

For God So Loves Spiro Agnew That He Made Him Vice-President

by Garry Wills

Is there some other explanation?

"In brief, a darling of the gods. No other American has ever been so fortunate, or even half so fortunate. His career first amazed observers, and then dazzled them. Well do I remember the hot Saturday in Chicago when he was nominated for the Vice-Presidency on the ticket with Harding. Half-a-dozen other statesmen had to commit political suicide in order to make way for him, but all of them stepped up docilely and bumped themselves off. The business completed, I left the press stand and went to the crypt below to hunt a drink. There I found a group of colleagues listening to a Boston brother who knew Coolidge well, and had followed him from the start of his career.

"To my astonishment I found that this gentleman was offering to lay a bet that Harding, if elected, would be assassinated before he had served half his term. There were murmurs, and someone protested uneasily that such talk was injudicious, for A. Mitchell Palmer was still Attorney General, and his spies were all about. But the speaker stuck to his wager.

"I am simply telling you," he roared, "what I *know*. I know Cal Coolidge inside and out. He is the luckiest goddam ----- in the whole world."

—H. L. Mencken

The idea of Spiro Agnew as President of the United States is fascinating and—according to some who best know his history—inescapable. The creaky gods of Olympus seem to have stirred at last and absentmindedly blessed this Greek hero among Western barbarians, not noticing (they are a little rusty) that their hero is a clown. Undeterred, they keep up a barrage of favors. His career has about it a somnambulant surefootedness, an inevitability of advance, that reminds one of Coolidge and his juggernaut of snooze. As Mencken said: "There were massive evidences of celestial intervention at every step [of Coolidge's career] and he went through life clothed in immunities that defied and made a mock of all the accepted laws of nature."

Spiro jokes gave us a few bright touches in last fall's campaign; cartoonists liked to draw him munching one or other foot. As time went on, journalists (as is their wont) began to believe themselves; they thought Spiro was a Nixon liability, that his missteps mattered, that he could do something to hurt or help himself (apart from the gods). But Lou Harris, two days after the election, went to the National Press Club and called the jokesters back to reality:

Nixon owed his election to Agnew—to the thin margin of victory given him in those border states that were inched away from Wallace. On election eve, Humphrey frothed back and forth among movie stars in the TV studio, fawning on his monkish second-string McCarthy, Ed Muskie. Nixon, by contrast, sat hunched and swiveling, all alone, sweatily re-masticating answers for his blond schoolmarm, all helpful smirks and nods, Bud Wilkinson. No Agnew in sight. It was said that Nixon regretted his choice, that his deal with Thurmond could ruin him yet.

But Agnew was not meant for all seasons or climes; he was a guided missile, swung into place, aimed, activated, launched with all the minute calibration that marks Nixon, the great calculator. Once the missile was fired, the less attention it drew to itself the better—like a torpedo churning quietly toward its target. Agnew has a neckless, lidded, wraparound-hair *flow* to him, a tubular perfection of suit or golf outfit, quiet burbling oratory, that lends him a sleek subaquatic look. He was almost out of sight by the end; but a good sonar system could hear him burrowing ahead, still on course. The real Spiro joke was, all the time, on us.

The beginning was unpromising—forty fairly undistinguished years. We can stick with Mencken's harshest page on Coolidge: "No man ever came to market with less seductive goods, and no man ever got a better price for what he had to offer." Spiro's father was a hard-working immigrant, a restaurateur in Boston, Schenectady, New York, Baltimore. Early in the Depression he lost his Baltimore place, but singlehandedly started it again, and scraped money up to put his boy in Baltimore's most expensive school, the Johns Hopkins University. The Hopkins is in the city but not of it: in those pre-S.D.S. days, it was totally "uninvolved" with the community, an ornament, external. Those with local ambitions, wanting old-school ties in the grappling chumminess of city-machine politics, did better to attend provincial Loyola College and follow that up with the University of Maryland's law school. (The incumbent Mayor, descended from an old politician family, did thus.) The Hopkins was for outsiders, or for natives who wanted out. It was, for instance, Alger Hiss's escape hatch from Lanvale Street to Boston and New York and Washington—a route Murray Kempton later followed and described. But Agnew's father overlooked one problem: Spiro was (and is) no student. After three years he gave up the losing Hopkins effort. His doting biographer



fuzzes over this flight from the test of senior year: "His scholastic concentration in sophomore year began to decline and he was distracted by other things than school." Agnew himself, at an American Legion dinner last October, was more frank: "I was more interested in a good time than in studying." After he left school, he helped a bit in his father's store, then went to work by day, and school by night—a city law school now, though he was no more studious; he admits he "still wasn't doing anything scholastically." But at his daytime job he met his wife, an unpretentious girl in open-toe shoes, plump winning Judy, still the most likable thing about him. Then war came, rescuing him: he went to O.C.S. and served honorably in Europe.

Back home, now father of two, he resolutely hit the law books again and, with the help of the G.I. bill, bought his first home out in the suburb of Loch Raven. Nixon presented him to the Miami convention as an expert in urban problems, and it is true that he early grasped and overcame what white urbanites take to be their main city problem—how to escape the city. It has been twenty-two years since Agnew lived in the city of his birth (once you've seen one decaying neighborhood, you've seen them all).

This flight from the city reverses Nixon's motion: the President strained *toward* big towns from his earliest days, when trains strode by night with muffled jangle from citrus landing to citrus landing past the store where Nixon sat sleepless over his books. In his last year at Duke University, Nixon and two of his classmates went to New York to find jobs; the other two succeeded, he did not. Then he tried Washington and the F.B.I. again unsuccessfully. So he had to go back to Whittier.

After getting his law degree, Agnew opened a practice, but flunked out again. With his law degree on the wall, he had to go to work in a grocery store. Nixon, too, failed in his first major endeavor after college, the launching of a new business called Citra-Frost. From that time, various irons were being annealed in Nixon, but Agnew just bounced along slaphappily, as if he knew the gods had things in store. War once more lifted him from inconsequential civilian life; he sold his home, and served in Korea. Finally, when he returned, things began to fall into place. Modestly prosperous in a county law firm, he found his destined stage within the floating hermetic life of a modern suburb. Neither town nor country, big city nor small hamlet, this is the place one retires to before going to a Retirement Villa; it is the natural home of the homeless, where all ties are brand new, forged today. In it the atomic family swims, served by new schools and supermarkets fitted to the needs of each "project" or "development."

Agnew, whose father gave up his original country and name, Agnew who himself gave up the family's religion and political party and adopted city, found roots in the rootlessness of suburbia. Not naturally gregarious, he could nonetheless run this world's casual *cursus honorum*—Vice-President of the Kiwanis Club, President of the P.T.A., President of the Loch Raven Community Council. Even retiring Judy participated in the unfrenetic politics of neighborhood and club basement, as Girl Scout leader, member of the Federation of Republican Women, and President of the Ki-Wives. Spiro, who had not taken part in collegiate sports, moved up from his city pastime (bowling) to golf. In this circle of one-generation clans, clan Agnew worshipped at the living totem, suburbia's answer to the generation gap, the family dog.

The first reward for this life of semi-civic duty was appointment (by a 4-3 Republican Council) to the County's Board of Appeals, (including zoning). Since Baltimore was emptying out its whites, filling up with blacks, a land boom was on—modest and ambitious homes exploding slowly, in a lumber and lawn-grass circle, out from the old edges of town. Fields were cut up into lots, ribs of wood clothed overnight with brick, and the supple corkscrew of water rose from a thousand lawn sprinklers. Baltimore row houses, first meant to save city space, now ran stichically off toward country horizons. Rodgers Forge, farmland when Scott Fitzgerald lived there, became a maze of brick, each block with its garbage-truck mews. Incongruous Dutch villages. The inbred "developments" whose roads never reach an outside artery. Mini-mansions in pockets of shrubbery. Even partially to control zoning was to get an inside glimpse of the action. For Agnew, it was a sign of the whole system's beneficence (let a thousand sprinklers flower). He was all the time, in his Greek uprooted soul, that vanishing American, still a valuable political property, the booster. (No wonder he ran from

Baltimore, unconsciously pursued, perhaps, by boosterism's scourge and Savonarola, Henry Mencken.) Some wealthy real-estate men, largely Democrats, realized just how valuable a property Agnew was, and put him on his way. The ties remain close even today; many of Agnew's investments have been in the county's rapidly improving property. These connections with land investors led The New York Times to accuse Agnew of "conflicts of interest" throughout his political career. The editors did not understand that when Agnew traveled from his Loch Raven home to the county's tiny seat of power, Towson, he was entering a remnant of the past, still haunted by ghostly Will Kennicotts; and if you are anybody in Gopher Prairie, you have ties with all men up and down Main Street.

Nixon knows this, from bitter memory. He came from a Whittier islanded in orange and lemon trees. His football coach says, "When Whittier played a game, we closed up the town." When the college debate team competed, pre-TV crowds came as to a boxing match. In that small unwanted world of his, Nixon was a celebrity—president of his class—with all kinds of local "connections." The water boy Nixon sat next to on the bench, in his second-string days, was the son of Herman Perry, a trustee of the college and manager of the Bank of America. It was not surprising that, as Mr. Perry became indignant at the "red" thoughts and ways of Congressman Jerry Voorhis, he should turn to the bright star of Whittier's narrow horizon, the born debater, Dick Nixon, to supplant him. Perry and his friends financed the campaign that launched Nixon. But Nixon was anxious to get out on his own; and get out he did. Fast. Agnew still enjoys, without chafing, his original patrons (plus others of their sort). He can do this without humiliation, for behind the J. Walter Joneses and their money stand the gods—who had been busy, undetected, through the years.

Back in 1958, Baltimore County's Democratic boss had picked his successor for the office of County Executive (ruler over a patchwork of housing developments and swallowed villages, Towson foremost among them). This boss thought he would still be running things out of his Dundalk business office; but the successor had ideas of his own. For four years, therefore, the boss—Michael J. Birmingham—plotted his own restoration; and though he was a septuagenarian of uncertain health, he had enough political debts to win a bitter, party-splitting primary. After his victory, supporters of the incumbent swung to the Republican candidate of 1962, and up popped—none other than Spiro Agnew. The old Democratic County had a Republican in charge for the first time in memory, the voice of the new suburbia, all real estate and new-arrived respectability.

The lucky chance that let Agnew rise through Democrats' divided ranks seemed a freakish and short-lived thing. Soon after Agnew's election, Birmingham died and the Democrats' party reknit, ready to claim its ancient seat again in 1966. But fate was readying better things. Part of the fatal weave came from Agnew's control of the county police. During the campaign the old police chief invited his subordinates over for a social evening with Mike Birmingham, the aging candidate. Agnew, as part of his assault on the past administration, made an issue of the social evening-cum-Democratic candidate, and pledged a "housecleaning" if elected. The result: he brought in an outsider to shake up the police department—Robert J. Lally, the legendary Fordham F.B.I. man, who had been in charge of the Maryland-Delaware area. Lally keeps his close ties with Hoover's department and is a strict law-and-order man. Agnew began a close association with him that was to bear fruit six years later in the incident that brought him to national attention.

The county Agnew presided over is a lopsided doughnut circling Baltimore. (It does not, as John Lindsay informed the Miami convention when seconding Agnew's nomination, *include* the city.) An invisible 2.6 percent of the county's population is Negro, scattered through greenlawncville in moldy pockets. Insofar as the big American city is becoming black territory, Agnew knows nothing of it. His one touch of racial trouble as County Executive he refused to think of in racial terms. Civil-rights groups, led mainly by clergymen, tried to integrate an amusement park in the county. Agnew and Lally treated it simply as a law-and-order matter and arrested the priests and rabbis. This was Agnew's first experience with a major social problem. I asked Robert Lally if he seemed anxious to learn about the enforcement problem, to study other

communities' ways of handling similar clashes: "No, he never had any doubt about the way things should be. He is very quick to boil things down to their essential." I asked Reverend Frank Williams, one of those arrested, if Agnew was a good learner in the area of Negro rights. "No. He simply admitted he did not know any Negroes, or much about them." It was a lack that did not disturb Agnew. By the time he ran for Governor, he still knew well only one prominent Negro, the Reverend Robert Newbold, who had to take him around and introduce him to the state's leaders.

By 1966, Maryland Democrats seemed determined to commit suicide at the state level ("all of them stepped up docilely and bumped themselves off"). Two years earlier, George Wallace had won forty-five percent of the votes in Maryland's Democratic primary, and those who ran up that total now laid claim to the party. The only candidate they could find was a tongue-tied unctuous old millionaire, George P. Mahoney, who had run in every political race he could enter for years, without ever being elected. He made his campaign slogan "Your Home is Your Castle" (up with the castle drawbridge, let the horde of advancing niggers silt up in the moat). Red-hots turned out for the primary, and made poor George their nominee. There was nowhere for the liberals, the Negroes, the Jews to go but to the Republican candidate, who was the last County Executive, running for this new office, cheating his opponents of a reelection showdown in the county, Spiro the Blessed.

Elected Governor, Agnew had to give up his home for Annapolis, the crowded little town full of history and crumbling buildings (in which he has not shown much interest). He consoled himself by giving the gubernatorial mansion a Loch Raven-style "club basement," where he could play billiards with his bodyguards. (Peace demonstrators in Baltimore last year carried placards reading, "You Can Take Agnew Out of the Country but—You Can't Take the Country Out of Agnew.") The new Governor brought several things with him from the County—including Bob Lally, his police chief. First he appointed Lally "Program Executive" in charge of correlating all the state's law-enforcement agencies, then made him chief officer (Colonel) of the state troopers. When Lally left the Program Executive's office, another F.B.I. man was brought in, at his suggestion, to replace him.

The city of Baltimore was now within Agnew's domain. But he could not often be lured there—except, on Sunday, to the stadium for a Colts game (suburbanites want to move the stadium out their way). His last Republican predecessor in Annapolis, Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin, a tireless hand-pumper and hubert-humphreyizer at all Baltimore affairs, moans melodramatically (he is an old speech teacher and magnificent ham actor): "Ted just does not like to meet people. As Governor, he refuses to attend even the most important city events. When a new president was installed at the Johns Hopkins University—and that happens only once in a decade or more—presidents of other universities and men of influence came from all over America. But not the Governor of Maryland." (Bad memory, those three Hopkins years?) "When the Greek Archbishop met our *g-r-e-a-t* Cardinal Shehan—a unique ecumenical event—Spyros Skouras, who brought the archbishop down from New York, asked me, 'Where is Spiro?' " A young Greek lawyer in the legislature, Paul Sarbanes, says, "Agnew never did anything for the Greek community in Baltimore except leave it at the earliest opportunity." Rabbi Israel Goldman, a member of the Maryland Commission on Human Relations, says, "Agnew insulted the Jewish community by sending an underling to read some perfunctory statement when we invited him to our meeting of seven thousand people to protest the Arab aggression against Israel." Agnew frequently expresses his opinion of these ceremonial events. His biographer puts it this way: "He once said wryly that whenever he has a train of thought" (rare precious happening, do not abort it) "that requires concentration" (over the billiard table?), " 'somebody wants me to stop and glorify National Pickle Week.' "

But his main trouble was with the Negro community. It did not start in Baltimore, but out on the antebellum Eastern Shore, over the Choptank River in Cambridge (what Mencken used to call "Transchoptankia"). After an appearance there by Rap Brown in 1967, Negroes burned down two city blocks and brought the National Guard in. For Agnew it was a time of lurid revelation. He had a police tape of Rap Brown's speech which he played over and

over in his office, inviting black and white leaders in to hear it. "He paced up and down as it played," says Rabbi Goldman, "in great distress, and said, 'How can we put up with agitators like this?' I tried to tell him Cambridge was ready to go up in flames long before Rap Brown went there, but he did not understand. The trouble came from the miserable conditions, not from the man who denounced those conditions." Senator Verda Welcome, a prominent black moderate, was one of those given a private audition of the tape, and she shocked Agnew by her lack of shock at what Brown said. It was old stuff to anyone who had ever listened to the black community. Agnew had not. When Lally brought him intelligence reports on agitators, people malevolent enough to blame the system that had blessed Agnew and all his kind, Spiro became obsessed with "militants." A conviction was hardening in him that no progress could be made until all moderates were forced to denounce the militants. Colonel Lally agreed: "We cannot have men going around telling people to burn their cities." They seem honestly to believe that those trapped in a ghetto would not think of starting trouble unless some signal caller came by to give instructions. The next clash with the black community came when Agnew's budget for fiscal '69 was submitted. Paul Sarbanes, in an extraordinary twenty-two-page indictment, called it an "East Coast version of the Ronald Reagan budget." Welfare mothers marched against it; black leaders and city officials told Agnew he was cutting back too drastically on programs for the poor. By this time Agnew was not listening. His one Negro aide rarely got to speak to him personally.

Spiro seemed to be living in the Governor's mansion on borrowed time (as he had lived in the County's supreme post). "Republicans only get into office in Maryland when the Democrats split," says McKeldin, "and they would not be stupid enough to run another Mahoney in 1970." But Agnew was ready to move on. If the Democrats had split two ways in the Mike Birmingham struggle, and the state party had fallen apart for a while on the race issue, he would climb the next step over a national party split *three* ways (Wallace Humphrey, McCarthy). In his quick rise, he has never had to stand for reelection. "If he would hold still for a minute," Paul Sarbanes says, "we'd nail him. But he is always moving off to something new."

The next step took more doing; but who can stop gods? By the beginning of 1968, Agnew was moderately successful as a Governor (nothing spectacular), but the Democrats were de-Mahoneyized, ready for 1970. Agnew was not nationally known, still something of a newcomer (just a decade ago his big race had been for the Vice-Presidency of the Kiwanis Club). He was considered a liberal Republican; he had stood with McKeldin in the 1964 Maryland delegation, working for Rockefeller. The campaign against Mahoney had given Agnew a liberal image. Besides, a public-accommodations law had been passed when he ran the county, a mild open-occupancy law when he was Governor—both bringing local into line with federal practice. Agnew himself probably did not know, at this point, whether he was a liberal or a conservative, or what the words meant. Later, when he called Humphrey "soft on communism," then claimed he did not know such charges were common in the Fifties and were connected with Joseph McCarthy, no man could plead ignorance so convincingly.

Agnew still thought his future lay with Rockefeller; he had not even met Richard Nixon. The new year crept in on him bearing all kind of unknown gifts, wrapped-up blessings all wound up and ready to go off, week after week, through the Spring of 1968. It began in January, when a lumpy absentminded fairy godmother waved king and prince together with an improbable wand. Louise Gore is a billowy evasive woman, wealthy and unmarried, who has dabbled in Maryland politics for two decades, supporting others or running herself (she is now a state senator). Her family own the Fairfax Hotel and Jockey Club in Washington and the fine home Marwood, where Roosevelts and Kennedys have lived. She is difficult to track down—she seems to think the measure of one's importance is the number of people kept waiting, simultaneously, at points dotted across the map—and when one does meet her, she tends to be preoccupied, peacefully daydreaming despite her bitten nails. Asking her questions is like tapping a balloon; she drifts.

But the story came out: "I wanted to give a treat to the women who worked for me in my senate race—I call them the Gore girls" (they deserve a treat). "So I took them up to New York for the

National Republican Club luncheon. I arranged for them to stay in the Manhattan apartment of Mrs. Edmund Lynch Jr. As a special treat for them, I asked Mr. Nixon to drop by the apartment after the Club meeting. Then I learned Governor Agnew and his wife would be in town, so I invited them too. I wanted these two men I admire so much to meet each other." The two met formally on the podium for the luncheon; but they did not get into personal conversation until they joined each other at Miss Gore's party. "It was almost as if one picked up the other's thought from—well, from the other; they were so engrossed in each other that they forgot we were in the room. When I walked Mr. Nixon to the elevator, he told me, 'Your Governor—your Governor—make him speak out more. He's got a lot to say.'" Agnew, too, was impressed, and sent a long letter to Miss Gore thanking her for the opportunity of meeting Nixon. The spark had jumped. Later, in Florida, Nixon was to say, "There can be a mystique about a man. You can look him in the eye and know he's got it. This guy has got it." Not given to such outbursts, Nixon must have been remembering that warm first meeting six months before. It stretches credulity to suppose that Nixon, of all people, was impressed by any cerebral excellence on Agnew's part (no one is on record as being bowled over by his brains). What, then, so impressed this man with his skilled eye for political horseflesh? No doubt the same thing that won over real-estate men back in Baltimore County. Agnew is a believer; his faith in the Establishment (as he proudly calls it) fairly shines from him, as does his horror for its critics. The year 1968 was to be a time for law and order, Goldwater's ridiculed theme from the former campaign, now respectable and part of both parties' platform. Nixon, just embarked on his own campaign in the New Hampshire primary, must have sensed this man could voice that theme with a fervor and innocence, a lack of racist nuance, impossible in most campaigners. He had found someone less sophisticated (and so less vulnerable) than George Wallace. Nixon himself had been kicked around too much to believe in a rosy system of rewards. He had scratched his way up the flinty rock face of history. But he knew the value of belief—not only politically but personally.

When he saw Agnew, fresh from an artificial Gopher Prairie, the buried Whittier in him must have stirred.

Nixon could sense, even in January, the political uses of Agnew, the thaumaturgic power of his innocence. But before he could make important use of the man, two things had to happen. Agnew's hopes had to be separated from Rockefeller, and the Maryland newcomer had to get wider exposure. Both things happened in the chaos of three weeks in spring, the bitter Easter season of last year. But first, as usual, fate made its preparations. In February, Robert Moore opened a S.N.C.C. office in Baltimore, and made an overnight sensation by calling the city's war on crime a war on the black man. Senator Clarence Mitchell, a black moderate, took the senate floor in Annapolis to denounce this irresponsible charge. The house of representatives passed a resolution praising Mitchell because he did not praise Moore (the easiest way for whites to undermine the authority of blacks in their own community is to give them medals for attacking other blacks). There was a tug back and forth of "Uncle Tom" and "extremist" charges, followed by a widespread desire in the black community to unite as a single effective bloc. With this aim, black leaders scheduled a secret meeting for March 24 at the Emmanuel Christian Community Church. The stage was set for Agnew's emergence as a national figure.

Meanwhile, three days before that meeting could take place, the Governor of New York called a special press conference. Everyone expected him to announce his candidacy for President—everyone, including Agnew, who had been first in the field blowing Rocky's trumpet. The Annapolis press crew was invited into Agnew's suite to watch the show with Spiro; he would ride the very first wave of publicity. They were there when Agnew got the humiliating proof of his unimportance in Nelson's eyes: Rocky had gone out of his way to announce that he would not announce, and he had not announced this non-intention to his leading booster. This was typical of Rocky's performance in '68. Later his people would try to woo Agnew back; but Spiro is sensitive, and he was hardened against his original choice from that dark moment. It was an apparent setback from which, as usual, Agnew would profit.

In three days, the black unity meeting took place, unheralded. It was four days before Steve Lynton, who covers the black community for the *Baltimore Sun*, could piece together enough details of the session to write an article on it. Not even police intelligence officers had picked up the story. They had to rely on the article—as did Agnew. Here was another example of moderates consorting with militants; and Agnew, his hope of impressing the liberal Rocky gone up in smoke, began to plan a public declaration of the responsibility black leaders have of maintaining law and order among their own. Three days after the Lynton article ran, Johnson withdrew from the Presidential race. The Republican candidate—Nixon, apparently—now had an even better chance of winning in November.

That was Sunday. A week of horror had begun—the week of Spiro's opportunities. A Negro state college was in turmoil, about twenty miles from Annapolis, over poor campus conditions. Agnew would teach the moderates how to handle disturbances. He sent one of his real-estate men—one known for his tactlessness, Charles Bressler—over to Bowie State to take a hard line with the students. The Governor was handling everything personally now. His Negro aide, Dr. Gilbert Ware, was not consulted; and Ware told me, "Even Mel Cole [the Governor's administrative assistant in charge of education] did not know about the trouble on Bowie's campus until I told him about it." Agnew was already composing, with his own hand, the declaration on the duties of moderates. In the week after his break with Rockefeller, he seemed a whirlwind of righteousness over the issue of law.

On Wednesday of that week, Stokely Carmichael came to Baltimore, and though he did not do much but meet with friends in a bar, Lally's intelligence report went to Agnew; this was another thing to be used in the address. On Thursday the Bowie crisis came to a head. About 250 students marched on the statehouse and asked to see the Governor. He replied, through intermediaries, that they were not on his calendar for that day; if they wanted to see him, they would have to make an appointment. The students sat down. When closing time (five o'clock) came at the statehouse, Colonel Lally, who had been standing by, moved the students down the steps, out of the building, into police vans: 227 were arrested in the next hour. Then Lally's men took to their cars, under orders from Agnew to close the school. While they were on the way, news came over their radios: Martin Luther King had just stepped out on a balcony, joked with friends in a car below, and had his jaw blown off. This gave extra urgency to Lally's mission: he must close the campus down before those imprisoned students returned, out on bail. Troops fanned out through dormitories and other buildings, telling students to pack their things and leave. Some had no transportation, no money, no place to go at the moment. They were put on buses, or given passes that would allow them to remain overnight, until they could arrange for other accommodations. The campus did not erupt.

But Baltimore did. The seismic waves moving out from Memphis put Baltimore in flames by Saturday. Sunday morning, federal troops moved in to supplement the National Guard. Dr. Ware suggested various moves to Agnew's aides, moves meant to calm the situation down: that he attend Dr. King's funeral (the Governor, he found, had not even sent a message of condolence to Mrs. King; it was belatedly dispatched after his inquiry); that he meet with leaders in a private way to rebuild the community; that he go to the ghetto himself to show concern. But Agnew kept to his original plan, to confront moderates with their great crime, that meeting with militants from their own community back on March 24. Nothing had shaken that resolution in the interval—not Bowie, not King's death, not the Baltimore riots. Agnew was still living more in the week of his break with Rockefeller, living with the opportunity given him by the moderates' meeting with militants, than in the arson and looting of the time since King's assassination. Meanwhile, the moderates who had been chosen for excoriation were out on the streets, risking their lives to restore peace to the ghetto.

The incredible meeting took place on April 11, one week to the day after King had been shot, two days after his funeral. Some of the leaders summoned to the State Office Building grumbled that the Governor never came to them, they were always summoned to him. But this time they came. The city was still jittery, on the edge of violence, only partially recovered. They felt they owed it to their people to make every effort at restored (Continued on page 134)

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(Continued from page 61) peace; and surely that was why the Governor had called them together. After they had filed in, Charles Bressler, no friend of theirs since the Bowie incident, spoke in the interval before the Governor's appearance. Parren Mitchell, head of the city's poverty program, told me, "Charley gave us a little talk on how his people had worked their way up in the world by industry and thrift. I didn't think we needed that lesson in the history of minorities." Senator Clarence Mitchell, whose criticism of S.N.-C.C.'s Bob Moore had started the whole chain of events, says, "Bressler's speech about 'all his father wanted was a little place to open a business' irritated us before the Governor ever arrived. We were ready to walk out then."

Upstairs, Agnew was still consulting with his experts on racial matters—Colonel Lally, Commissioner Pomerleau of the Baltimore city police, and General Gelston of the National Guard. Herb Thompson, Agnew's press secretary, had met Dr. Ware, the aide appointed to advise on Negro affairs, and said, "We'll have a few minutes with the Governor before we go down." But by the time they entered, Agnew was ready to go. He said, "Gil, you won't

like it," as Thompson handed Ware a copy of the statement, so long gestated. It was the first Ware knew of any prepared text. (The text had gone out to the press several hours before; some newsmen, who knew Agnew well enough to risk it, called and asked him not to let them print the statement.) Agnew entered the meeting room with his police and military escort. The TV cameras were there, the newsmen with their copies of the text. Senator Verda Welcome says, "We did not know the cameras would be there, turning this into a show. We thought it was meant as a meeting of reconciliation, a time of planning for peace." Bressler, Agnew, Pomerleau, Gelston, Lally took their seats at the dais, Gil Ware stood far away, in a corner. "There was not a black face up there," Senator Mitchell remembers. "It was like a white jury sitting in judgment on black folk."

Agnew began to read, his quiet voice playing its odd meaningless melodies, W. C. Fields rise-and-fall, a scathing assault delivered in the tone of quizzical soliloquy. Was this a meeting to plan the rebuilding of the ghetto? Hardly: "I did not request your presence to bid for peace with the public dollar." Then some more material in the Charley Bres-

slender vein: "Look around you and you may notice that every one here is a leader—and that each leader present has *worked* his way to the top." Flattery of a tactful sort? No. By the third paragraph Agnew was rehashing Bob Moore's February charges: "Some weeks ago [sic] a reckless stranger to this city, carrying the credentials of a well-known civil-rights organization, characterized the Baltimore police as 'enemies of the black man.'" Then that damning repeated praise for Clarence Mitchell: "Some of you here, to your eternal credit, quickly condemned this demagogic proclamation." The events of March: "But when white leaders openly complimented you for your objective, courageous action, you immediately encountered a storm of censure from parts of the Negro community. . . . And you ran." They did not run now, they walked; others had slipped out earlier, now the mass of the audience—eighty out of the hundred—left in stunned, quivering rage. "Nobody calls me a coward," Parren Mitchell says of that moment. "I had gone forty-eight hours without sleep, walking streets at war, trying to calm them."

Agnew, during the exodus, was describing the March 24 meeting: "You met in secret with that demagogue [Bob Moore] and others like him—and you agreed, according to published reports that have not been denied [i.e., Steve Lynton's article in the *Sun*, which Agnew waved], that you would not openly criticize any black spokesman, regardless of the content of his remarks" (this goes far beyond what Lynton knew or wrote of the meeting).

Agnew finally did talk about the riot, and offered his own weird analysis of its cause: "The looting and rioting which has engulfed our city during the past several days did not occur by chance. It is no mere coincidence that a national disciple of violence, Mr. Stokely Carmichael, was observed meeting with local black-power advocates and known criminals in Baltimore on April 3, 1968, three days before the Baltimore riots began." But if Carmichael caused the rioting, he must have been in league with the man who shot King in the interval between that visit to the bar and the outbreak of arson on Saturday. The thing makes no sense. Agnew was simply determined to make his planned indictment of Moore and Carmichael, no matter what. If Baltimore had been half destroyed by an atomic attack on April 1, he would still have called in the moderates and denounced them for that March 24 meeting. But though the riot did not deflect him from his course, it gave his statement even more publicity than he had hoped for. The gods had arranged another sacrifice to the career of their favorite. That reckless incredible statement of April 11 made Agnew the Vice-President of the United States. (Coolidge, too, had risen to national prominence as the result of his part in a riot, the Boston police strike of 1919.)

All Baltimore—not only its blacks—staggered under Agnew's attack. Repeated attempts to bring Agnew to a more conciliatory line were useless. Not even the most cooperative black leaders could defend him (not even Toms could afford to). He was beyond address. He admitted he thought some of the leaders would walk out, but not so many. Asked, "What if everybody had walked out?" he answered, "I would simply"—simply!—"have been faced with a situation where I would have to find

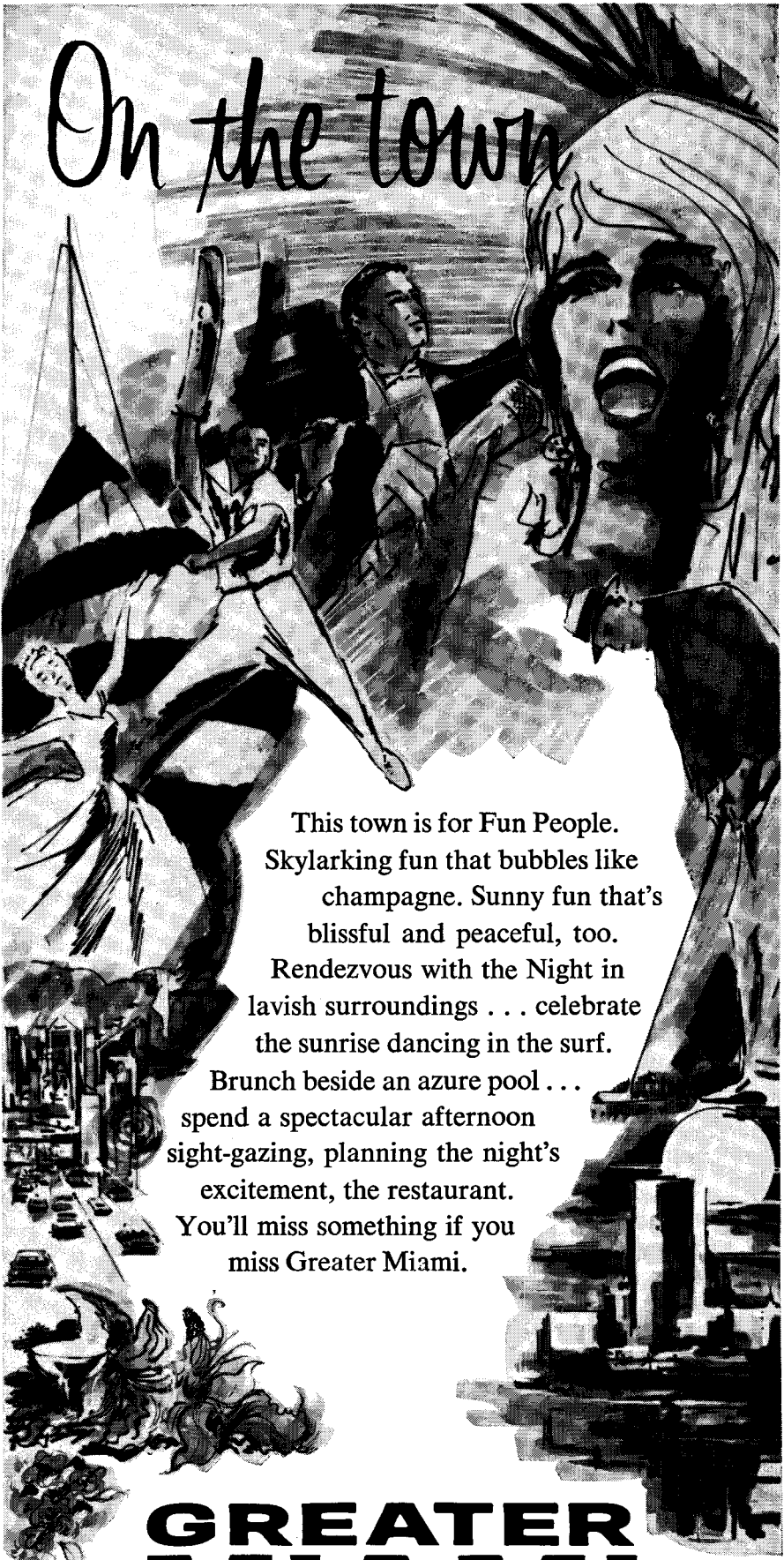
other Negro leaders." (From the moon?)

For once even his innocence wore thin: at the conference, when the few blacks who stayed rose and argued with him, he said, "Don't you know I'm committing political suicide when I sit here and do this?" If he were, it was done with a peculiar relish: from that day forward, his "tough" statements—on the Cadillacs in Resurrection City, on the failings of the Kerner Report, on shooting looters—were volunteered often and readily, in response to no obvious local need. His staff boasted of the favorable mail his statement brought in from all over the nation.

More important, the friendship with Nixon was ripening in private. It had obviously passed through several stages when, just after the Southern Governors' Conference in June, Agnew disappeared from sight: Maryland newsmen thought he had gone back to Annapolis, until a *Newsweek* reporter saw him leaving Nixon's New York apartment. Shortly after, Nixon had dinner at the Governor's mansion along with Louise Gore and Agnew's principal backers. These backers had meanwhile set up a fund for out-of-state travel and political activities. Agnew was giving ambitious speeches, addressing problems like the Vietnamese war (which, last time anyone looked, was not being waged on Maryland soil). In retrospect, it is clear he was reaching out toward the national scene. Reaching out toward what? Again, with the wisdom of retrospect, one finds no obvious opening but the one he did, in fact, fill. A year before the Miami convention, Baltimore political observers thought he was maneuvering toward the Vice-Presidency under Rockefeller; it seems clear now that all he did in late March was shift smoothly from one horse to another—and why *not* change in midstream if the first horse dies beneath you?

What is important, and terrifying, is that Agnew grew more like Mayor Daley as the summer wore on and his prospects broadened. In a New York speech delivered in July, one which sounds like a first draft of the campaign speech he would give throughout the fall, he reduced all questions about law and warfare to one level of meaninglessness—a relativistic ploy, one would think; but he offered it as an *attack* on relativism (no wonder he did not risk that senior year in college): "One of the prime contributors to our age of anxiety is the insidious relativism that has crept into our thinking. Relativism is epitomized by the agonizing of a police officer who couldn't bring himself to kill a looter over a pair of shoes, or the youngster contemplating whether he will serve as a soldier in what he considers an unjust war. But where does this line of reasoning end? . . . What war is ultimately totally just?"

It had all fallen in line for him—King's death, riot, Poor People's Campaign. After Miami, he would make an issue of student revolt, the Democratic convention in Chicago, the S.D.S. in Maryland, the hecklers who greeted him at Towson State College. Law and order, Negroes and students—they helped the "conservative" Agnew just as Mahoney's racism had helped the "liberal" one. And all the while he was neither. Neither—either. Something more elemental. Darling of the gods, of course; yet taking his openings. Moving with a sure instinct for success.



On the town

This town is for Fun People.
Skylarking fun that bubbles like
champagne. Sunny fun that's
blissful and peaceful, too.
Rendezvous with the Night in
lavish surroundings . . . celebrate
the sunrise dancing in the surf.
Brunch beside an azure pool . . .
spend a spectacular afternoon
sight-gazing, planning the night's
excitement, the restaurant.
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There is a difference between ambition and opportunism. Leisurely "Ted" is not driven by Nixon's demons. He does not knock himself out; he does not even do his homework. But he is opportunistic—not cynically so; when lucky chances are given, one takes them, grateful to the gods. Life is, for him, a chance-bestowing machine. How foolish for Negroes not to understand that. It is this sunny view of things that gave Agnew his meaning for the 1968 campaign: he was valuable because of his optimism, his trust in "the good old values," in the rewards of American sobriety; in the System, the Establishment. It takes an elephantine innocence to think one is reassuring young blacks when one says, "You may give us your symptoms; we will make the diagnosis and we, the Establishment, will implement the cure." Only a man who *believes* that sentence could risk its absurdity. We must do him justice: when he says law and order, he does not use code words. He is innocent of irony, nuance, or double meaning (innocent, a good deal of the time, of *single* meaning). He *believes* that one must have appointments, wait one's turn, earn one's way. He expects everyone to observe and enjoy decorum, even in a ghetto.

In him, America's old dimmed-puritan mixture still works—morals without religion, a peremptory *must* without a tempering *why* (inverse of the European formula, religion without morals). Agnew maintains the cult of success as a form of righteousness. America's history revolves around the interconnected superstitions that one must deserve success; that one *can* (rather easily, by mere decorum) deserve it; and that if one deserves it, it will come. America was built on the symbiosis of Dale Carnegie and Billy Graham. These national superstitions have been prolonged in Agnew beyond their natural life by his blighting prosperity, his deals and millionaire pals, his anachronistic Main Street of steel and neon (replacing the old stone and shingle), his crippling good luck and gods who blind him with blessings. He can sustain himself in thin mythical air—like the cat or mouse in cartoons, strolling off a cliff with serene unconscious aplomb across a crayon sky (if he notices, he falls—there is little sign, so far, that Agnew notices).

What makes the performance wonderful is its increasing rarity. The raucous campaign crowds that cheered George Wallace, the flag, the good old days, did not any longer believe in them. They were people who had all, modestly, "made it." Yet one saw them at Wallace rallies last year, shouting in agony, not joy. They can no longer believe in the myths of success, because they have succeeded, and their mouths are filled with ashes. They are not, it dawns on them, the chosen people. Hovering somewhere between protest and complacency, they are robbed of the healthier angers; their own shouts savage them inside—canine shouts of the baffled. They have privilege without style, an unstable thing, unsure of its right to possession.

They are not angry so much at their children as at themselves for failing their children. The hippies and Negroes, turning on the System, have cruelly revealed how little heart the System's minions have for its defense; revealed the hollowness of their lives, the inanition of their beliefs. Nixon's campaign vote-analyst, Kevin Phillips, constructing charts on the new shape of the elec-

torate, lays special emphasis on what he calls "the Sunbelt"—a new geographic and demographic phenomenon of great importance: it stretches from Florida across Texas and Arizona to Southern California, a particularly bilious compound of the new and old, of space programs and retirement villas, honky-tonks and superconservatism. This may be the face of America tomorrow, technological and affluent, disillusioned and reactionary, wanting all the comforts of science and of simplicity, a world of cushy gerontology: wheelchairs in the sun.

Wallace offered these people nothing but the sterile pleasure of *release* for their hostilities, just impotent ejaculations in air. Nixon—ah, tricky still—offers them more. Distraction. Nostalgia. Surcease. If the kids no longer believe in America's earn-your-way salvation, if the parents sour at this revelation of disbelief (which uncovers their own silent defection from career-orthodoxy), then Nixon will produce, magically, the thing that seemed impossible, a semiconscious living specimen who *does* believe.

Nixon performed the feat, of course, at great risk—not to him, to us: the risk of Spiro's someday becoming President. Nixon's choice of Agnew shows how much winning meant to him, at this late last-chance of his life. But it reveals something more, too. It shows Nixon's sensitivity to the need for escape, for illusions, for innocence artificially preserved (like Spiro's). How far does the new President mean to play on this, to use it? Some minimal use was always implied in Nixon's iconographic use of Eisenhower (who trampled on him in the Fifties). Ike propped up, taped, recorded, barely surviving convention South and con-

vention North—Ike the quavering voice of the past—was Nixon's animated campaign poster. The first act of the President-elect was a pilgrimage—the acolyte's procession moving aptly toward a hospital for shrine. Ike's name was sounded like a cracked diminished bell in "the speech" of Nixon's campaign. A stray bit of Agnew luck even gave hard-luck Nixon a new symbol of the old—the young willing captives of history, worthy and amiable kids suggesting simpler times and the Eisenhower days of an earlier TV, the Ike doll and his bride, cute Mr. and Mrs. Howdy Doody.

There is an obvious danger, here, of massive national infantilism, of induced mental retardation on a wide political scale. But the Ike-myth was expectable, and cannot go deep (for one thing, Nixon's memories of that time hurt). But the choice of Agnew suggests an attempt to call up even more primordial—pre-Ike—dreams. Nixon not only sings the old songs—the flag, business, success, "a piece of the action"—he talks of a new activism and success for America across the globe. The last third of the century will be, uniquely, the American era, he promises. It is brave talk—old talk of merited success, of Billy Graham abroad, winning friends and (with God's help) influencing people. Nixon says all this, with a jerk up of his hands and arms as if tugged by strings (from heaven)—but his mouth, too, is full of ashes. He is more the Wallace audience than a Spiro Agnew or a Howdy Doody in his middle years. Nixon may be the one to lead us into the era of the Sunbelt. He is its product, after all—brought up in Whittier, gravitating across the continent toward Florida.

Whittier to Key Biscayne is a low

trajectory. In fact, the two are getting increasingly difficult to tell apart. Whittier has been absorbed in the unbuckled slouch and spread of Los Angeles. There are incongruous traces of the little town's Quaker origin—it takes a struggle, still, to introduce a hard-liquor bar within the city limits—but beer joints east and west on Whittier Boulevard have topless go-go girls undulating on the cheap, young breasts worked with heel and toe to a jukebox for a thirty-cent draft (no cover charge). Topless Quakerism, stingy half-vice, the essence of Sunbelt. This is not the Whittier Nixon escaped; it is more like what he fled to—more like Beverly Hills and Key Biscayne. One of his early spiritual departures was the forty-odd-mile trip he and Pat took for their wedding, to Mission Inn, a kind of ecclesiastical Wuthering Heights, full of Sunbelt empty symbols of belief for unbelievers.

Nixon spent the three days before election in Los Angeles, yet did not visit Whittier. He does not need to; he carries bits of it like lead in his stomach. But he should try it out again; it is sufficiently vulgarized even for Florida taste. On that first Sunday in November I went to the downtown Friends Church in Whittier. Several of Nixon's relatives were there, and many old classmates. Even the pastor was a Whittier College alumnus—all sparkle of teeth and eyeglasses, talking of God and the election ("Vote for religion in your life"). Back at the rectory, I talked with him as he changed clothes, hurriedly, for the Los Angeles Rams game.

The church is squared-off New England board softening toward English college-chapel. It has "stained-glass windows"—pale colored patterns of frame, niche, surrounding scroll, with a large blank in the middle, watery cosmetics for some absent graven image. The main floor is sparsely tenanted during the services; the balcony is empty but for one little girl, all eyes. Those eyes dart everywhere across the enigmatic people, turn rarely toward the preacher with his vacuous cheer. She is above them, watching; one with them, but by way of inquisition; set apart. It was easy, watching her, to imagine Nixon fifty years ago. It is this side of him that understands Agnew's appeal—and this side that should have resisted the temptation to use Agnew. Nixon knows the Whittier of his youth; he knows it has been erased, that boosters have taken over the pulpit and go-go girls the street. Yet he goes on trading in this substanceless world he hated, cashing in on vanished dreams. The man who would risk putting this country in Agnew's hands is, aptly, the man who puts the destiny of his immortal soul, presuming there is such a thing, in Billy Graham's hands, or Dr. Peale's. It shows, with melancholy force, how topless Quakerism can become.

It all makes him typical. American. We deserve, and dare not scorn, him. Indeed, it is hard, standing in Whittier, to think ill of Richard Nixon. We must wish the man well in his new office—out of regard for our own skins, of course; and for deeper reasons. But we cannot forget the intelligence behind those eyes scanning us from the balcony; and therefore for the campaign joke on all of us, for Spiro, we cannot forgive him. #



"I know one thing—we'd get invited out a lot more if you didn't always tell those stories about playing for the Boston Celtics!"

See page 144 for I-R-I-S.