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Nixon or McGovern?

(IV) The Presidential Role at Home

We return to a theme that brought any number of liberals and conservatives together in the 1968 presidential campaign—"Nixon can govern." Beyond its suggestion that the managerial skills of the Republican candidate augured well for his ability to run a government, the assertion had another, more specific meaning. It was that Richard Nixon, certainly more than Hubert Humphrey and perhaps even uniquely, enjoyed the confidence of that broad class of Americans who felt themselves most menaced and misused by the social upheavals of the late 'sixties, the very Americans whose trust and respect would be essential to any new president who hoped to consolidate the real gains of the period and to lead the country in the direction of necessary and enlightened, if more orderly, change. There were new realities at home and abroad to be reckoned with, and who was better fit to do that than Richard Nixon, the pragmatic man of the middle? Who could be more persuasive in doing so—and more secure politically—than this spokesman for those he was later to name the "silent majority"?

So far as the President's more important foreign policy departures and achievements are concerned—the Chinese and Soviet initiatives, the arms agreement, the setting forth of the modest aims of the Guam doctrine and, in some respects, on Vietnam—it seems to us indisputable that Mr. Nixon has put his bona fides with a particular domestic constituency to good use. Never mind that he has done things he regularly forbade his political opposition to do and regularly warned against in another life: The President has taken advantage of his "anti-Communist credentials" to legitimize a series of new relationships between Communist and non-Communist nations. We dwell on this point in connection with our appraisal of Mr. Nixon's domestic record because we think that connection is vital. It's not just that the President has failed to utilize his particular political strengths in the same way in domestic affairs, but rather that he has apparently sought to pay for his foreign policy innovations with domestic coin, to reinforce one prejudice or myth at home for every one he has

shattered in his dealings abroad. In his boldness abroad Mr. Nixon, in short, has not dipped as heavily into political capital as you might suppose. Busing paid for China, Agnew for Russia, welfare for SALT—he has managed to put something into his account for everything he has taken out.

This approach, we believe, helps to explain the spasmodic, even convulsive manner of the administration's functioning in the field of domestic affairs, its now-you-see-it-now-you-don't reversals of policy and priority, its infatuation with "environment" one year, "power to the people" the next and something else again after that. It helps to explain, that is, how Mr. Nixon could have torpedoed his own welfare reform proposal in the Senate and how it has come about that the administration now finds itself in federal court fighting busing orders that—in another frame of mind—it had helped to bring about in the first place. But the constant need to keep his political bank account current in terms of some hypothetical foreign-domestic balance, does not explain the whole of it. For the President's particular view of the appropriate uses of federal power and his particular, even personal, perception of the order of importance of human needs play a very large part too.

We have observed in this space that so far as national security is concerned, any weighing of the two candidates must take account of the fact that Mr. Nixon sees the principal urgencies requiring presidential attention abroad, while Senator McGovern believes they are at home. The two men's approach to the expenditure of federal revenues—the relative amounts they would devote to defense and to domestic needs—fairly faithfully reflect that difference, as do the entirely different areas where each would make his first and largest budget cuts. The expenditure of public funds, however, is only part of the story. There are also expenditures of

presidential interest, attention and authority to consider, and in this respect, Mr. Nixon has taken a very distinctive approach. Clearly, he believes in an activist role for the President abroad and a kind of noninterventionism at home. We qualify the President's domestic posture with the term "kind of" because there is an interesting contradiction in it. The administration's assault on the private rights and freedoms of its citizens, which we wrote about

in this space yesterday, taken together with a Nixon White House penchant for gathering authority to itself at the expense of Congress and other lesser public instrumentalities, suggests that Mr. Nixon's often-stated reservations concerning the overreach of the federal government are quite selective. They do not apply to wiretapping. But they become entirely applicable to anything that might mean an interference in what the administration appears to regard as the natural social and economic order of things.

That order—and here we approach a substantial difference between Mr. Nixon and Senator McGovern—appears to include preferential government treatment of those who need it least, "welfare" (or tax break and subsidy, anyhow) for the executive, pep talks and a fueling of resentments for the put-upon middle, and sermons full of reproach for the poor. For the plain fact is that, after the concessions have been made in the tax code and after the "priority" defense expenditures have been made, and after the funds over which government has little control have been paid out, there is not enough left for the real needs of the ordinary citizen in the ordinary community. This would probably be true, though to a lesser degree, under Senator McGovern as well in the immediate future. What distinguishes the two men's candidacies on this score, however, is the different ways in which they would deal with the problem. We are not referring here simply to the McGovern tax reform proposals or to the emphasis the senator (as distinct from the President) puts on job opportunity and full employment or any of a number of other specific economic proposals that seem to us to indicate a stronger concern for the lot of the ordinary citizen than Mr. Nixon has displayed. We are talking really about values, leadership, sincerity, seriousness, the truth—things of immeasurable value that a President can give a people at no cost to the public till.

It is a curiosity of the moment that Mr. Nixon, who has given his presumed constituency so little of real material worth at home—higher crime, higher prices, higher unemployment—should have apparently been able to hold their loyalty with what he has given. For that, domestically, has been almost entirely limited to a gratification of resent-

ments and an exploitation of anxieties. A President who has presided over and acquiesced in an enormous rise in unemployment, tells people the trouble is that a lot of chiselers won't work and are gobbling up their taxes into the bargain. A President who has come to power at a particularly delicate and dangerous moment in contemporary racial history tells the people he will neatly resolve the conflicting claims of blacks and whites—and the anguish they have produced—by blocking court busing orders, which is beyond his constitutional power to do. The benefit to those for whom this "remedy" is intended is virtually nil. The cost not just to the constitutional system, but more immediately and more poignantly, to those black children whose entrapment and isolation is paid into the bargain, is vast. So it is the blacks, the hippies, the draft evaders, the unpatriots, the chiselers, the bad news bearers of the press who are the cause of the silent majority's troubles, and if you say so often enough that will evidently, at least in Mr. Nixon's view, provide satisfaction enough.

How strange it is that Senator McGovern, whose presentations of his programs are as inept as Mr. Nixon's are skillful, has contrived to get himself identified with the way-out social fringes, when his proposals (including even the badly executed original tax credit plan) go so consistently to the needs and wants of that very constituency Mr. Nixon calls his own. How odd that the man who puts a premium on full employment should be regarded as a dangerous crazy by comparison with a man who countenances high unemployment while talking acrimoniously of the decline of the "work ethic." We do not judge that either candidate has addressed himself adequately to the great and in many ways unfamiliar social and economic urgencies of the coming decade. But even as we would give Mr. Nixon the edge in competence in foreign affairs, there is no question in our mind that Senator McGovern's instincts and sympathies and record of interest should commend him more to deal with this nation's particular and pressing domestic needs — should commend him precisely to those voters who seem at the moment to regard him as their enemy.