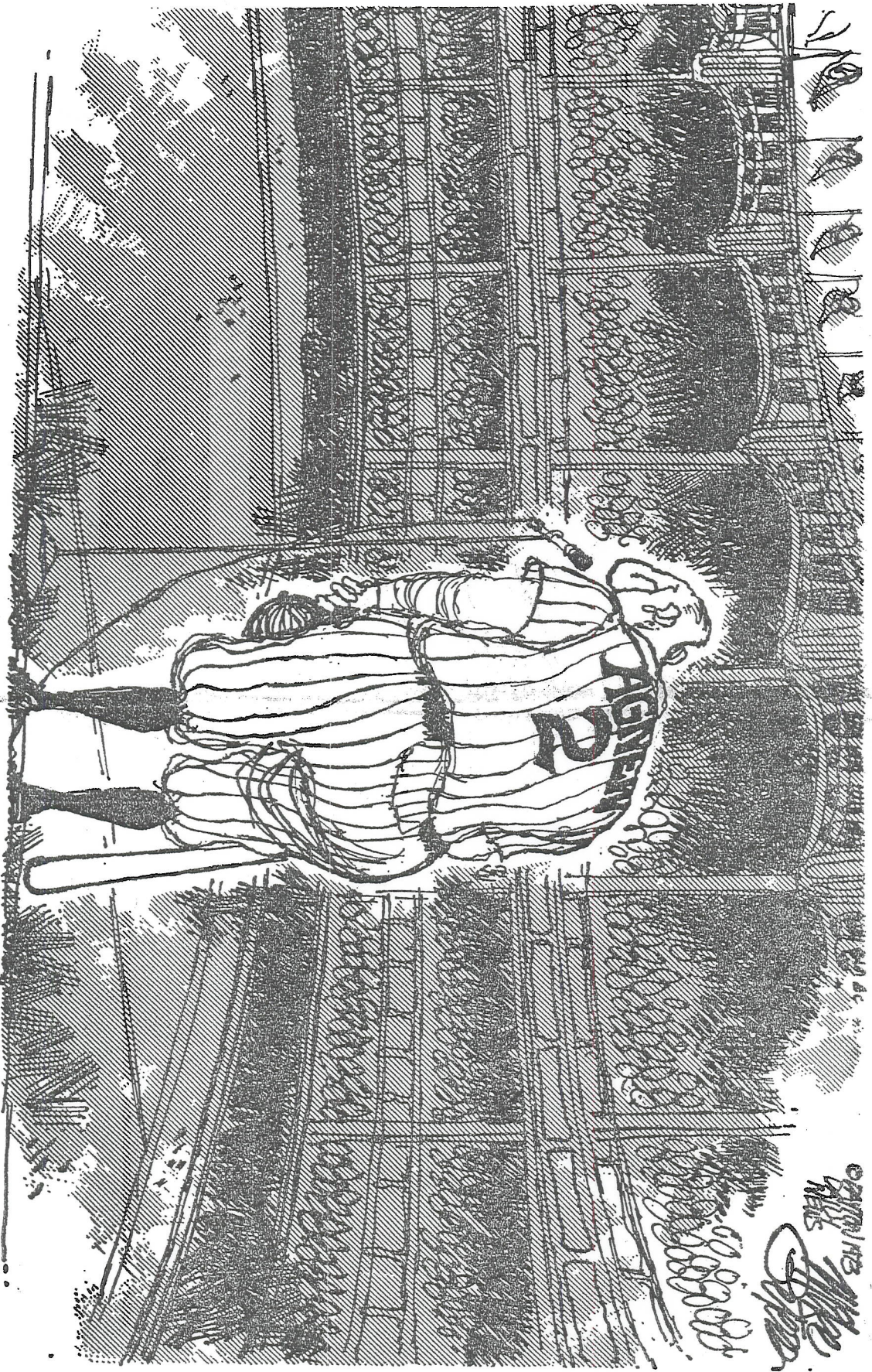


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Agnew's Tragedy—and Ours



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Peters in the Dayton Daily News

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ONLY FIVE DAYS before his historic disgrace, Spiro Theodore Agnew coined his own epitaph. "A candle is only so long before it burns out," he said.

It wasn't only Spiro Agnew's flame that was extinguished so dramatically last Wednesday afternoon. Nor was his final fall merely an unprecedented personal—and national—tragedy. Indeed, the ultimate American tragedy is that the end of the Agnew story is so familiar.

Once again a national leader has been taken abruptly from the scene. Once again a sudden casualty has created another political void and left a collective feeling of bitterness, betrayal, frustration and impotence. It matters not whether one thought Agnew a political fool or prophet, villain or victim. To millions he was a symbol of hope and stability, independence and integrity. He spoke for *them*. Now Agnew joins that long line of recent political victims who represented the widest range of political thought and attitudes, whether of the right, left or center: the Kennedys; Martin Luther King; Malcolm X; George Wallace; even, it can be argued, Richard Nixon. Their constituencies have been shattered. No one has yet emerged to take their places. The result is a reinforcement of national cynicism and a numbing of the vitality of the political process.

Serious Questions

IN THE IMMEDIATE aftermath of the Agnew fall, a number of serious questions are being debated. Agnew's case, it is being said, is another example of the mighty receiving favored treatment not given to the ordinary citizen. A Vice President does not go to jail, nor is he prosecuted for the more serious charges compiled against him. Does the law really apply impartially to the powerful and the powerless? What is the proper price of a pound of flesh?

Questions are also again being raised about the process by which our highest officials are chosen. How is it possible that no investigative agencies previously failed to turn up so massive a pattern of classic corruption as seems to have existed in the political corridors of Baltimore County? Were those rumors that are said to have

floated for years through the legislative chambers of Annapolis checked and dismissed as groundless by both prosecutors and press? Should not the FBI or Secret Service have investigated a man being considered for the second highest office in the land? Are the cynics correct after all in assuming that everyone does it, that politics is synonymous with the take, the bribe, the extortion, the pay-off, the bag men and their bundles of cash?

Agnew's departure has brought forth another theme: the necessity for removing the taint of money from politics. In this year of Watergate, the denouement of the Agnew drama adds one more chapter to that sordid aspect of American politics. It brings home with perhaps more force than all the assorted Watergate characters put to-

gether the ignobling realities of the seamiest side of our elective process. And it raises again the troubling question of whether only the wealthy can afford political life or be free to follow their own consciences.

The Common Chords

ALL THESE questions, too, are familiar. But important as they are, essentially they take a narrow view of Agnew's tragedy—and ours. Forget the rhetoric he employed and the anger or pleasure his presence aroused. Think of him neither as a conservative nor an ideologue. He was neither. His spectacular success came because he was so ordinary, because so many saw in him an image of themselves, because they believed in him. He was the quintessential self-made man. His themes were neither elegant nor eloquent, but they were the common chords that struck the most response in the most people: patriotism, family, thrift, firmness, tradition, the virtues of hard work.

A large part of his appeal was easily explained. He came to national prominence at the end of the Sixties and all the attendant traumas of that decade of riots, assassinations, bombings and war. No matter what slogan one wanted to employ—whether "forgot-

ten" or "silent" or "middle" Americans—he spoke out at a time when many people clearly were weary, fearful, frustrated, and looking for another way out. Like George Wallace, he made political capital out of "anarchists" in the streets, anger at student protestors and a strong, if unarticulated, belief that the news media had fomented strife and deliberately distorted the "real" America people thought they knew. His harshest language about "impudent snobs" and the "effete elite" and "rotten apples" attracted the most attention, but Agnew was saying something else that suited the times. He was promising to create order out of disorder. In a period of continuing disillusionment, he appealed to a basic desire for security and stability.

In one of his speeches then, he expressed his message by saying: "The last decade saw the most precipitous decline in respect for law of any decade in our history. Some of those who call each other 'intellectuals' helped to sow the wind, and America reaped the whirlwind. And then the years of permissiveness and indulgence finally culminated in the days of disorder—in violence in our cities and on our campuses."

He spoke for an older generation

that was shaken by what it perceived to be the American present. A crumbling of authority. A rejection of the old values. Pot, promiscuity, permissiveness, long hair and seeming uncleanliness. Hedonism. A failure to appreciate the sacrifices and suffering of the past.

"He Says What He Thinks"

AT THE HEART of Agnew's appeal was one belief—that he was a moral man. He might be outrageous at times, he might be too controversial, too hot, too intemperate, too decisive, but he was honest. He said what he really believed. When David Broder and I made the first of our long trips across America interviewing voters, we invariably encountered the same reaction to Spiro Agnew. "Spiro?" the voters would say. A laugh, a pause, and then: "Well, he really says what he thinks."

In a kind of embarrassed, awkward way, many Americans were proud of him. He was one of them, and they knew it. They understood him when he spoke about his upbringing, responded favorably when he would say: "I am proud to say that I grew up in the light of my father. My beliefs are his and my father believed deeply in America. My father was deeply in-

involved in the life of the Greek community; for this, to him, was part of being an American." Or when he spoke about his country in a time of trouble: "I am not ready to run up a white flag for the United States of America, and I don't think you are either." Or, in a typical Agnew phrase: "Those who burn banks can bank on being burned."

Even the way Agnew looked fitted the popular impression. Like many men who struggled to make it, and did, Agnew dressed with a somewhat self-conscious style, a fashion that said, in effect, "Look at me." He was always impeccably, if not fussily, attired: the trousers carefully creased, the tie and shirt conservatively chosen, the material expensive, the French cuffs extending just the proper length from the suit coat, the coat buttoned, the quiet four-in-hand tie firmly in place, the hair neatly combed, never a strand out of place.

Nothing casual about him. He gave the impression of a man coolly in control. Dignity and decorum, not informality, were the dominant tones. The camaraderie, the conviviality, the sense of sleeves-rolled-up, tie-loosened-air always stayed out of public view. That, presumably, was for Palm Springs and Frank Sinatra and the

glamorous setting of "stars" and "celebrities." But that was all right; that was Everyman's old dream of success and fame and underneath it all Everyman knew that old Spiro was playing out his secret desires.

In public, and particularly before the press that he genuinely distrusted, he was distant, aloof, solemn, always on guard. Four years ago, when I traveled with him across the country for several weeks preparing a profile for this paper, only once did he let down his guard. He had gone down to his condominium at St. Croix in the Virgin Islands for relaxation and there, sitting around the pool in bathing trunks, a towel draped over a shoulder, his feet propped up on a chair, sipping beer from a can, he gradually opened up.

Agnew said two things that day which, in retrospect, are worth recalling. "I've always relied on my own instincts," he said at one point. "Politics is a high-risk business. You have to be prepared to take those risks." Later, he added: "I have always believed that the best defense is a strong offense."

So he did, and all America now knows just how many risks he was privately prepared to take—and just how aggressively he would take the offensive in his own defense. To the end, of course, he continued to strike that indignant stance of a righteous man wronged. To the end, it seemed hard to believe, even for those who disagreed totally with him politically, that he was not still telling the truth.

For those millions who believed in him both politically and personally, there is no way to fathom the final disillusionment and feeling of betrayal. The moral man, the preeminent exponent of law and order, the attacker of permissiveness, the vigilant fighter of "enemies" in our midst, the defender of home, family and flag, now stands revealed as, in the words of a U.S. attorney, "a common crook."

Past and Promise

SEVERAL YEARS ago, when he was riding high, Spiro Agnew said something else worth remembering.

"Right now we have a choice," he said in a reflective moment. "Will we treat all that is wrong with America as a challenge or as an indictment? Will we attack these problems or just weep over them? Will we condemn our institutions or correct them? Will we repudiate democracy because it moves slowly or revitalize it as its pace quickens?"

He knew, he went on to say, that "the answers are far from self-evident" and that "the jury is still out."

Those answers to Agnew's—and our—questions are even farther from resolution. The doubt and disbelief are now deeper and more widely held. In this present climate of universal cynicism, perhaps there are no answers to any of his questions or to any of the country's problems. But Agnew at that time chose to take a positive view.

"I trust," he said, "that Americans understand history well enough to see in our imperfect past the promise of a more perfect future."

Spiro Agnew, as the cliché goes, was not capable of practicing what he preached. That does not make his prescription for the ills of democracy any less valid. His own tragic example is yet another lesson to be learned.