

Terrence O'Flaherty

Views TV

Chicken Coop Journalism

SPIRO T. AGNEW is loose on the tube again, this time hawking his book, "The Canfield Decision." Any viewers who assumed that the defrocked vice president would be ashamed to curry favor with the medium he despises in order to publicize his new public image as a political novelist have overestimated this folksy old crook.



Spiro T. Agnew

Indeed, it is clear from his appearance on Tuesday's "Today" show, as well as this afternoon's Merv Griffin Show (4 to 5:30 p.m., Channel 4) that the word *shame* is as unfamiliar to him as it is to his former boss.

Agnew's two appearances are as different as the two interviewers themselves. NBC's Barbara Walters was as aggressive as Griffin is fawning. The results are a surprising lesson in TV technique almost defeating Walters in the first round when she should have clobbered the bum.

She opened the second round by noting that the jacket of his book describes him merely as a former vice president now living in Maryland. "But for a news program, a bit more must be added," said Walters who recalled for viewers his resignation; pleading no contest to charges of tax evasion; three years probation; a fine of \$10,000; a fully detailed 40-page report by the U.S. Attorney General citing evidence of bribery and extortion; and his eventual disbarment from the practice of law . . . to which Walters added that "reading this has been as painful to me as I am sure it was painful to you."

"To a degree," Agnew answered with a shrug.

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THE HEAVILY PUBLICIZED "first TV appearance" of Agnew on the Tuesday program was originally scheduled for today by NBC but set ahead at the last moment to give more of an appearance of a scoop. Actually, NBC was scooped by today's Griffin show which was taped four weeks ago and leaked to the press on May 1, but not aired until today at 4 p.m. on KRON.

Such shenanigans are acceptable on TV, if not exactly admirable, but it DID seem excessively non-professional of NBC news to allow Walters, in addition, to quote from comments on the Griffin show in her questioning of Agnew *without credit to Griffin*. This is what we used to call "hen-house" journalism — a euphemism that has no reference to Walters' sex, but refers to what's left on the floor of a chicken coop.

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THE BACKSTAGE mechanics of Agnew's appearance on the "Today" Show indicate that he called the shots. This was revealed through a remark made by him when he refused to answer any questions about Watergate, Richard Nixon, President Ford or the details of his shady retreat from public office: "When I came on this program I explained what the ground rules were," he said. He was there to sell books.

His excuses for not answering such questions must be unique in the field of political crime: "Eventually I want to publish a memoir and I want to market it . . . It's a property of mine and I don't want it excerpted or commented upon."

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VIEWERS WHO were repulsed by Agnew's arrogance on the Tuesday morning show will be physically revolted by today's 90-minute encounter. Griffin, the Uriah Heep of the talk show circuit, approaches his guest in the hushed tones once reserved for people of the stature of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, Helen Keller or the Pope.

The more Griffin exudes his phony servility, the more Agnew beams — but the resulting aura of unctuousness gives Griffin a better interview than the one attempted by Walters. If proof is still needed that studio audiences are made up of morons, near morons and children of morons, it is supplied today as they applaud Agnew as if he were a movie star. (continued)