

Dick Gregory's Political Primer

By Dick Gregory.
Edited by James R. McGraw.
Illustrated. 335 pp. New York:
Harper & Row. \$6.95.

By VICTOR S. NAVASKY

"And by the way," Dick Gregory tells us in his "Political Primer," "Reagan' pronounced backwards is 'nigger.' That's why I've always hoped Governor Reagan would pull himself together and get elected President. Then we could say we have a backward nigger in the White House."

Dick Gregory is not the first humorist to instruct Americans on how their government really works. Petroleum V. Nasby, Artemus Ward, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Finley Peter Dunne, Will Rogers, Mort Sahl, Russell Baker, Art Buchwald and Marvin Kitman are others who come immediately to mind. But Gregory may be the first to give us a political primer that is really a political primer rather than either a work of imagination or a collection of transitions interspersed with jokes, gags, witticisms and sardonic observations on the corpse politic.

Not that Gregory's primer is without wit. He reminds us, for instance, that the major importance of the Vice

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President is the "what if something happened to the President" factor. And then notes that this should give Presidential aspirants a clue to the best life-insurance policy they can have. "I tried to convince President Johnson that if he was really smart," recalls Gregory, "he would have picked me as his Vice Presidential running mate in 1964. That way he would never have to worry about someone being crazy enough to assassinate him. It begins to look like President Nixon adopted my idea."

And Gregory reminds us that back in the days of Earl Warren he never referred to the nine judges on the highest bench in the land as "the Supreme Court." "They rendered so many decisions for the benefit of black folks that I used to call them 'our alternate sponsors.' And that was as it should be. The cats wearing the white sheets took our rights away from us, it's only natural that the cats in the black robes should give them back."

But mainly this is Dick Gregory's quite sober and often boring course on how American government really functions (as opposed to how it's supposed to function). It goes all the way back to the Founding Fathers, the Federalist Papers and the three branches of government — "legislative," "executive" and "judicial," he tells us in depressing and straightforward detail. And, alas, for every half-way decent joke ("Chicago is the only place in the United States where after the election is over and they talk about the 'spook' vote, they're not talking about us black folks") there are pages and pages of historical rehash with accurate acknowledgment to men like D. W. Brogan (on the Constitutional Convention), Daniel J. Boorstin (on the primaries), Martin and Susan Tolchin (on patron-

age), T. Harry Williams (on Huey Long), etc.

Gregory's vantage point is consistently antiestablishment, occasionally making uncommon sense, as when he laments that Americans are always blaming everything good on the Communists. "If a group of marchers are demonstrating carrying signs saying 'Free the Indian' invariably folks will say 'That's Communist inspired' . . . I've never understood why the Communists never get blamed for anything bad."

"When the Communists want to take over a new country they should first go in with a whole bunch of American newspapers. The Communist advance man should say, 'Look, I know you don't know much about our program. But just read what Americans are saying about us. We're for feeding hungry folks, women's liberationists, freedom and dignity and power for black folks and poor folks, Indian rights, and a whole lot of other things.'"

But interlarded with his only intermittently instructive history lessons (there are 17 of them, with "Review Questions and Further Assignments" at the end of each) is occasional bad history, superstition and nonsense. He lists former Congressman Adam Powell's impressive record but neglects to mention the Congressman's flagrant absenteeism. He suggests that the C.I.A. played a role in the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. He pays less attention to business cycles than planetary cycles, arguing that July "was chosen as the birth date of our country" because "it is in the American tradition to follow the astrological cycle of fours. Thus national elections are held in November, the fourth month following July, the original date for the nam- (Continued on Page 44)

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ing of the President was March 4, the fourth month following November." "It is curious that Jefferson's 20 year cycle of change, if not revolution, has worked itself out since 1840 in that every President elected in this cycle has died in office." (Lincoln, elected in 1860; Garfield, elected in 1880; McKinley, re-elected in 1900; Harding, elected in 1920; Roosevelt, elected to a third term in 1940; J.F.K., elected in 1960.)

In addition to the lessons, which manage to render high-school-level history in street-level terms without sacrificing college-level grammar, there is a brief glossary, which has some sting. *Vide*, "minorities: The top half of the unemployed statistics and the bottom half of tables of income."

At one point in the proceed-

ings, while discussing the black caucus in the current House of Representatives, Gregory explains its success by noting: "It's nothing new for black folks. We've been keeping watch over white folks for four hundred years. Even old 'house niggers' during slavery were doing their homework in more ways than one, and they certainly knew their 'masters' better than their 'masters' knew them."

Maybe so. But dark humorists have been watching white America for years, too. And so it is not surprising that the most successful moments in this occasionally paranoid Primer are those that draw on both traditions and combine black perspectives with black satirist perspectives. Listen to Gregory watching the watchers:

"I have been aware of the presence of Army intelligence agents long before Senator Ervin's hearings. . . . When you see a person in the audience

wearing a beard with a price tag still hanging from it . . . it is a dead giveaway. But the real clincher is to look down and notice a spit-shine on the sandals.

"And I've long been aware of the fact that my telephone is tapped. . . . I even have agents hiding in the bushes outside of my apartment building. People come by my house and say, 'Look at Dick Gregory's bushes. They have feet.' I tell them, 'Yes, and my bushes change shifts every eight hours.' One day instead of watering my bushes I'm going to go out and scald them. . . . I was on a television show. . . and the interviewer asked me how I could be so sure my phone was tapped. . . . So I finally gave him irrefutable proof. I said, 'Any time a black man in America can owe the telephone company twelve thousand dollars and they don't shut the phone off, you know that phone is tapped.'" ■

2/6/72 The New York Times Book Review