

The Evolution of Spiro T. Agnew

From pop hero to national disgrace to nonentity?

By Bob Greene

"How is your golf game?" says the man from the sponsoring company, breaking the silence.

"Nonexistent at the moment," says Spiro Agnew.

Agnew is alone on a couch built for four. There are perhaps a dozen people in the room, on the 19th floor of a high-rise office building. Before the man from the sponsoring company has spoken, none of the dozen deemed it necessary to talk to Agnew. There is another silence.

Agnew sits motionless, one leg crossed over the other. He is in a dark suit, a briefcase by his feet. His right hand rests on the arm of the couch; his left, bearing a gold wedding band, is on his knee, not a finger moving. It is standing-room-only in the small office, but no one sits in the vacant spaces next to Agnew. He looks over his shoulder, out the window.

The man from the sponsoring company tries again.

"I heard your handicap was down."

"No," Agnew says. "It was 16, but I think it's up to 20 now."

More silence. Across the room, a Louis Vuitton carrying bag lies open on a small table, next to two foldout makeup mirrors and a jar of cold cream. There are cakes and



cookies on another table; an empty can of Pepsi, an empty can of Lite beer. Television.

That is why Agnew is here. This is a television studio, and in a few minutes he will go into another room and try to sell the paperback version of his novel. There was a time, not so very long ago, when the timetables would be adjusted to Agnew's whims, when all involved would wait for him to come sweeping in, surrounded by Secret Service agents speaking into wrist microphones. He had a massive following then; some said that for a few brief months Vice President Spiro Agnew's following among the American people exceeded even that of his President.

Now, because another author on the road to sell another book is late, Agnew is waiting. The others

in the room are not being consciously rude to him; it is just that they are embarrassed. He is a felon and at one time was considered a national disgrace. Now he has not even that distinction; it is as if he is no longer alive. His name never surfaces except as an occasional punch-line for a half-hearted joke. So it is . . . jarring . . . to walk into a room and find him here.

The man from the sponsoring company:

"A friend of mine bought a golf ball that's supposed to cut down your slice to one-fourth of what it was. They do it with the dimples. There's a different dimple pattern on the ball."

"I hadn't heard of that one," Agnew says.

He seems to be grateful to be included in someone's conversation. He says:

"It seems like they come out with something new every year." The later-arriving book-writer is here. Agnew is beckoned into the next room, where the television show will be recorded on video tape.

The questions on the program are controversial, but somehow it doesn't matter, because Agnew himself doesn't matter. It is one thing in America for the masses to love you, and another thing for them to hate you. Those are phenomena deceptively close to one another, and there is energy in both. But for the masses simply not to care . . . at one point Agnew turns to the host and says: "People come up to me and say that they still support me."

But the sparks do not fly, because the inclination is not to believe Agnew and thus not to argue with him.

The taping session lasts an hour, and then the people leave the taping room and return to the room with the couch. The scene repeats itself; too many people in the small room, all of them trying to behave as if Agnew is invisible.

A high school basketball game is being broadcast on a color television set in the corner. It provides an excuse: although no one in the room is familiar with the teams, and no one is familiar with the progress of the game, all turn toward the screen and feign interest.

Spiro Agnew locks toward the doorway.

"What time do we get out of here?" He says. His companions watch the high school basketball players, and before long he leaves.