John P. Roche

Let's evaluate 'truths' from zero

Sixteen years ago, full of zestful arrogance, my generation of Democrats descended on Washington. We sure paid for an education!

During the Ford-Carter transition period it has been hard to avoid reliving the past, reminiscing over the roads not taken, and perhaps sometimes sounding like an inmate of a Democratic old-folks home.

The problem is, if you believe, as I do, that character is fate, insight into the past behavior of a number of Jimmy Carter's "new faces" is invaluable in predicting their future track record. However — as my wife gently noted the other day — the "who said what to whom" in 1966 bit can be overdone. Mea culpa.

What is now important is to close the books and turn off the memory tape except when past action is directly relevant to assessing the current scene.

The right-wing commentators, for example, are screaming that in 1950 Ted Sorensen was a pacifist.

Actually, he was 1A0 — he would accept military service but not bear arms, a position held by a number of heroic medics in recent wars. The serious questions about Sorensen's nomination for Director of Central Intelligence are his administrative competence (he has never run anything) and his 1977 position on the role of force in foreign affairs.

Another example: Why continue the interminable investigation into the murders of President John Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King?

True, it keeps a number of lawyers and miscellaneous outriders employed, but what difference does it make in 1977 whether J. Edgar Hoover or the CIA concealed evidence in 1963? Or whether James Earl Ray had some European contact in 1967? Kennedy and King are in their graves — let them rest in peace.

Then there is amnesty for draft evaders and deserters. (I say draft evaders rather than draft resisters because the latter, men of principle, stood up for their convictions and accepted the consequences.) I support amnesty for the evaders, but have grave doubts about deserters, most of whom I suspect were hard cases who only discovered they were "pacifists" after they landed in Sweden. This may be mistaken, but take them on a case-by-case basis.

Morever, as was suggested here when President Ford pardoned former President Nixon, give amnesty for the Watergaters too.

From 1963 to '74 our society underwent a baleful series of psychological earthquakes. The human debris included both rogues and innocents, and a desert saint would doubtless sacrifice anyone who refused to distinguish the categories. That's why those saints were in the desert: You can't run a society on virtue undiluted by prudential compassions. No one suggests we award the individuals involved medals — just let them quietly vanish into the population.

In terms of his character, Jimmy Carter seems ideally equipped to preside over an abandonment of national paranoia. The fact that he has not spent years in the intense Washington atmosphere does provide a freshness that is congenial. Let us hope this freshness extends to a rejection of the standard policy categories of the past decade, particularly in foreign affairs.

Without suggesting that he paraphrase Jefferson's inaugural by stating "we are all hawks, we are all doves," it is essential that these tags be dumped.

I hold strong convictions about the need for adequate defense, but strongly oppose the B-1 and those Nimitz-class carriers the Navy wants for the next Battle of Midway. Never in my wildest moments have I thought the United States should "police the world," though there are obviously some areas in whose future we have a vital national interest. What kind of a bird am I?

Maybe I am just a nuthatch, circling a tree upside down, but I submit that we must have considered debate in this vast, crucial grey sector. Eight years of the Kissinger perpetual-motion regime, dominated by romanticism, not real-politik, has left us in a foreign-policy shambles.

President Carter, a rational man if ever there was one, should throw away the old code books and start a "zero-based" evaluation of everybody's "truths' — including mine.

Let's begin our third century with the kind of hard-minded experimental skepticism that launched our first.