

5/19/76

WXPost
Agnew:
MAY 19 1976
**A Taste
Of Things
To Come**

By Sander Vanocur

Spiro Agnew has the media to kick around some more. Consult your local television listings for time and place. He is booked on more talk shows than Joan Rivers, promoting his recently published novel, "The Canfield Decision."

Agnew chose the "Today Show" for his debut as an author, a choice attributable to Barbara Walters' persistence and the show's capacity to sell books.

It was a disquieting occasion and not merely because Agnew used it to jump on the media. He wanted to sell books. Walters and co-host Jim Hartz, knowing that this was Agnew's first appearance on television since his resignation, wanted to talk not just about the book but matters far more important.

For a moment, especially when Agnew said that "ground rules" had been established about what he was going to talk about during the interview, one had a momentary inclination to feel sorry for him. After all, he had written a novel. Why couldn't Walters and Hartz confine themselves to questions about the novel?

But there was no reason for sympathy. He imagined, as he has imagined so many other things, that ground rules had been established. Later, Walters and Hartz and the show's executive producer, Stuart Schulberg, said no ground rules had ever been agreed upon. Their word against Agnew's. Based on past performances of veracity, it wasn't much of a choice.

No ground rules were in order. Agnew was not on the "Today Show" because he was a budding Robert Penn Warren. He was there because he had written a novel after he resigned the vice presidency. He had entered a no-contest plea on one count of income tax evasion, and had been sentenced to three years of unsupervised probation and a \$10,000 fine.

Walters made mention of this and more, adding: "Mr. Agnew, this introduction was painful for me to read in front of you and I'm sure it was painful to you to hear." She needn't have bothered. What she should have done was to read the bill of particulars against Agnew before the interview began rather than when she did, during the second half of it.

That would have been helpful to all of us. It would have provided a setting in which we could have understood that we were watching Agnew with a mixture of fascination and unease, not because he was the author of a novel, but because this was the man who had disgraced his high office.

It is easy to say what was wrong about the manner in which Walters set up the interview for us to watch, or how she and Hartz questioned Agnew. It is much more difficult to say how others might have made the interview less uncomfortable to watch.

Far better for Walters and Hartz to have questioned him the way they did than for Agnew to have received the lap-dog treatment Merv Griffin accorded him for 90 minutes, in an interview seen a few days later.

The two of them produced some vintage Agnewisms, such as "I think the media are sympathetic to the Zionist cause, put it that way." Or,

See VANOCUR, D4, Col. 1

VANOCUR, From D1

"Well, I think the media became more imperial than the President did." Or, "The Constitution never intended, I don't believe, that the news media would be running the country."

Television has been charged by non-Agnewian critics with providing us with no sense of memory. Every day

it wipes the memory slate clean. In due course, we are going to be watching John Ehrlichman peddling his novel. Later, we will sit in front of our sets, wondering when, if ever, David Frost will say "SUPER" as Richard Nixon takes us down memory lane for both cash and the exploitation of his memoirs.

The memory slate has been wiped

clean. But it is being written upon again. Perhaps that is what made Agnew's appearance on the "Today Show" so painful to behold. It was a foretaste of an impending period for recalling an unpleasant period that we would wish away if we could. But we cannot. And there is no reason why we should. After all, it did happen.

©1976, Washington Post Co.