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Overture to the Second Term

President Nixon is proceeding toward his second administration in the spirit of a man taking over a corporation that has been losing money. Costs are to be cut. Everyone is to submit resignations, and there is to be a mass departure of executives who no longer pull their weight. (The phrase "burnt-out volcanoes" seems to have achieved a certain currency.) We are to have a lean, taut organization instead of the present fat and sloppy one. Things are going to be different.

Mr. Nixon makes it sound strangely as though he were just now arriving at the White House, succeeding some other person who had done his best, no doubt, but never quite got an adequate grip on the job. It was at the very peak of the triumph, on the day after the election, that Mr. Nixon issued his tight-lipped demand for the resignations and made it very clear that he did not regard it as a mere formality. He could hardly have found a more effective way of communicating dissatisfaction with the administration that he himself has built over the past four years—and even distrust of it.

Never mind; there is indeed a new President now, with a new purpose, and the contemplation of American politics starts with that fact. The President Nixon of those past four years was elected by 43.4 per cent of the popular vote (compared with Hubert Humphrey's 42.7 per cent). The President Nixon of the next four years was elected by 61 per cent of the vote. And he is a man apparently transformed by that statistical fact. In his interview with Mr. Horner of *The Washington Star-News*, Mr. Nixon spoke at length of the reforms that he now foresees. A reporter asked the White House press secretary why Mr. Nixon waited so long to undertake them. "The fact of re-election was not there until Nov. 7," the press secretary replied. "The fact of the very extensive margin of re-election was not there until Nov. 7 . . . The fact in reality is here now. . . ."

Mr. Nixon's relations with Congress, under this new augmented presidency, seem likely to be even more sterile than in the past. Mr. Nixon has for four years been using a kind of jiu-jitsu on Congress, asking for less money than Congress wants him to spend and in that fashion circumventing the power of the purse. His most active policies have been in foreign affairs, where Congress has the least to say. Currently he makes it clear that he is not greatly interested in waiting for congressional collaboration in the reforms that he is about to lay before us. "Now, what I have determined to do," he told Mr. Horner, ". . . is to accomplish as much as I can of that reorganization through executive action, obviously not doing anything which would be in violation of the law, but I am convinced that the thrust of our reorganization plan, the thrust of our special revenue sharing, is right, that it is needed, and I intend to accomplish it, as much as I can, through

action at the executive level unless and until the Congress acts."

But Mr. Nixon also knows that there are a large number of Americans, neither appointed nor elected to any public office, who exercise a very substantial influence over public policy. He has been thinking about them, and he has begun to denounce them publicly. Here we have, quite possibly, the seed of the most serious politics of the next four years, lying entirely outside the traditional structures of parties and constitutional institutions. Three weeks before the election, speaking to wives of American prisoners in Vietnam, Mr. Nixon gave an inventory of those influential nay-sayers. They are not only the editors and publishers and television commentators, with whom he has been at odds for some time. The opinion leaders are also "supposed to be the presidents of our universities and the professors and the rest, those who have the educational background to understand the importance of great decisions and the necessity to stand by the President of the United States when he makes a terribly difficult and potentially unpopular decision. They are supposed to be some of our top businessmen who also have this kind of background." When he decided to mine Haiphong, he said, he got "precious little support" from them. The interesting point is that he considers himself entitled to it.

The President returned to the matter very forcefully in his interview with Mr. Horner last week. Speaking of the late 1960s, he said: "But we saw a breakdown in frankly what I would call the leadership class in this country . . . For example, the enormous movement toward permissiveness which led to the escalation in crime, the escalation in drugs in this country, all of this came as a result of those of us who basically have a responsibility of leadership not recognizing that above everything else you must not weaken a people's character." Evidently Mr. Nixon sees himself engaged in a great struggle not only to make policy, but to mold the American character. His antagonists are not only the conventional ones, the Democrats and the congressional chairmen, but the men of influence who lie in ambush out beyond, in business and the universities and the press. Bolstered by the returns, he is serving notice that he is a new President and playing under new rules.

This massive assertion of personal authority is predictable and perhaps even pardonable in the immediate aftermath of a sweeping victory. As a style of government for four years, it is disquieting. Only eight years ago President Johnson won a similarly huge victory over a similarly weak opponent. In a cloud of euphoric self-assurance he led the country into a second term that became one of the rare genuine tragedies in American political history. Great victories carry their own kind of danger.