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Speaker: Zach P. Messitte, President and Professor of Politics and Government, Ripon College, Ripon, Wisconsin and Associate Fellow at the Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe.

Chair: John L. Harper, Kenneth H. Keller Professor, Professor of American Foreign Policy, Academic and Faculty Liaison

Republican Populist: Spiro Agnew and the Origins of Donald Trump's America
American Foreign Policy Seminar Series

Professor Zach P. Messitte observes that very little has been written about Former Vice President Spiro Agnew and there has been very little interest in his political career until recently, that is, with the rise of President Trump. Richard Nixon's selection of Spiro Agnew to be his running mate in 1968 proved to be one of the most underrated, consequential decisions in modern American politics and it still reverberates half a century later. Although Agnew's policy contributions, during his five years in office, were limited, he is responsible for a broad reshaping of the trajectory of the Republican Party since then. His suburban, middle class image mixed with his sharp-edged, anti-elite political style launched his meteoric rise from an obscure county executive in a small border state to being a heartbeat away from the presidency.

For most of the twentieth century the GOP was the party of Wall Street, country clubbers and prep school white males who attended Ivy League schools and worked for big banks. Although it enjoyed the support of the plain-folk Protestants of the small-town and rural Midwest, there was little question that the party's power center lay with the big, moneyed interests who were now being blamed for the Great Depression. Essentially, the Republican Party of the 1930's had an image problem. Between then and the 1970's, the Republican Party would rebrand and reform its fundamental character and Spiro Agnew was part of this transformation.

Theofrastré Spiro Anagnostopolous was born in Baltimore, the product of a mixed marriage between an Orthodox Greek immigrant father and an Episcopalian mother. His military service led him to the European Theater of Operations in 1944 and he returned to the United States to begin a career in community politics. During his tenure as Governor of Maryland, he came to the notice of Richard Nixon for his tough law & order stand during the Baltimore race riots of 1968. Nixon saw him as choice for running mate as he would be acceptable to suburban America and the growing Southern wing of the party. He was also perceived as unlikely to outshine Nixon and willing to toe the party line.

However, Agnew made a number of gaffes on the campaign trail: insensitive comments towards the poor and was criticized for having McCarthyite tendencies by the media. Even during his early tenure as Vice President, he was known to be far outside of Nixon's circle (so much so that he was not implicated in the Watergate scandal). It was during this time, in the late 60's and early 70's, that Agnew began to give attention-grabbing "red meat" speeches where he attacked the media, eastern intellectuals, college presidents, anti-Vietnam war protestors and affirmative action, while Nixon remained quiet on these issues.

Although, Nixon did not particularly like him personally, nor had little value in his policy judgment and preferred to replace Agnew with John Connolly for the 1972 election, Agnew's popularity with Republicans in the south and Midwest stopped Nixon from making a switch. Nixon and Agnew were re-elected in a landslide in 1972 and conventional wisdom pegged the vice president as a front runner for the Republican Party presidential election in 1976. There would be no presidential run in 1976. Agnew would plead no

contest to tax evasion stemming from his years as Baltimore County Executive and Maryland's governor in play to pay corruption scandal which brought a swift end to his political career.

Agnew's platform spearheaded the traditional conservative issues of tax cuts, a stronger military, an anti-Communist agenda, and small government but he possessed the uncanny ability to marry establishment positions with more populist domestic and international positions. His ideology, however, was sometimes hard to discern. It seemed to reflect law and order and anti-intellectual and anti-establishment sentiments.

Agnew went after his opponents as political opportunists with chips on their shoulders. He preached a general mistrust of institutions and relied extensively on public speeches where he claimed to represent the "silent majority". All this appealed to the majority white South and rust belt Midwest which was making a generational transition away from the Democratic Party. His long-lasting impact can be seen in the greater inclusion of conservative voices in the mainstream media and the reinvention of the Republican Party in the 1970's and 1980's.

Spiro Agnew's influence on his country was wider and more longer-lasting than has usually been recognized. Indeed, he continues to be a relevant figure long after many of his vice presidential predecessors and successors have receded. He is one of the rare public officials, in his or any other American era, who can lay claim to a legacy.