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Nixon or McGovern?

(I) *The Nature of the Choice*

The 1972 campaign is giving politics a bad name. We are aware, of course, that its reputation was already nothing to write home about. Thus: "It's only politics" or "it's all politics" or "I could do the easy, political thing"—and so on. Politics, in other words, has long been subject to sanctimonious ridicule and contempt, especially by those engaged in precisely the kind of maneuver they seek to discredit as "political" in others. For the opposite of a politician is meant to be a "statesman" (President Nixon) or an "idealist" (Senator McGovern) in this particular image game. From which it follows—or is supposed to—that the opposite of politics, as a fit subject of concern for would-be public leaders, is (and here the organ music really swells) the *issues*.

Both Senator McGovern and Mr. Nixon have, in different ways, contributed to this popular misconception, and each has tried to turn it to his advantage. But that is no reason for the rest of us to lose sight of the true meaning of the term, its better and more fundamental meaning. For, in our



view, that truer and better conception of politics may hold the key to understanding the 1972 election and the nature of the choice the voters will

finally have to make.

To sketch out a working definition, we would begin with the premise that "issues" have no meaning whatever apart from the political competence and vitality of the men who espouse them or from the political processes whereby public understanding and assent are sought. It is hogwash to pretend, as Mr. Nixon regularly does, for example, that the President's governmental burden—his daily traffic with the issues themselves—somehow pre-empts all time and thought for politics, incidentally rendering politics squalid by comparison as well. That is not just because Mr. Nixon, the most self-aware and impact-minded of men, is so obviously concerned with political effect on a regular basis. It is also because the distinction itself is a false and hazardous one. Senator McGovern, to his sorrow, discovered as much when the unreal and rather stagey "purity" projected by his preconvention campaign collided with the wholly legitimate, necessary and admirable goal of broadening his base of support once nominated. The "disillusioned" should not have been offered so many pointless illusions in the first place.

If you turn those illusions on their head, as a matter of fact, you will have gone pretty far toward fashioning what we would consider a useful definition of the requirements of political leadership. The illusions hold that the value of a candidate may be measured by—among other things—his disinclination to impose his will on colleagues or supporters; his adherence to positions that, whatever their theoretical merits, stand well outside the bounds of public acceptance or practical application; his refusal to compromise differences with potential allies or anyone else; his horror of the politics of manipulation—even of the clever and unexceptionable stratagem that advances the likelihood of his being able to put his ideas into practice or that enlarges the public consensus concerning the worth of those ideas.

We would argue that the capacity to lead, to govern—which is what political distinction is all about—rests on a set of values quite contrary to these: an ability to manage, to be tough when required and—yes—to impose one's will; a keen sense of the peculiar relationship between leading the

public and responding to its sentiments, one that is always seeking to make principle and position relevant to the everyday lives of the governed; a willingness and capacity to persuade; and a talent for those stratagems and manipulations that enlarge the constituency for what one believes is right.

These we would list as the minimum requirements of political leadership. We would immediately add that they are as susceptible of abuse as they are essential: The country can die from an overdose of any one—when responsiveness becomes demagoguery, say, or when stratagem becomes conspiracy. So just as there are minimum requirements to be met, there are also outside limits to be respected—points beyond which legitimate technique becomes subversive of the political process it is meant to serve. It will come as no surprise to those who have been reading our commentary on the candidates in this election so far, that we have our profound misgivings about Senator McGovern's grasp of the essential techniques of political leadership and that we have something rather graver than misgivings concerning President Nixon's conscious and systematic abuse of them.

It is one of the oddities of this campaign that according to voter surveys, Mr. McGovern has got himself the reputation of being "too political" or "just another politician." Would that he were. For our part, we see an unfortunate deficiency where others seem to perceive an excess. Presumably, the "politician" label proceeds from Senator McGovern's ditching of some of those preposterous position papers cranked out by his supporters and aides and endorsed by him before the nomination, and also from his handling of the Eagleton affair. Our view is that a skilled and sensitive political

leader wouldn't have got entangled with those position papers in the first place. And we would also argue that the senator's ghastly turmoil in trying to extricate himself and his party from the impossible position into which Senator Eagleton knowingly put both, reflected anything but a superabundance of political judgment or skill. On the contrary, it seemed to us at the time (and it still does) to have represented a lack of assertiveness and a failure to manage that raised questions about Senator McGovern's capacity to assume and exercise authority in the manner required of a national political leader.

Throughout the campaign there have been other, less apocalyptic episodes that have kept those questions alive. So Senator McGovern's aptitude for political leadership—and, by extension, his ability to govern wisely and well—remains, at least to our mind, in some doubt. We would add two points to that observation. One is that it is necessarily tentative and provisional and thus does not foreclose the possibility that the Democratic candidate could prove our apprehensions wrong. The other is that a capacity to govern does not automatically imply a desire or will to do so. We offer as Exhibit A in

this regard, the fact that four years ago it was Richard Nixon's very aptitude for those things Senator McGovern now seems to do so badly—his management of a super-efficient campaign machine, his ability to blur differences within his party, his instinct for the bland, common denominator position—that suggested to so many observers in all parts of the political spectrum that Mr. Nixon should be elected—because he "could govern."

Four years later, we believe Mr. Nixon has done the country and the processes of government a great deal of harm by his persistent and peculiar disinclination to do so in an above board, responsible manner. When we spoke a couple of weeks ago about the President's all-consuming concern with "strategy" and manipulation and when we speak of his abuse of the tactics and techniques of politics, we have had in mind his strange notion of a disjunctive relationship between governing and leading, his flight from political responsibility in the best sense and into political chicanery in the worst. We are not concerned here with the appalling revelations of subterfuge and wrongdoing undertaken by his associates in behalf of his re-election—we will get back to that in time. But the manner in which the administration has responded to those revelations is in fact apt to our point. It has been artful, cynical and full of contempt for both the intelligence and the moral sensibilities of the public. It has operated on the assumption that people either won't understand or won't care or won't do either if the thing is stage-managed right.

That particular reading of the public mind and character—and a far from flattering one it is—has increasingly come to dominate Mr. Nixon's conduct and that of his administration. "Watch what we do, not what we say"—thus Mr. Nixon's confidante and former Attorney General, Mr. Mitchell, raised cynicism and dissembling to the status of official doctrine. And so the chasm between deed and word, between action and explanation has continued to widen, with little concern and much contempt for the fact that government actions are taken in the public's name and at the public's expense and that the public is, at the very least, entitled to some part of the truth and to a measure of respect from its leaders. Consider that three years ago Mr. Nixon introduced a proposal to provide a guaranteed annual income for every family with children in this country, one that would have doubled the number of persons receiving public assistance. Then consider that for most of those three years he sought to sell it to Congress and the public by denying that *it was what it was*, regularly suggesting instead that it was some sort of money-saving instrument of vengeance to use against the lazy poor. That is what we mean by an abuse of political techniques and a betrayal of the obligations of leadership. And the examples



Sketches by Wendy Cortes.

could be easily multiplied, given the President's durable faith in the small-mindedness and gullibility of the public. We would argue, however, that Mr. Nixon's successes in some of these public relations endeavors have had less to do with the public's gullibility than with its trust in the basic decency of its leaders and institutions—and we would further argue that it is that vital public trust which Mr. Nixon is putting in jeopardy.

All this, it seems to us, is an element—the darker side—of Mr. Nixon's record in office, which must be taken into account by those who are weighing his claim on their support, just as Senator McGovern's serious defects as a prospective leader must be weighed. Their two distinctive approaches to political responsibility are in fact an essential lens through which their other claims as candidates must be viewed, and we intend in subsequent editorials to do so. But they also constitute one element of the choice before the public. If anyone tells you it's an easy or obvious choice, don't believe it.