



LBJ & Rocky

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Three days of steady association with delegates to the national convention of Americans for Democratic Action (and some perceptive Washington journalists) offer no true clue to the state of mind in Peoria's saloons or Harlem's slums. But the degree of angry alienation President Johnson has stirred in the liberal sector of the American community cannot be lightly discounted.

Only an awareness of the self-destructive impulses of the venerable leaders of the Grand Old Party inhibits a sensational prophecy about the defections facing the Democratic ticket in 1968.

If this latest ADA assemblage had been offered a secret ballot listing the names of President Johnson and Nelson Rockefeller, I believe the latter would have prevailed (and John Lindsay or Mark Hatfield more decisively).

In fact the resolution, adopted by about a two-to-one majority, as reported here yesterday, was an almost wistful invitation to the Republicans to produce a progressive alternative. It was Rockefeller's name one heard with remarkable frequency in the corridors and the late-evening bull-sessions, since it was widely agreed that Lindsay and Hatfield are at least five years ahead of their party.

I took no private poll on the possibility of a Robert Kennedy insurgency, within the Democratic Party, partly because, on the day the convention began, he had affirmed his fealty to the Johnson-Humphrey ticket. Moreover, too many still alive in ADA traumatically remember the fate of the "dump-Truman" movement and, even more guiltily, the Eisenhower boom that accompanied it. (Four years later he bought a different ticket.)

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Apart from past injury in the accidents of political history, several factors caution me to soft-pedal the significance of my findings.

It remains implausible (although not impossible) that Rockefeller can surmount the obstinate resistance of the Goldwater wing of his party to the nomination of a candidate who could win—and especially one deemed guilty of premature combat fatigue in the election of 1964.

Moreover the concessions Rockefeller would almost certainly be obliged to make to the Republican right to obtain the nomination would cast a large shadow over his present appeal to independent voters. A contemplation of the nature of the Congress his election would bring would further diminish his luster.

Finally, perhaps most important, the deep contradiction between Rockefeller's position on Vietnam and the stand of the liberals now rebelling against Johnson would become sharper once he became an active candidate—unless he abruptly found a rationale to change his view. By avoiding strident statements and sticking to the affairs of New York State, he has avoided too conspicuous identification (except among those who follow these matters closely in the line of journalistic duty) with our Vietnam policy. But it is a matter of public record that he has aligned himself with the President and is seemingly unafflicted by any torment about our deepening involvement.

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A sudden, unexpected termination of the war would resolve that dilemma. But it would also remove a major cause of the estrangement between the President and those who, in effect, cast a vote of disappearing confidence in his Administration at

ADA's meeting.

Yet that might not be the end of the story. The gap between the White House and much of America—not merely the organized liberal sector—grows steadily wider. It is expressed most savagely by Robert Sherrill in his newly-published book "The Accidental President," which portrays Mr. Johnson as "treacherous, dishonest, manic, aggressive, petty, spoiled and above all accidental." No man I have known is so one-dimensional an embodiment of wickedness.

But there are many men on many streets saying "I just don't trust the guy." No expert public-relations formula can neatly remedy that condition of suspicion. It may be argued that Harry Truman was the object of similar disaffection in 1948 and confounded his detractors. On the other hand Tom Dewey's capacity for chilling the electorate (and concealing his intelligence) was fatefully underestimated.

The present odds remain that, when the backroom games are over, Richard Nixon will be the "unity" candidate. Most of those whose anti-Johnson discontent I have heard in recent days will be offered the intolerable alternative. The right-wing Republicans will have thereby reasserted their veto power over GOP victory.

Nevertheless, strange things may still happen. If there are any who invest in prophecies detected here, it is recommended that they place no bets now. The elephant may regain memory and desire.