

# The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 1972

PAGE B6

## Nixon or McGovern?

### (VI) A Question of Values and Priorities

In talking about the choice of a President of the United States, what is a newspaper's proper role? That there is no obvious or universally accepted answer is plain from the selection of endorsements, non-endorsements and even anti-endorsements we have printed elsewhere on this page today. Our own answer is that we are, as our masthead proclaims, an independent newspaper, and that with one exception (our support of President Eisenhower in 1952), it has not been our tradition to bestow formal endorsement upon presidential candidates. We can think of no reason to depart from that tradition this year.

Instead, we have tried as we customarily do—and at length over the past few days—to identify what we regard as the country's most pressing needs and responsibilities at this point in its history and to define the candidates' particular qualifications for meeting them. If any one thing has become clear as a result of this exercise, it is that, metaphorically speaking, the voters are faced with a Jack Sprat choice: What one candidate does best, the other does worst—or not at all. And the same stark distinctions apply to the values each holds most dear, so that the choice does not come down to a jeweler's glass appraisal of relative skills at this or that presidential function, but rather to a cruder and yet far more difficult choice among fundamental values and necessities.

That the voters should not be faced with such a choice, that they should not be obliged to vote against fulfilling one basic need in order to vote



for fulfilling another, goes without saying. But when you have observed that ideally, or even practically speaking, neither Mr. Nixon nor Senator

McGovern should be President for the next four years, you still have not done away with the fact that one of them will be—and apparently by landslide too. That fact, it seems to us, must also be put into the agonized computer. For it bears directly on the choice the voters must make on Tuesday, helping convert it into something of a referendum. The point is that, if the polls are to be credited, Mr. Nixon is, in an important sense, running against himself. His particular strengths in the area of his opponent's particular weaknesses have evidently overwhelmed the McGovern candidacy, with the result that the judgment the voters are being asked to make in relation to the President is whether his shortcomings are sufficiently important in substance and degree to outweigh what he has to offer. We would state the general proposition for the referendum aspect of the ballot this way: Does a proven competence at handling the nation's foreign and defense responsibilities override in importance the need for maintaining its constitutional values, the vitality and integrity of its system of justice and the compassion and candor of its government in dealing with the people themselves?

For purposes of discussion, that question divides into two others: 1) Do you foresee, over the next few years, a greater danger to the national security proceeding from abroad or from the continued development of certain trends and tendencies at home? and 2) Do you believe that Mr. Nixon's harmful inroads on a number of well-defined and generally accepted principles concerning the relationship of the government to the governed in this country have been serious and real? Our short answer to the first of these questions would be that, while there is still clearly much danger abroad and much to be done in furtherance of the arrangements and accords Mr. Nixon has himself pursued, both the general movement toward great power detente and the likelihood that any future President would work it to the country's advantage, tends to make the domestic threat more immediate and worrisome than the foreign threat at this time. Our short answer to the second question—whether Mr. Nixon at home has done real and serious damage to some of the nation's most vital and treasured values—is, yes.

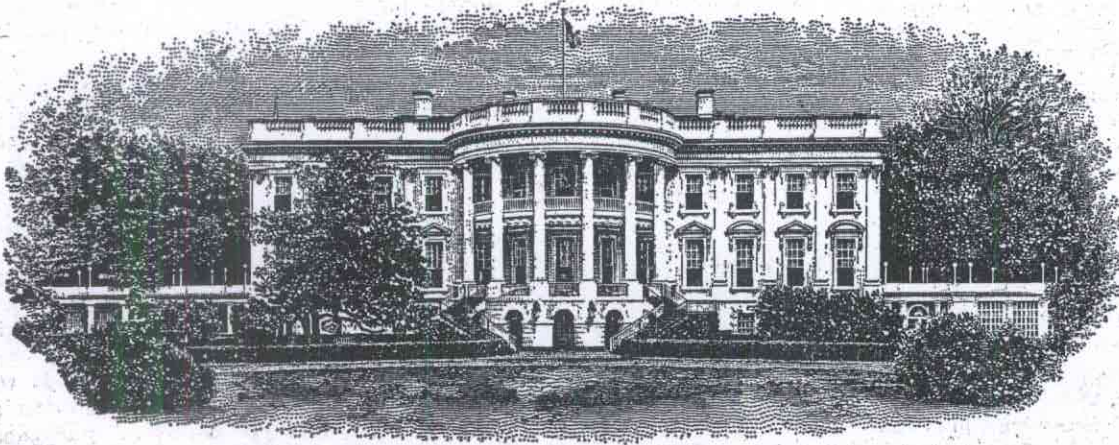
We will expand on that, because we believe it



goes to the heart of Tuesday's referendum. And we will begin by observing that something other than conventional political preference is at stake, that we are not talking about "liberal" versus "conservative" programs or anything remotely like that. For our first assertion would be that Mr. Nixon has carried to new and chilling lengths a propensity for cynicism in his dealings with the public and that this cynicism has fallen most directly upon that presumed right-wing constituency whose anxieties he regularly fuels. The President has not given unity or stability or purpose or any of those intangible gifts that are his to bestow, and he has not given material benefit either: prosperity or domestic security or well-founded civil peace.

He has given fuel for resentments and he has given irrelevant pieties and he has created a false impression that he and he alone is holding the line against further assaults on the worker's, the householder's security. He has suggested by irre-

fears which Mr. Nixon has exploited. We will be hearing a lot more in the wake of the election about the presumed "turn to the right" on the part of the electorate, which Mr. Nixon is said to be profiting from. What "turn to the right"? one must ask—where is the ideology of it? Detente with Russia and China? Wage and price controls? No, the "turn to the right" is the latest defensive circumlocution for the message that the office of the President of the United States is sending a vast majority of black Americans: the hell with you. That is what is regularly insinuated in Mr. Nixon's sanctimony on the "work ethic" and that is what underlies his cynical sporting with the "busing" issue, which he has only aggravated for his own political ends. Even—perhaps we should say especially—on those rare occasions where his administration has undertaken to do right by the nation's poor and its blacks, Mr. Nixon has insisted upon publicly describing such actions in the most ungener-



sponsible talk that he could make racial discord vanish. He has suggested that it is not his own indulgence of preferential treatment for the well-heeled that makes a break for the put-upon middle classes impossible. He has suggested that he and he alone represents the last stand for law and order in this country while his own agents and aides systematically undermine both. And, in the name of preserving freedom and of respect for the democratic system which is the constitutional foundation of this country, he has presided over and acquiesced in what we regard as the gravest and most dangerous hackings away at that freedom and those constitutional rights of any president in recent memory.

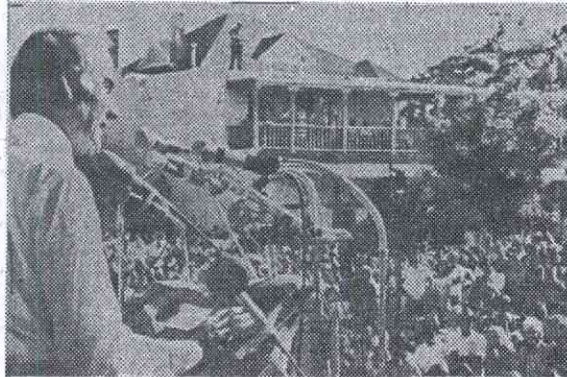
It is, one must admit, in terms of sheer political expediency and demagogic skill, a remarkable accomplishment, so that the question becomes: How was all this done? It was done recklessly and irresponsibly, we would argue, at the expense of those Americans who are poor or black or both, those Americans whose just claims have come into conflict not only with prejudices but also with other just claims and whose existence has inspired the

ous and small-minded way, in asserting that he is doing the opposite of what he is doing—all this, one must suppose, for the sake of reinforcing what he takes to be the quintessential greed and meanness among the people at whose pleasure he serves.

And for the rest, what is this "turn to the right"? It is another hoax in the sense that it asks people—the presumed "middle American" constituency—to yield up their own most precious rights and the integrity of their constitutional system under the guise of protecting them from some terrible menace—the hippies or the crazies or the lazies or someone or other who is imperilling the nation's well-being. Mr. Agnew to the contrary notwithstanding, this surely is the ultimate in "elitism": to believe that you can bemuse and ensnare the people into yielding up what is ultimately most valuable to them by a series of well-contrived political pitches. Under Mr. Nixon, as the revelations of the past few months have made all too plain—although it wasn't all that obscure or unknowable before—we have seen, one after the other, our national assumptions and expectations vanish, beliefs such as that the processes of justice were blind and knew no favorites, that the constitutional freedoms of Americans were inviolate, that the president



and the presidency—whatever the temptations and lapses of the moment—were insulated by both practice and tradition against a certain unacceptable



degree of duplicity and corruption of the system itself.

So the choice comes down, first of all, to a decision about what you think is going to matter the most over the next four years—the conduct of foreign affairs, the management of the economy or the balance of payments, in which Mr. Nixon has demonstrated a certain competence and George McGovern is at worst a question mark, or these larger and more fundamental questions having to do with first principles, in which the President is demonstrably deficient and Mr. McGovern offers, at worst, no cause for concern. It can be argued, issue by issue and in a conventionally compelling way, that the burden of proof, in the case for change, is upon the man who would supplant a sitting President—and that George McGovern has failed to meet that burden convincingly. But if you look upon Tuesday's choice, in addition and in an overriding way, as a referendum on the sort of fundamental questions we have spoken of—if you think those are what matters most, as we do—then it is inescapable, or so it seems to us, that Richard Nixon is on the wrong side in that referendum. And it merely reinforces our concern over contemporary American values, and what the President has done to demean and distort them, that any man on the wrong side of this referendum should win it—and win it by a large majority.