

Mr. Agnew's Farewell

There would be greater pathos in the fate of Spiro Agnew if his had been a fall from grace rather than from arrogance. Many Americans, after witnessing the incongruous White House festivities in celebration of the nomination of Mr. Agnew's successor, might have found it possible to sympathize with any forthright statement by the former Vice President.

Instead, they got, via television, the self-serving tale of a man who maintains that he was the innocent victim of a conspiracy. Mr. Agnew did not content himself with denying that he had done anything beyond living by what he maintained was the customary Golden Rule of American politics—the now nauseatingly familiar “everybody does it” line of defense. He rolled out a blunderbuss with which to defame all his detractors—the witnesses against him, the prosecutors and, of course, the news media. The forty pages of sworn charges against him, carefully documented by the Justice Department, were brushed aside as a mere compendium of malice—the work of “self-confessed bribe brokers”—even though they showed kickbacks still being made to him four years after he became Vice President.

In a manner unhappily all too characteristic of this master of doubletalk, Mr. Agnew had prefaced his TV speech by letting the word go out—through an interview with a journalistic confidant—that his resignation had been forced by pressure from the highest levels of the Nixon Administration.

The contrast between that imputation of intra-Administration betrayal—similar to many Mr. Agnew had made earlier when he was accusing Justice Department officials of knifing him—and his subsequent extravagant televised praise of Mr. Nixon suggests that the whole Agnew speech was merely another concession to image-building, aimed at earning him points for loyalty and magnanimity. The public will not so easily be deceived by this latest transparent application of the Nixon-Agnew doctrine that previous “facts” can be rendered inoperative by the projection of a new message.

Mr. Agnew cannot expect to be judged in a vacuum that eliminates from memory his own earlier views and statements. In 1970 he urged Federal prosecutors to “focus the spotlight of publicity” on “criminal elements,” including “the tax cheat.” In 1969, while taunting those who engaged in the “politics of protest,” he mocked: “Thou shalt not ask forgiveness for thy transgressions, rather thou shalt demand amnesty for them.”

In his farewell address, a new measuring rod emerged as he attested to his own purity, except “perhaps, judged by the new post-Watergate political morality.” That yardstick implies an astonishing view of the pre-Watergate state of law and morals on the part of this law-and-order Administration's erstwhile chief moralist. The most charitable interpretation of his parting message is that it reflected faithfully the plastic ethics of the Nixon White House. Spiro Agnew remained, until the end, the echo of his master's voice.