Richard Nixon: An American Disraeli?

NOW more than ever, Americans may wonder exactly what Richard Nixon stands for. He won a unique victory because of his demonstrated political skills and the weakness of his opponent. But he said little in the course of the campaign to give anyone an idea of what to expect in the next four years. Shortly before his re-election, however, he did drop a suggestive hint. He told an interviewer that he would like to be thought of as a "Disraeli conservative" with a "strong foreign policy, strong adherence to basic values that the nation believes in, combined with reform, reform that will work, not reform that destroys."

It is an ambitious notion that is worth examining. At first glance, the comparison seems far-fetched. The 19th century Prime Minister of Great Britain would appear to be an odd sort of fellow to find favor at the White House. Amid the close-cropped sobriety of the Haldemans and the Ehrlichmans, he would stand out like the dazzling Victorian dandy he was. His long hair coiling around his shoulders, his blue trousers paired with black and red stockings, his fingers festooned with rings, he enjoyed the reaction of people on the street as they fell back to let him by. To him this was like the "parting of the Red Sea, which I now believe from experience." His comments on the work ethic would make a welfare loafer blush. "I have passed the whole of this year in uninterrupted lounging and pleasure," he once noted. His wit was irrepressible. Trapped in a drafty room at a party, he remarked when the champagne was served: "Thank God for something warm."

■

But the frivolity masked an inner earnestness. As Tory Party leader and Prime Minister from 1874 to 1880, Disraeli reshaped British conservatism, which had been divided and defensive, giving it durability and a future. He laid the foundation for Tory democracy, a form of government with appeal to all classes. If Nixon sees something of himself in Disraeli, it is not mere gimmickry. Presented by Pat Moynihan with a copy of Robert Blake's massive biography of Disraeli, the President liked what he read so well that he has been drawing on the book for appropriate quotes ever since.

Both Disraeli and Nixon were rather elusive figures in their native land—the one a Sephardic Jew who, as Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb puts it, "created himself in the likeness of an anti-Semitic cartoon," though he became an Anglican; the other a man who often seemed shallow and without strong roots. Both made their contemporaries uneasy for reasons that could not always be spelled out. Each in his time was underestimated by others, Disraeli because of his rakish dilettantism, Nixon because of his bland ordinariness. Both were dismissed as opportunists; few perceived the fire within. Neither of them ever gave up. "Disraeli," admitted his great rival William Gladstone, "is a man who is never beaten. Every reverse, every defeat is to him only an admonition to wait and catch his opportunity of retrieving and more than retrieving his position." Though he phrased it a bit more elegantly, Disraeli offered several equivalents of "You won't have Disraeli to kick around any more." Both men returned more than once from the political dead. Dizzy was defeated four times before he finally was elected to Parliament. His flowery maiden speech was greeted with gales of laughter and catcalls. Prophesied an enraged Disraeli: "I will sit down now, but the time will come when you will hear me." He had to wait so long to become Prime Minister that nobody thought he would make it. But at 63, he reached the top of what he fondly called "the greasy pole."

■

In an uncanny way, Nixon and Disraeli fought similar political battles—which may support the liberal charge that conservatives never change or the conservative charge that conditions never change. Though both believed in a strong government that would not flinch from taking resolute action, they were hostile to big bureaucracy, with its overcentralization and deadening uniformity. They preferred to accept society in all its luxuriant if inegalitarian variety; they made a policy of trying to pump life and vigor into local government. As an American politician, Nixon can hardly endorse aristocracy but he would surely agree with Disraeli's praise of the aristocratic system in England as ready to receive "every man in every order and every class who defers to the principle of our society which is to aspire and excel."

Both Nixon and Disraeli were capable of dazzling conversions. Almost overnight, Nixon changed from a budget balancer to a Keynesian. After helping to bring down his own Tory government in 1846 because it proposed abolishing the Corn Laws that protected Britain's landed interests, Disraeli switched to a free-trade position. He made another turnabout when, faced with Liberal plans to extend the franchise to the workingman, he steered his own election bill through Parliament. The liberalism of 19th century England was in many respects the exact opposite of 20th century American liberal-

TIME, NOVEMBER 27, 1972

ism; it was essentially laissez-faire. But both Disraeli and Nixon rejected the assumptions of liberalism, then and now: a faith in utilitarian reform, an easy optimism, a hankering for change. Said Disraeli: "In a progressive country change is constant; and the great question is not whether you should resist change, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws and the traditions of a people, or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles and arbitrary doctrines." He compared the "national system" of the tradition-minded Tories with the "philosophic system" of the doctrinaire Liberals—a distinction Nixon makes today when he contrasts his New Majority with the "limousine liberals."

In foreign policy particularly, Nixon has demonstrated a Disraeli touch. Disraeli based his foreign policy on a sober, unsentimental appraisal of the national interest. What was good for England, he thought, was good for the world, and it worked out that way—for a time. Disraeli was determined to maintain a balance of power by preventing Russian expansion—as much feared in the 19th century as it came to be in the 20th. To do this, he had to prop up the decaying Ottoman Empire, a policy that outraged Liberals who felt that it was a violation of British principles to support a corrupt regime. To stretch a point or two, Disraeli even had a McGovern hectoring him in the person of Gladstone, the Liberal leader who thundered his righteous indignation at the power politics played behind his back. Gladstone was an inveterate moralizer who, as André Maurois once noted, "was reproached not so much for always having the ace of trumps up his sleeve as for claiming that God had put it there."

No more than Nixon did Disraeli believe in open diplomacy. His backstairs dealings aroused as much opposition. Just as Nixon caused an uproar by selling wheat too cheaply to the Russians, so did Disraeli upset sensibilities by negotiating a loan at 13% from the Rothschilds to buy a major interest for Britain in the Suez Canal. Doubtful though some of his means were, Disraeli achieved his goals. By promoting a general European settlement, he helped maintain the Victorian peace, which was to last longer than any period of peace Europe had known since the early days of the Roman Empire.

DRAWING BY JULIO FERNANDEZ

If Nixon is serious about becoming a second Disraeli, however, he still has a way to go. Disraeli was not only a supreme political operator but considerably more. He thought deeply about politics and acted on his precepts. He wrote a number of political novels that, for all their playfulness and cynicism, come to grips with flesh-and-blood people. In the manner of the best European conservatives, Disraeli felt a strong attachment to his fellow countrymen even when he mocked them or they reviled him. Nixon may feel the same way, but Disraeli displayed a passion that is generally lacking in American conservatives, including Nixon. It was Disraeli, after all, who coined the phrase "two nations" when he wrote about rich and poor in his novel *Sybil*. No British government of the 19th century produced more social reform than Disraeli's, which improved the laboring man's working conditions, recognized trade unions, provided health and sanitation services and undertook slum clearance.

In domestic matters, Nixon's leadership has combined a shrewd understanding of what most of the country wanted—or feared—with constant reminders of the old verities and only occasional flashes of innovation—so far. Even in his reform proposals, Nixon sometimes comes across only as a leaner, meaner liberal. The shortcoming is not his alone. American conservatism has long been inconstant, uncertain and divided in its aims, trying to combine belief in authority with a belief in individualism and little government. A rich tradition of conservative thought on the European model has never taken root in America; perhaps Americans are too much on the go, too future-oriented. Confronted with liberalism, U.S. conservatives have often offered something less rather than something different.

Nixon won his mandate by siding with the majority in a national division. He has not yet shown that he can make one nation out of two. It is true that in Disraeli's day the members of the other nation, the poor, were a majority while today they are not; the difference is vast. Nevertheless, a Disraeli could supply a profound corrective to conservative thought in America: a sense that everyone is in it together, that no one class or group can function properly unless all do. Until Richard Nixon does that, he remains only half a Disraeli. The historical portrait deserves to be completed. ■ Edwin Warner