

John D. Lofton

A Conservative's Farewell to Agnew

Washington

AS ONE who knows and likes the former vice president, Spiro Agnew, it is impossible on his resignation to analyze objectively and dispassionately what it all means.

Conservatives in particular are both saddened and angered by Mr. Agnew's actions. Saddened because we have lost our most articulate spokesman at the national level; angered because he did not level with us either in public or private.



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What impressed me most was his candor and intelligence. There was nothing he wouldn't talk about and on everything he was well informed. This was one of the great untold stories about Agnew. He had come to conservatism through his intellect, not his guts. He was a man who had done his homework.

He was a rarity, a vanishing species in political Washington: a man concerned with the correctness of ideas not necessarily with what was politically expedient.

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THE PRIVATE Agnew was also much different from the press image of an uptight, constantly buttoned-down man who refused to sit down because he didn't want to wrinkle his pants.

I'll never forget the scene on the Agnew plane at the moment of touchdown at the Des Moines airport. Standing in his shirt sleeves around a table with a few of his staff, everybody slapped the table hard as the plane landed. The winner collected a buck each from the losers. The plane was a converted military plane with very small windows making it impossible to see the landing. To win, the slap had to be closest to the sound of the screech of the wheels hitting the runway. Agnew won.

The next time I saw the former vice president for any length of time was approximately a month ago in his office for an off-the-record, for-background-only talk about the allegations being made against him.

He spoke convincingly of his innocence, excoriated the news leaks about his case and portrayed the entire matter as a plot by his political enemies to do him in. Stating that he had been "grievously wounded" by the charges against him and was politically dead, Mr. Agnew nonetheless reiterated that he would fight to prove he was not guilty.

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IRONICALLY, Mr. Agnew's harshest words were reserved for the legal practice known as plea bargaining. He was very angry that certain individuals were being given special treatment, immunity against prosecution for testifying against him.

The Veep called this process a form of blackmail and an incentive to lie.

At one point, he opened his middle desk drawer and handed me a photo copy of an article reporting on a speech made by Representative Wayne Hays. The Ohio Democrat was calling for a reform of the plea-bargaining process which he denounced as a "perversion of a justice" allowing prosecutors to "leave off the hook" accused persons.

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THE WASHINGTON STAR-NEWS now reports that Mr. Agnew's attorneys and the Justice Department began serious plea bargaining about a month ago.

Thus, at the very moment he was denouncing plea bargaining to me, his lawyers were in fact doing it.

As for what effect the Agnew resignation will have on the GOP in next year's elections, punditry and pontification will have to wait. Today, I feel like I did when I was told there was no Santa Claus. Today, I feel lousy.

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