

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Agnew made desert home in late life

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Marge Anderson, a friend of Spiro Agnew recalled for The Desert Sun's Bruce Fessier how people in the desert treated Agnew after his resignation of the vice-presidency in 1973. "He was totally accepted. There was never any hesitation on anybody's part. I think half of what he was suspected of was trumped up."

Agnew was in the desert during and after his tenure in the White House. Living at The Springs Country Club and was seen regularly riding his bike, out to dinner at Rancho Mirage restaurants, and golfing with Frank Sinatra. Agnew first came to the desert as a guest of Bob Hope in 1969 and stayed at a guest house at Frank Sinatra's Rancho Mirage compound.

Richard Nixon asked Agnew to place Nixon's name into nomination at the 1968 Republican National Convention, and Nixon in turn, named Agnew as his running mate, choosing him over Ronald Reagan. According to Wikipedia, "Agnew's centrist reputation interested Nixon; the law-and-order stance he had taken in the wake of civil unrest that year appealed to aides such as Pat Buchanan. Agnew made a number of gaffes during the campaign, but his rhetoric pleased many Republicans, and he may have made the difference in several key states." Nixon and Agnew won easily.

"As vice-president, Agnew was often called upon to attack the administration's enemies. In the years of his vice-presidency, Agnew moved to the right, appealing to conservatives who were suspicious of moderate stances taken by Nixon." They were re-elected in 1972.

In 1970, a small group of demonstrators greeted the vice president outside the Palm Springs International Airport. He flew in from San Diego with the intent of spending a quiet weekend playing golf and tennis, arriving on a military "Jetstar." Secret Service agents came the day prior to meet with Police Chief Robert White to secure the trip. Two prominent Palm Springs Republi-



In September 1970, Spiro Agnew is greeted by protesters at the Palm Springs International Airport. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

cans, Councilman Edgar McCoubrey and Dave Margolis, president of the Palm Springs Republican Assembly, then journeyed back to San Diego with Agnew to attend the California Republican State Committee fundraising dinner.

Agnew, who served in combat in WWII, had earned the ire of protesters around the country when he derided opponents of the Vietnam War as "an effete corps of impudent snobs" and described the news media as "nattering nabobs of negativism." The protesters at the Palm Springs airport carried a sign that politely demanded, "Throw the Rascal Out!"

At the 1970 Bob Hope Classic, Agnew accidentally hit professional golfer Doug Sanders to the amusement of the press. Agnew also powered a tennis shot

into another player, but journalists suggested that since tennis balls were considerably softer than golf balls he should stick to tennis and cause less damage.

Agnew was not implicated in the Watergate scandal, but was investigated for criminal conspiracy, bribery, extortion and tax fraud during his time as Governor of Maryland and continuing into his tenure in the White House. Agnew eventually pleaded "no contest" to a single felony charge of tax evasion and resigned. Nixon replaced him with Gerald Ford who would also eventually move to the desert, down the way from The Springs to Thunderbird Country Club, and had his own physical gaffes documented by the press. (Nixon, like his vice president before him, resigned a year later in 1974.)

Frank Sinatra defended Agnew after

his resignation and welcomed him to Rancho Mirage. According to Fessier, Pat Rizzo, Sinatra's ever-present pal, remembered, "All those years he was around Sinatra, he was at every party. He was on the 'A' list." Sinatra hosted George Burns' 80th birthday party in 1974 and Agnew's presence caused a national stir as Democratic lawmakers complained about the Secret Service agents who accompanied him for the eight-day vacation. The Secret Service would not comment on Agnew's travel but did say it would provide him with protection "for a reasonable period of time" despite his resignation.

Agnew would live quietly at The Springs during the winter months, and back in Maryland for the summers. He was part of the social scene at the club, playing both golf and tennis regularly. Fessier also recorded Nelda Linsk's impression of the disgraced vice president, "He was an excellent conversationalist, reserved and extremely well-mannered."

Wikipedia sums up, "At the time of his death, Agnew's legacy was perceived largely in negative terms. The circumstances of his fall from public life, particularly in the light of his declared dedication to law and order, did much to engender cynicism and distrust towards politicians of every stripe."

Wikipedia also chronicles the idea by some that Agnew was as important in the development of right-wing politics as Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan and credits him with popularizing the idea that the news media is controlled by elitist and effete liberals; noting that some historians acknowledge his pivotal role in recasting the Republican Party as that of "middle Americans" with his fall from grace reinforcing the public's distrust of government.

Decades later, the issues surrounding Agnew have a strangely familiar echo. But his legacy in the desert seems to have been that of a congenial gentleman at his leisure.

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