

# Reflections on Mr. Nixon's November

By Philip Geyelin

"I DON'T THINK the average Americans realize how desperate it is when a group of demonstrators, not peaceful demonstrators, but the very liberal Communists move into Washington," said the wife of the Attorney General the other day and went on to add: "As my husband has said many times, some of the liberals in this country, he'd like to take them and change them for the Russian Communists."

The Mitchells have obviously had an experience for which they were not entirely prepared when they came to work in Washington (the demonstrations outside the Justice Department two weekends ago looked to Mr. Mitchell "like a Russian Revolution,"

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his wife exclaimed). And while it may be, that Mrs. Mitchell was not reflecting her husband's considered view, on the other hand it is more likely that she was, because her account is by no means inconsistent with some of the things he and others in this administration have said and done in recent days. So it says something about what's wrong with the approach of the Nixon crowd—the almost hysterical edge in their voices, the near paranoia about dissent, the mindless combativeness, the dated preoccupation with the "Russians," and along with that, the awful ease with which the opposition is branded Communist. And it also says something about how to set it right.

THE PROBLEM is not merely a matter of whether this is an administration of able, intelligent, decent men; it's a mixture, like most. The problem, or a large part of it, is that the wrong men, the raw amateurs, are out front, making the running, doing the loudest talking, setting the pace. And just because they are the wrong men, unskilled, untested, out of date and out of touch, with little stomach for the very thing that the Vice President professes to relish—"the rough and tumble of public debate"—because of all this, these men are running scared. For all their bold, aggressive airs, *the men out front are frightened men.*

"How can you ask the man in the street in this country to stand up for what he believes if his own elected leaders weasel and cringe," the Vice President asked in his speech last week and then proceeded to lay about him at "an arrogant few . . . a small minority . . . hundreds who have burned their draft cards . . . scores who have deserted to Canada and Sweden . . . the gentlemen from the New York Times." How can so few be so frightening? Are these antagonists worthy of so much time and energy?

"It is not an easy thing to wake up each morning to learn that some prominent man or institution has implied that you are a bigot, a racist or a fool," Mr. Agnew went on to say, and perhaps right there we are

closer to the heart of it. These men are not as tough as they are touchy; a dangerous level of dissent is found by the Deputy Attorney General in 1.35 per cent of a Peace March; security is sought in a degree of unity beyond all realistic reach; without flinching Harry Truman conducted a war with as little as 27 per cent of the public behind him; this administration feels insecure even while claiming to have a solid majority in support.

IF THIS is the problem, a solution suggests itself and that is simply to silence the new boys and let the tone and style and approach of the administration be fixed by men within its ranks who have done time in this kitchen, or others, and have learned to take the heat. There are such men, but it is idle even to consider a solution without first examining the central question of where the President figures in all this.

He promised at the start to lower voices, and this was, on the face of it, the easiest of all his campaign promises to keep. Yet it has only been 10 months, and the decibel count is edging back toward the level of the (Joe) McCarthy years. It is too easy to say that the dissenters started it; they were doing their thing when he arrived. We had already had the Pentagon March, and Chicago, and on a loftier level the Fulbright hearings and the phenomenon of the McCarthy campaign. But we had not had protest on a monthly installment plan and more important we had not had the super-patriotic shouting from the right, the flag-waving, or anything like the volume of violent hate mail. By its own inflammatory

behavior, the Nixon administration has given us all that and in the most bogus way, by claiming only to be trying to forestall and pre-empt what it is promoting and elevating, with the imprimatur of the presidency, to new respectability.

IT ALSO ISN'T enough to argue that the President hasn't been participating in the worst of it himself, or that he couldn't have damped it down if he had wanted to. It is nonsense to suppose that the Vice President or the Attorney General (or his deputy) or Mr. Volpe or Mr. Blount or the others who have been making the running are beyond restraint. They are all, even Mr. Agnew, responsive to a presidential lead, not just by sending Mr. Ronald Ziegler around afterward to tidy up, but by a firm presidential decision to tone things down. It can be done by directive, if need be, or simply by quieting the amateurs and giving more running room to some of the more experienced hands—to William Rogers at State, for one example, or the case-hardened pol, Melvin Laird at Defense, or Robert Finch at HEW, or the Director of Communications, Herbert Klein. Alternatively, the President can come out more often from behind the screen he has built between himself and the public and do the job himself.

IN SHORT, it is up to him, and at this point things get murkier because we do not know his mood and nobody can—without laying claim to divine insight. For all his long exposure in public life, he remains a riddle, wrapped in an enigma called Ziegler, letting others talk, except on those rare occasions when he has said and done things which only reinforce the impression of a curious, native combativeness. It is not the muscular competitiveness of, say the Kennedys, or the rough wilfulness of Lyndon Johnson. It is something else—a reflexive contentiousness, a quickness to see challenges and even invite them, an unflinching instinct for getting himself cornered and another for lashing back. All this runs like a thread through the President's too little read

autobiography, "The Six Crises." The compulsion for "combat" (a favored word), the overriding need to win, the intense self-analysis at each step along the way, the stunned reaction to every important new development, the conscious build-up to fighting pitch, the fear of letdown before the fight is won—again and again these re-occur in the encounters with Khrushchev and the Caracas mob, and John F. Kennedy, and with the monsters of the media who tried to destroy him, so he thinks, in the affair of the California campaign fund.

MAYBE THIS is enough to explain what now is going on—except that it is many years later and he is President now and Theodore H. White in "The Making of the President: 1968" tells us that he is a new and different man, markedly more secure and confident than the one we used to know. Who can say, for we do not even know how much the men out front are really representative of the President or to what extent this is an all too familiar effort on the part of the man in the White House to have it both ways. But somehow the suspicion here is that we will know better before long, because however effective the President's Southern Strategy may have been in stitching together a winning constituency a year ago in the Electoral College, it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not a constituency on which a workable, national government can be built—a government that can deal generously and effectively with dissent in a deeply divided country; that can conduct a disengagement from a desperately unpopular war; that can re-order domestic priorities and come to terms with poverty and the blacks and the campuses. Surely that is one of the lessons of the North-South division in the Senate on the Haynsworth vote and we will learn much from the way the President reacts to this, his first big defeat.

The first Nixon term has more than three years to run and there is more than enough time—and there are plenty of ways—for President Nixon to make good on the fundamental theme he set for himself from the start... the first order of business on which the successful conduct of all other business would have to rest. "Bring us together" was the way it went. It is not the way that it is going now.