

# States of the Union

## ALL THE AGNEWS FIT TO PRINT

BY RICHARD J MARGOLIS

*Each of us is likely to feel that he understands things a little better than the next man*

—ADLAI E STEVENSON (1953)

**I**F THERE HAD been no Spiro T Agnew, somebody would have had to invent him. Liberals need him as their *bête noire*, Nixon needs him as a hedge against Wallace, and writers need him on dull days when there is nothing else to write about. At present I am confronted with three new Agnew books, all of which claim to get at the essential man, the *real* Agnew.

Jules Witcover, a Washington correspondent for the Los Angeles *Times*, portrays Agnew as an insidious *White Knight* (Random House, 453 pp., \$10.00), a man who encourages white Americans to cultivate their racist inclinations—in short, a menace. Theo Lippman Jr., in *Spiro Agnew's America* (Norton, 250 pp., \$7.95), sees the Vice President as a new phenomenon, a politician with a national suburban base—not a racist but a prophet of two-acre zoning. And John R. Coyne Jr., who once worked for Agnew, views him quite simply, in *The Im-*

*prudent Snobs* (Arlington House, 520 pp., \$8.95), as a messiah.

All this suggests that Agnew, who has built his reputation on alleged candor, may be the most elusive politician in Washington. More than most others, he is what each of us thinks he is, and little more. At a bar in Washington a few months ago I ran into some New Left types who boasted they were compiling the Vice President's speeches in preparation for the coming campaign. "We're going to hoist him with his own petard," one of them said with deep satisfaction. "It'll be a study in self-indictment."

It never occurred to these young people—or, to use an Agnew-type phrase, to these swillers of beer and vitriol—that one man's petard may be another man's patriotism. To some Americans the Vice President's words constitute a kind of national glory, like Disneyland, or the flag. His star-spangled prose, with all those alliterative bombs bursting in air, makes many a conservative pulse beat faster.

So it is not surprising that while Agnew's enemies were snipping and pasting his speeches, one of his

friends was reverently working the same territory, intending thereby to rescue Agnew once and for all from the smears of "knee-jerk liberalism." At first, Coyne explains, he had meant to write a full-length commentary on the Vice President, "with a few of the more important speeches appended." But the more he studied his hero's words the more he was inclined "to let them speak for themselves." The result is an upside-down pyramid of a book, beginning with Coyne's brief but passionate panegyric and ending with a massive 339-page "Appendix" containing 94 Agnew speeches, unexpurgated and unabashed.

In assessing Agnew, Coyne flips. The Vice President possesses "candor, courage, loyalty"; he is as considerate as an angel, and he personifies "the kind of rock-hard integrity that we once used to be able to take for granted in our best American men." Like other Agnewites, Coyne tends to view life as an adversary proceeding. On one side are the intellectual establishment and the mass media, powerful forces determined to brainwash the public and smash "traditional American verities", on

the other side is Spiro Agnew and his millions of eager followers. Once every few decades, Coyne rhapsodizes, a politician appears who eschews circumlocution and evasion and says those things which most Americans know but despair of ever hearing expressed by their political leaders."

To learn what "those things" are, one need only glance at the speeches, a melange of pieties and Archie Bunkerisms. About a political opponent Agnew quipped, "He may be in tune with the times, but you and I know it is the *New York Times*' picture one gets from these speeches is of a virtuous America unaccountably beset by shady intellectuals, rioters, pornographers, and the *Times* "The man who believes in God and country, hard work and honest opportunity," he told a Vermont audience, "is denounced for his archaic view." Moreover, the denouncers use "four-letter words—screamed through bullhorns."

It is clearly an unfair fight. They have the power—the bullhorns, the newsprint, the television airwaves—while the Vice President and his humble crew have just their moral armament to protect them.

But Agnew is not one to turn tail. Bravely he attacks college students: "The student now goes to college to proclaim rather than learn. The lessons of the past are ignored and obliterated in a contemporary antagonism known as the generation gap. A spirit of national masochism prevails, encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals."

He does battle with the networks: a narrow and distorted picture of America often emerges from the televised news. How many marches and demonstrations would we have if the marchers did not know that the ever faithful TV cameras would be there to record their antics for the next news show?"

And he defends his own constituency: "One reason the silent

majority is so silent is this: They're too busy working to make a lot of noise."

**R**EADING THESE speeches, one wonders if Agnew is chiefly motivated by the Puritanism he continuously preaches, or simply by political ambition. Witcover tends to see him as an opportunist. He got to be governor of Maryland, for instance, by posing as a civil rights enthusiast, a mantle his Right-wing opponent, George P. Mahoney ("Your home is your castle—protect it"), thrust upon him. In that memorable 1966 campaign Agnew claimed Mahoney "is against free speech—against free press." Now we know that the man who talks about guarding castles doesn't really care about individual rights and constitutional protections. On another occasion he accused Mahoney of "trying to tempt mankind to yield to its baser impulses."

As governor, however, Agnew's own baser impulses were sometimes in evidence. Before Rap Brown's trial Agnew declared, "I hope they pick him up soon, put him away and throw away the key." After blacks rioted in Baltimore's ghetto, Agnew took to lecturing black leaders on the perils of militancy, which he said led directly to "black racism." In other words, he acted much like the Agnew we later came to know. One gets the feeling that Mahoney kept him dishonest, but not for long.

On the whole, according to both Witcover and Lippman, Agnew has been ideologically consistent. As chief executive of Baltimore County, says Lippman, the future Vice President created a human relations commission, then forced the chairman to resign when he tried to desegregate an amusement park. During the same period Agnew rebuffed supporters of open housing legislation, noting that it would "invade the rights of property guaranteed by our Federal Constitution." In such mat-

ters as civil rights and zoning, Lippman theorizes, Agnew accurately mirrored the needs and prejudices of his suburban constituency, and he still does. Translation: Agnew in '76.

Maybe so. Yet Agnew's political career seems so freakish, and at times so inept, that one seriously doubts he could go all the way. As Witcover makes painstakingly clear, much of Agnew's success can be chalked up to dumb luck. If the Democrats in Baltimore County had not squabbled, Agnew would not have been elected county executive, if Mahoney hadn't won the Democratic primary, Agnew would not have been governor, if Rockefeller, whom Agnew idolized and promoted for President, hadn't quit the race—temporarily, as it turned out—Agnew would never have been driven into the arms of Nixon. There is a limit to luck, sooner or later it has to give way.

Agnew is something of a True Believer. Though Americans like True Believers, they seldom elect them. Ask Barry Goldwater. To be a True Believer, one must display a measure of paranoia, find a principle at stake in every question, refuse to compromise where principle is concerned and, ultimately, seek revenge on one's enemies. The Vice President appears to be making reasonable progress on all these fronts. If his speeches are any indication, he is getting more rigid and more vengeful all the time.

Such traits frighten friends and foes alike. Agnew's vendetta against Senator Charles Goodell, putatively a fellow Republican, is a case in point. Not only did the Vice President call Goodell "the Christine Jorgensen of the Republican party," but on the night of Goodell's defeat, Agnew was heard to exult, "We got that son of a bitch!"

Of course Agnew denied he said that. But then he has denied practically everything, including some of the quotations. Coyne lovingly reprints His is a peculiar style, slightly effete.