

# Agnew Cops a Plea

By Tom Wicker

## IN THE NATION

Spiro T. Agnew has copped a plea and bargained himself out of going to jail. Conceding income-tax evasion and the acceptance of money gifts outside his official salary, while the Justice Department dropped numerous other criminal charges against him, Mr. Agnew is getting off with a \$10,000 fine, a suspended sentence and a "Dear Ted" letter from the President. That, apparently, is what the public trust is worth to the Nixon Administration that made this deal.

The charges, massively detailed, were that Mr. Agnew as a county, state and Federal official, in the latter case as the second highest in the nation, consecutively betrayed each trust. The "pattern" of payoffs to him, said Attorney General Richardson, had been established—and although Mr. Agnew does not concede that, the circumstances of his plea bargaining and the willingness of Mr. Richardson to make such a statement in court, even while pleading that Mr. Agnew not be sent to jail, speak louder than any denials.

Even for such crimes as those not contested by Mr. Agnew, men who had no public trust are ordinarily and frequently sent to prison. For stealing \$75 from a service station or grocery store, people—especially poor people—are imprisoned for years. What were once minor drug offenses in New York now carry mandatory sentences of 15 years or more. In most cities, accused persons routinely spend months or years in jail even before coming up for trial; and some political dissenters of recent years spend more time in jail, without being convicted of anything, than Spiro Agnew will for evasion of taxes and betrayal of public trust.

The appalling prisons of this country are full of people who committed crimes no more serious than those not contested by Mr. Agnew and who held no high office of trust. The cities of this nation are full of people who know they would go to prison for almost any crime, who know friends and relatives who are rotting in prison now for lesser crimes than the second highest official in the nation has conceded. But he is getting off lightly, and for millions of Americans the lesson of the Agnew case is merely the confirmation of their bitter belief that prison is for the poor and the powerless, while mercy is for those who can swing it.

Rather than Mr. Nixon praising Mr. Agnew for patriotism and public service, rather than Mr. Richardson and Judge Hoffman declaring that an easy sentence for Mr. Agnew was in the public interest, someone might have pointed out that betrayal of public trust is neither patriotism nor public service but their opposite; and that what the public interest really requires is that the Administration

ished—as Mr. Nixon and Mr. Agnew so often preached in their palmier days—and the more swiftly and certainly when the wrongdoing is by those sworn to uphold the law, engaged in the public trust, and looked to for guidance and example by millions of ordinary people.

But Mr. Agnew is getting off lightly, which is more than could be said for the dead inmates he scorned at Attica, or the student radicals he characterized as bad apples to be separated from the barrel, or the street kids growing up in the ghettos he avoided, because, he once said, if you see one, you've seen them all.

As for the Administration for which Mr. Agnew was twice chosen as second man, and which made the deal to keep him out of prison, an air of corruption now hangs over it so thickly that nothing but legal artifice and political expedience are likely to keep it in office. For the moment, the Agnew resignation and the choice of his successor may obscure this Administration's deeper troubles; but they will be restored to the public eye by the tapes controversy, the forthcoming Watergate indictments, the sober aftermath of the Agnew scandal, and the unfolding accounts of other shady Administration activities—most recently, the story of how Howard Hughes sent \$100,000 in cash to Mr. Nixon's friend, Bebe Rebozo, following which antitrust rulings that allowed Mr. Hughes to expand his Las Vegas empire somehow were reached.

Two of this Administration's former Cabinet officers already have been indicted for criminal activities in the Vesco matter. Several major companies have admitted making illegal campaign contributions to Mr. Nixon under political pressure. The Administration never has refuted the well-documented story that it raised milk support prices after heavy contributions from milk producers' associations. On several fronts, its dealings with I.T.T. are under investigation and it is charged with systematic attempts to use the Internal Revenue Service for its own purposes and interest.

Mr. Nixon himself has not satisfactorily explained his land dealings in California, his heavy borrowing from two friends while he was President of the United States, the extraordinary Government expenditures on his San Clemente property, or strong allegations that he took an improper tax deduction that reduced his income taxes in two years to a minor amount, despite his \$200,000 salary and his expense allowance.

Restore confidence in this Administration and this President? It would be easier to put Spiro Agnew together again, and send him out anew to

... against permissiveness.