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Four More Weeks

This is the moment in an ordinary election year when the voters tend to complain that there doesn't seem to be much difference between the candidates after all, that once again, so far as the issues are concerned, the electorate has been robbed of a choice. The sentiment, a quadrennial cliché, which has generally vanished by election day, has not been in evidence at all this year. But in its place there has been another complaint about the lack of choice, one that proceeds from a fairly widespread dissatisfaction with both candidates, not as purveyors of stands on the issues, but rather as leaders, as men. From this newer discontent, however, there seems to flow the same kind of public bemusement that people profess to feel in more ordinary election years.

Only this time, the reaction doesn't show signs of wearing off. 1972, in fact, could go down as the election year in which nobody wanted to think about it—in which nobody even wanted to look.

The averted public gaze, we suspect, owes less to a feeling that the contest is already decided than to a feeling that the contenders have been miscast and mismatched. For it is, in many respects, a grotesque and improbable encounter. On the one side is Senator McGovern, whose post-convention activities have created the impression of a candidate without any strategy whatever and without any particular strategic sense or skill. We don't mean "strategy" here as some elaborate, conniving turn of mind, but merely as that kind of over-all planning which takes account of probable consequence and which relates individual acts to a desired outcome—strategy in the sense that you might devise one, say, for getting your Saturday errands done or for handling a particularly difficult day's work. The McGovern campaign seems, by contrast, to be organized around principles no more complicated than those which have given us the add-a-pearl necklace: One thing just follows another, and then another follows that.

There, of course, you only have the half of it. For what finally makes the viewer avert his gaze is that Mr. McGovern, the candidate without apparent strategy is pitted against another, Mr. Nixon, who—at least at the moment—seems to be *all strategy* and nothing else. So we read about espionage and sabotage and law-breaking and suitcases full of hundreds of thousands of dollars being secretly carted about and false names and dummy fund-raising organizations that self-destruct before their business must be made public and the habitual undercover sacrifice of the public interest to those private interests that can add some money or clout to the Nixon elec-

tion drive.

And we read, as well, of the President's gigantic pretense that he is "ignoring" Senator McGovern, even as he and the journeymen of his administration betray a thoroughgoing preoccupation with the Senator's faltering campaign and a willingness to scuttle almost any legislation or make almost any disingenuous statement as part of their over-all anti-McGovern election strategy. That is what makes the spectacle of this encounter so unreal and so uninviting to behold. It is Mandrake the Magician stalking Donald Duck, Peter Lorre on the trail of Mr. Magoo.

Still, a gift for strategy—or the lack of one—has its effects in the real-life world. Thus, Senator McGovern has revealed a knack for making certain sensible positions sound awful—even as Mr. Nixon has developed a knack for doing the thing the other way round. It is testimony to this odd condition,

that Mr. McGovern has now acquired a reputation for changeability on matters of substance, although his alterations of policy and even his capacity to reverse himself seem for the most part negligible in relation to those of his opponent.

It was Mr. Nixon, after all, who campaigned for office in 1968 with a pledge to gain nuclear "superiority" in our relations with the Soviet Union and who, just a few months after entering the White House, summarily reversed himself and adopted the nuclear parity/assured destruction policy he had been inveighing against. It was Mr. Nixon who airily announced one day a total rearrangement of his economic thinking of a lifetime (and of a lifetime of campaigning) with the remark, "I am a Keynesian now." And it was Mr. Nixon, who against all expectation espoused a guaranteed annual income policy for the poor when he came to office and—just as abruptly—threw it over a short while back when it appeared to present a political liability.

That Senator McGovern, in the face of these and similar presidential policy switches, should have got himself the reputation for being the indecisive and inconstant leader of the two is, we should think, a pretty telling commentary on the quality and character of his campaign thus far. So—per-

haps even more so—is the fact that people should be talking about *his* inability to manage his aides (and thus, by extension, to govern) even as the daily story unfolds of gun-toting, bugging, tapping, and money-lugging on the part of presidential aides and agents of whose activities the President blithely pronounces himself to have been unaware.

We do not make these observations by way of drawing some spurious distinction between the “real” man and the “mere” candidate or to suggest that an aptitude for campaigning and a sense of strategy are some special skills extraneous to the virtues or qualifications of a man who is seeking office. On the contrary, an ability to identify genuine and paramount public issues and to bring them to life in people’s lives and in their understanding must surely be accounted one measure of a man’s fitness to serve in office, not just to win it. And during the spring primary campaigns, Mr. McGovern seemed to have this ability. Where is it now?

President Nixon’s own campaign has now gone so far beyond the realm of normal or acceptable practice that it seems fair to say that he and his administration are not just running against Senator McGovern, but against the public—against the normal processes by which a democracy is permitted to make its elective choice, against rights and liberties and decencies that were heretofore *assumed* because no one believed that a United States government would systematically challenge them. These are rights and liberties and decencies that affect everyone in this country. They are related to the economic inequities of which Mr. McGovern has repeatedly spoken. But there is in all this a far larger and more inclusive issue, one that could and should give form as well as focus to any Democrat’s campaign in 1972. Where is Senator McGovern on that? Four more weeks is not a lot of time—and most of the money says Mr. McGovern could do nothing to turn it to victory. But, however that may be, four weeks is more than plenty to redeem this election contest and to make it one of which Americans finally were not ashamed.