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The Perils of Spiro

"I know Ted Agnew well. We have had long and tough discussions. We have examined each other's ideas, debated issues and tested each other. He has real depth and genuine warmth. Having watched his performance as Governor of Maryland for two years, I was deeply impressed by his tremendous brain power, great courage, and unprejudiced legal mind. He has vigor, imagination, and above all he acts. Under pressure, he is one of the best-poised and controlled . . . he has the attributes of a statesman of the first rank . . ."—RICHARD M. NIXON.

Well, there is no doubt that Ted Agnew has genuine warmth and there should be no question by now that he acts. But the Governor's performance over the past month leaves little doubt about anything else, except perhaps his capacity for imagination. Given enough time, Nixon's decision ("I seriously considered more than a dozen able men") to name Agnew as his running mate may come to be regarded as perhaps the most eccentric political appointment since the Roman emperor Caligula named his horse a consul. But never mind. Let's, as Nixon used to tell us back in 1960, look at the record.

The last time we left Spiro Agnew he was in trouble. He had described Polish-Americans as Polacks, and then the day before yesterday there were news dispatches reporting his reference to a correspondent of Japanese descent as "the fat Jap." He apologized for both. Last week, he was apologizing for calling the Vice President "soft on communism" and "squishy soft" on almost everything else. A few days after that, he was in hot water when he misunderstood a reporter's question and hotly rebuked a suggestion that he and Nixon were in collusion with George Wallace. "The word collusion has nasty connotations," the Governor said. "It's as bad as 'soft on communism.'" It turned out that Nixon had made the accusation of collusion between Humphrey and Wallace. Apologies all around after that, too.

Later on, there was a confident description of Nixon's "plan" to end the Vietnam war. He sort of apologized for saying that, too, indicating that there was no "plan" but it was just that sort of as the campaign got, ah, under way he and Mr. Nixon would be getting into lots of policy matters including, of course, the situation in Southeast Asia . . .

It is by any account a dazzling performance. Agnew probably isn't prejudiced, and when he says that his Polish and Japanese pals don't mind when he calls them Polacks and Japs that is probably true. As Agnew points out, he himself used to be the Greek kid in the neighborhood and is accustomed to being called "that Greek." Anyway, the Democrats trotted out Ambassador Gronouski to tut-tut and the Republicans found Rep. Derwinski to pooh-pooh, and so it would seem to be a stand-off so far as the Polish thing is concerned.

For the moment, our sympathies are with Stephen Hess and John Sears, the two very able men Nixon has dispatched to keep an eye on the Governor. The specter of Spiro leaping from crag to crag with the press in hot pursuit is a beguiling one; it recalls the palmier days of the Romney campaign. Then, as now, there was a need for comic relief to leaven the tedium. You can view Agnew with alarm, or you can point to him with pride, but for now we prefer to look on with horrified fascination. What will he do next? What will he say? We said when he was nominated at Miami that we had serious doubts about his fitness for high office. Those doubts are being rapidly resolved.