

# The Agnew Tragedy . . .

The drama of Spiro Agnew has reached its appointed end. For him, the sad dénouement in a Baltimore courtroom concluded his sudden, steep descent from occupant of the second highest constitutional office to convicted criminal—a descent that began two months ago with the official warning from a Federal prosecutor that he was under investigation on grave charges.

For the public, his personal tragedy is part of the larger tragedy of the Nixon Administration. Overwhelmingly re-elected less than a year ago, the Administration is almost daily beset by fresh scandal. And the public can only look on in mingled shame and dismay.

The deal Mr. Agnew made with Attorney General Richardson to avoid full prosecution by pleading "no contest" to a single charge of income-tax evasion obviously made it beneficial for him to resign the Vice-Presidency instead of adhering to the aggressive battle plan he has followed in recent weeks. If he had clung to office through indictment, trial and possible protracted legal appeals, an intolerable shadow would have fallen across not only his own office but also the Presidency to which he might at any time have been called.

From the outset of his case, it has been imperative that all the facts be brought out and nothing hushed up. It has also been essential that the case be disposed of in reasonably swift fashion without compromising Mr. Agnew's rights or endangering the public interest. Both of these imperatives have been met by the settlement announced yesterday. Although it is beyond question that if Mr. Agnew were a private citizen, he would have been dealt with much more harshly, it is also true that for a public official who rose so high, disgrace and banishment from public life are severe punishment indeed.

Mr. Agnew's downfall spares the nation the danger that he might have become President, a strong political possibility if his corrupt dealings had not become known. Yet the unblinkable fact is that, even when Mr. Nixon chose him as his running-mate five years ago, he was plainly unqualified by the fundamental criteria of experience, character and demonstrated competence to be placed in immediate line of succession to the Presidency.

President Nixon bears a heavy moral responsibility for that choice. In the atomic age, the nation simply cannot afford a Vice President selected for the frivolous, selfish reason that he was a political cipher who offended no faction or interest group. When it turns out that the man chosen was lacking in probity as well, an undeserved honor is converted into a personal tragedy, and the nation becomes aware that it has been running a terrible risk these last five years.

Important though it is, the Agnew story is only one episode in the larger drama of the Nixon Administration. The President's own income-tax returns are the subject of dispute. Grave accusations of criminal misconduct by the President's former legal counsel remain unresolved. Indictments may soon be forthcoming against some of the President's closest former aides, while two of his former Cabinet members are about to go to trial on criminal charges. The courts have yet to make their final ruling on the President's desire to withhold from the grand jury the tapes of conversations dealing with many disputed points in the Watergate criminal conspiracy.

Mr. Agnew's resignation goes only part way toward resolving the crisis in national leadership. President Nixon has much to do if confidence in that leadership is to be restored.

## . . . and Opportunity

In the unprecedented circumstances in which the country now finds itself, President Nixon faces an awesome responsibility. Under the Twenty-fifth Amendment he must appoint to the post left vacant by Mr. Agnew a person who might at any time be obliged to assume the Presidency of the United States. All that can block the appointment of a man unsuited for that great office is the will of a Congressional majority.

For both the President and Congress the responsibility is no greater than the opportunity. By choosing a man of national stature and unquestioned integrity, Mr. Nixon could do much to restore public confidence in the political institutions of a nation badly shaken by the series of sordid events from Watergate, which so tarnished his own reputation, to the sentencing of his Vice President for a felony. The President now has a providential chance to lift his own sagging political stock by rising above partisanship to appoint a statesman to the second highest office in the land.

At the same time, the country has a right to demand of Congress that it apply to Mr. Nixon's appointee the criteria only of competence and character. It is not the purpose of a constitutional amendment either to stimulate or to relieve the concern of the opposition party in Congress that the Vice President it helps to confirm might enjoy a hammerlock on the next Presidential nomination of the party in power. That is a squint-eyed view of a national crisis which Democrats would properly denounce if the partisan picture were reversed.

The duty that now devolves upon Congress is to see to it that in picking a new Vice President, Mr. Nixon aims higher than he did in his original selection of the ill-starred Spiro Agnew as his running-mate.