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Agnew: Return to Obscurity

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Melancholy Task of Sorting Papers Occupies Him

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Five weeks after resigning as Vice President, Spiro T. Agnew is slipping back to the household obscurity from whence he sprang.

But the process is slower and more complicated than his critics would like. For Agnew, it means a lot of tedious work. For taxpayers, it involves continuing public expense.

Most every morning, accompanied by a Secret Service detachment, the ex-Veep leaves his home in suburban Kenwood and is driven to work, just as always, arriving at his government office by about 8:30.

He puts in a full day usually. By quarter to six, the office is dark and he is on his way home. His evenings are his own now—no banquets to address, no TV speeches—though requests for his appearance still pour in almost as if nothing had changed.

Yet everything has changed. The Agnew staff of 57 has shrunk to six people who personally serve him. Small caretaker staffs also remain on hand in his two



SPIRO T. AGNEW
... sought as speaker

old offices at the Capitol where he was President of the U.S. Senate, and at the Executive Office Building where he worked most of the time. But both are anxious to emphasize that they no longer work for Agnew, but for the now-vacant "Office of the Vice President."

The man himself is off the federal payroll. He works

now at one of those handsome old rowhouses on Jackson Place facing Lafayette Park, a white brick building flanked by the Commission of Fine Arts and the Council on Environmental Quality.

His melancholy job is sorting through the yards and yards of files which document his five years as Vice President, a task which will take months. He has to decide which belong to the government and which are his to keep.

"He seems to be in pretty good spirits now," said one of the men who used to work for him. "The pressure's off now so he can relax. He hasn't said anything about what he's going to do."

Two Saturdays ago, Agnew held a party at his home for all of the departing staff people. He circulated among them easily and the conversation was studiously light—no speeches of farewell.

"It wasn't nearly as melancholy as I feared," said one ex-aide. "Of course, peo-

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ple didn't go around asking each other, 'Where are you going?'"

Agnew's next appearance in public will most likely be a somber one—pleading before the Maryland Court of Appeals against his disbarment. The Maryland Bar Association has petitioned for a disciplinary hearing, based on Agnew's no-contest plea to income tax evasion. Leon Pierson, a Baltimore lawyer who is defending Agnew on that front, said the former Vice President will be present at the hearing whenever it is held.

In the meantime, though the public spotlight has shifted from him, there are still lots of audiences that want to hear him. Walter L. Mote, his former administrative assistant in the Senate, said the mail has slackened in the last month, but requests for speaking engagements continue to pour in from colleges, business groups, conventions.

"The requests are from all kinds of groups, just as though there was no change at all," said Mote. "It's amazing. If these were just coming from specific geographic areas, I would say that's where his strength is. But this is from all over."

The Walker Agency in New York, which books speakers for the lecture circuit, has been after Agnew to sign up and Mote said he thinks Agnew will probably get into that, once his "transition" responsibilities are completed.

The former Vice President is also thinking about the literary marketplace. When one author asked for an interview, Agnew sent a polite note declining.

"It is my intention that my position and points of view would be best presented in my own writings," he explained, "which I intend to essay in the future."

Money also is still coming into the Chicago office of the Agnew Defense Fund, set up by insurance millionaire W. Clement Stone. Stone will not disclose how much has been raised, but his aides said the fund will be closed with an audit at the end of this month. So far, the donations have been considerably less than the defendant's legal expenses, a spokesman said, but only a "very few" contributors asked for their money back after Agnew's no-contest plea when Stone wrote to all of them offering refunds.

Closer to home, however, Agnew has been criticized for his continued use of government facilities, plus the Secret Service protection which was afforded to him by presidential order under the "transition" law governing former Presidents. Rep. John Moss (D-Calif.) has challenged whether those privileges, including free postage, office space and government travel should extend to a former Vice President who is also a felon.

Moss asked Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats for a legal opinion on the expenditures, including this question:

"Had (Agnew) received a jail sentence, would the na-

tion have provided protection in a federal detention facility?"

The ambiguity stems, in part, from the 1963 transition law which extended protection and other federal services to former Vice Presidents for six months. But the law speaks of Presidents and Vice Presidents who have completed their terms, so it is arguable whether Agnew is covered or not.

It is difficult to pin down precisely what perquisites are still available to him, partly because his personal aide, Arthur F. Sohmer, ducks repeated inquiries made at the Jackson Place office. A White House spokesman responded in general terms, as did the Secret Service.

According to them, the Secret Service protection will continue for "an undetermined period of time," presumably until the President orders it to stop. Former Agnew aides, no longer in daily contact with him, understand that the protection will last for six months, just as for any retired Veep, but one said that Agnew hopes to complete his transition work in less time, perhaps three months.

The protective coverage has been dropped for Mrs. Agnew and other members of his family. The former Vice President travels about town in a Secret Service vehicle, but usually not a limousine. While theoretically he might be entitled to use military planes for out-of-town trips, Agnew has not used them and, according to several colleagues, doesn't

intend to. When he flew to Chicago earlier this month, it was on a commercial flight, accompanied by the Secret Service bodyguards.

Congress authorized free postage for him until Nov. 10, but several ex-aides said they thought the franking privilege would be continued under an interpretation of the transitional privileges. The White House spokesman didn't know.

The Vice President's Senate office staff under Mote is now down to four people, but the Senate resolution which continued that operation was explicit in confining it to housekeeping chores for the Senate, not Agnew.

Mote reports now to the Secretary of the Senate and is responsible for recording the various memorials, petitions and formal communications which are addressed to the President of the Senate.

"The only difference," said one of Agnew's ex-aides, "is that they don't have to alert anyone on tie votes anymore." There is nobody to alert.

At the Executive Office Building, where Agnew spent most of his working hours, the staff is down to three military aides and several secretaries, headed by Brig. Gen. John M. Dunn. But again they emphasize that they are serving the

vacant office—not the man who used to hold it. For the past month, the principal function has been to help departing staff people find other jobs and to keep the shop open until there is a new Veep, presumably Rep. Gerald Ford.

"We're doing routine things, picking up building passes, handling parking problems, working with GSA on equipment," said Cdr. Howard Kerr, the Navy aide. "We're doing nothing with regards to Mr. Ford or Mr. Agnew."

Both of those offices boxed up all of the Agnew papers—nearly five years of letters, memos and other documents — and trucked them to 716 Jackson Place. It is an enormous amount of paper—27 file cabinets from his EOB office and 18 file cabinets from the Capitol office, plus several dozen packing cases.

The townhouse last used by President Lyndon Johnson after his retirement is elegantly furnished in the flavor of the Federal period when people like Thomas Jefferson lived next to the pasture that became Lafayette Park. Agnew rides an elevator to his third floor office, the Secret Service agents wait in the sidewalk-

level basement, where they can peer out at visitors through the one-way, bullet-proof glass.

Agnew's staff consists of Sohmer, Mary Ellen Warner, his personal secretary, and four other secretaries, who must plow through all of his papers.

The trouble with 716 Jackson Place is that it's an old building, despite the restoration. As government laborers kept moving in more and more of the Agnew files, officials began to worry.

"They had so damn many files there, we pulled out the building specifications on the house," said Cdr. Kerr, "and found that the floors wouldn't hold all that weight."

So Agnew was provided a second townhouse. The National Commission for Drug Abuse Prevention moved out of 712 Jackson Place next door.

The Agnew papers moved in—tens of thousands of letters from across America, most praising a Vice President beloved by "the silent majority" he helped create.

"They claim he was one of the most corresponded-with vice presidents," said Mote, his ex-aide, "for whatever that's worth."