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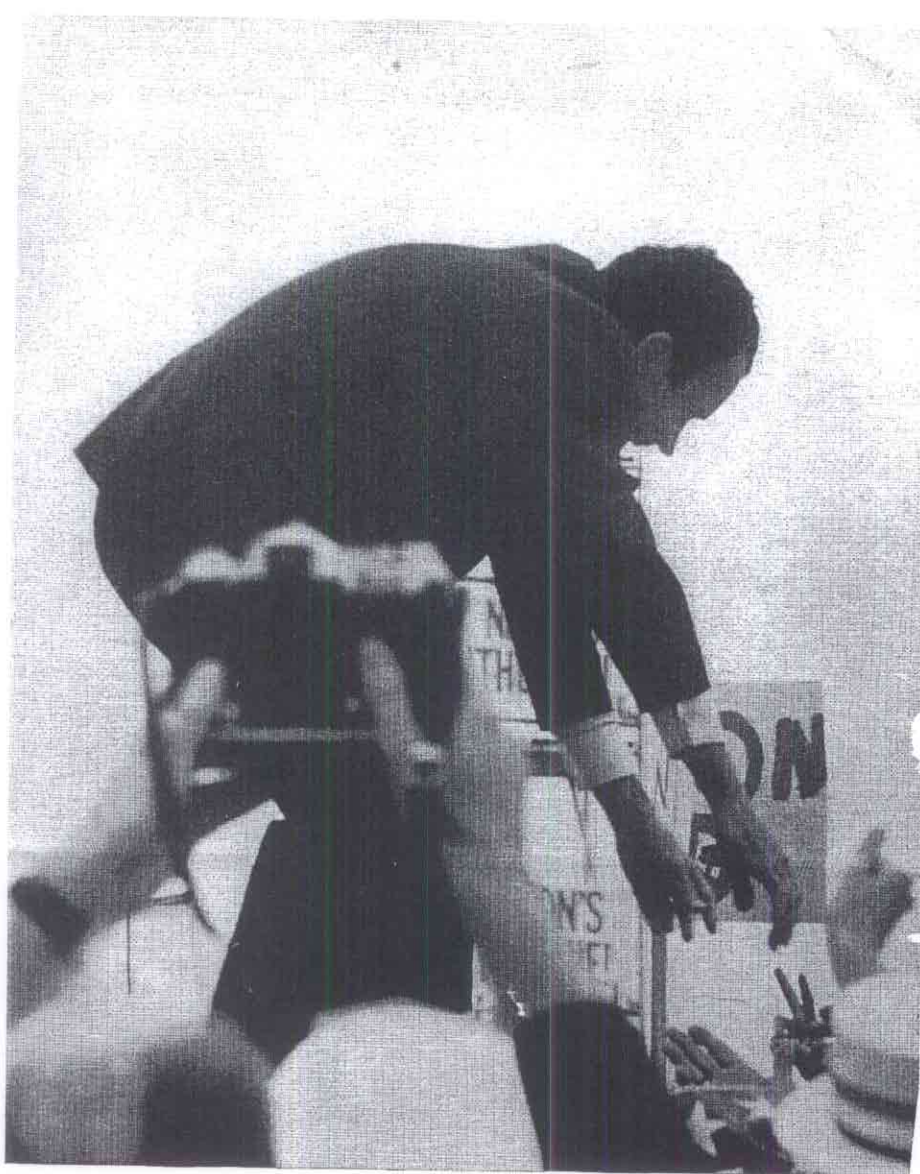

How international intrigue left Nixon at Humphrey's mercy—the strangest incident of the entire campaign

The Making of the President 1968

After his defeat in the California gubernatorial election of 1962, Richard Nixon renounced politics, but his successful efforts on behalf of Republican candidates during the congressional campaigns of 1966 established him clearly as the leader of his party. On Aug. 8, 1968, at the Republican National Convention in Miami, he won the presidential nomination on the first ballot. The Democratic party was in chaos; Nixon, serene and confident, began the final election campaign as if approaching one of the great sweeps of all time. By the end of September, the Gallup Poll showed him 15 points ahead of Hubert Humphrey. Then came the turning. In this second of two articles excerpted from The Making of the President 1968, to be published by Atheneum later this month, Theodore H. White reveals the tension and strategy that shaped the closing weeks of the campaign.

In September, 1968 the presidential campaign took Richard Nixon back to his home state of California—the scene of his humiliating 1962 defeat. Here he greets supporters at the Santa Barbara airport.

by Theodore H. White

The changing temper of the campaign became apparent to the Nixon staff from mid-October on—not as a crisis, not as cause for panic, but as the shadow of something new and indiscernible approaching. While the public polls continued to show the Republicans comfortably ahead, Nixon's own sensitive polling apparatus had begun to pick up ominous turnings. Nixon insiders refused to call it "slippage" until much later; in early October they were still calling it "movement." In any event, Nixon enplaned for his hideaway at Key Biscayne on Oct. 12 and summoned his staff for a three-day session to review matters.

First, there was a quick reexamination of tactics:

▶ Nixon, the longest-surviving public figure in the presidential contest, had now worn his themes and proposals bare; and from the press came the normal clamor for more discussion of issues, more specifics, more clear programs. To meet this attack, Nixon and staff decided on a series of 10 nighttime radio broadcasts over the next three weeks—serious, scholarly discourses on welfare, youth, education, arms, peace and other holy subjects of American politics. In addition, two instant books were ordered (the first to be published in six days), *Nixon on the Issues* and *Nixon Speaks Out*.

▶ Humphrey had been goading "Sir Richard the Chicken-Hearted" to join in debate, and the Nixon staff had to face the fact that the challenge had begun to grip the public fancy. It was decided that Nixon would now lash back at Humphrey, but all agreed there could be no debate.

▶ Certain hoped-for states—like Michigan and New York—seemed to be weakening, and the campaign schedule was revised to stress more travel in key states.

▶ There was the Agnew problem. Nixon heard a doleful and candid report from Patrick Buchanan, his young speechwriter, just returned from traveling with the Agnew party. Agnew had by now made a fool of himself—not so much out of malice or stupidity as, simply, by a coarseness of fiber, an insensitivity which he, as a second-generation American, might have been expected to eschew. Agnew himself would have bristled at being called "the Greek," but he had called Polish-Americans "Polacks," called a Japanese correspondent "the fat Jap," had blurted out early in the campaign that Humphrey was "soft on Communism," had stated that "if you've seen one city slum, you've seen them all." Nixon decided that, for the moment, it was best to ice Agnew and keep him under wraps.

These tactical decisions were easily made. But elections, unlike primaries or conventions, cannot be won by tactics. Elections are between the people and the candidate, involving realities larger than those any single gambit can alter. Nixon wanted to be a great President, and great Presidents are those who govern. But no President would be able to govern Americans in 1969 if his way to the Presidency had further embittered and divided the American people. Thus Nixon's conundrum: to enlarge his base by appeal to the Wallace voters on the right might swing to him those key states where they held the balance-vote and also, conceivably, give him a popular majority. But such an appeal to racism, open or covert, was entirely alien to his conscience; and it would also guarantee that when he came to power, he would be hated by the submerged black tenth of the nation, and no bridge of goodwill could ever again link them to the federal government as long as he led it. And to try to rival Hubert Humphrey in appeal to the left would be to shake away the support he already had on the right. Trapped thus in the center, Nixon must remain there.

Even graver, as a reality, was the Vietnam war. In Salt Lake City on Sept. 30, Humphrey had spoken out on the war. By the alchemy of politics the Democrat who in August had been denounced as a war hawk by the peace-seekers in Chicago was emerging in October as the peace candidate. Again and again in October, Nixon was urged by members of his staff to speak on Vietnam, but he would not. Despite the "movement" in the voter preferences, the executive mantle, with all its responsibilities, seemed about to enwrap him. So he would not bind himself now, for campaign purposes, in policies or positions that would tie his hands, and perhaps cost lives, once he did become President.

Tactics thus could be modulated to the needs of the campaign, but strategy could not; and the Nixon strategy, therefore, as the party departed from Key Biscayne, was reduced to the ancient ballad of American elections: the "Ins"

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The people at the rallies were prosperous, well-dressed—and afraid

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against the "Outs," a choice of more of the same, or something new, though undefined.

There was, as one resumed traveling with Nixon after the session in Key Biscayne, little fresh that one could report. The campaign was smooth, pre-programmed, efficient. And yet occasionally there would still come a day to remind one that a presidential contest remained a personal matter between a leader and his people.

Such a day was the one that closed at dusk in Deshler, Ohio in late October. We had been traveling by train north from Cincinnati. All day we drummed along railway tracks fringed by paradox. The factories of industrial Ohio spewed smoke, their parking lots were crowded, trucks carrying away cargo and product in unending streams. But wherever the train pulled to a halt in the old downtown centers, one could observe the boarding up of the railway stations, the decay of the business districts; the old centers of community were husks that had been gutted by change. The people gathered at the rallies were prosperous, well-dressed, sober. But they were afraid. And whenever Nixon spoke of crime, they cheered. ("When Richard Nixon got finished," wrote Jimmy Breslin, "there was a strangler's hand coming out of every cornfield in Ohio.")

We came to Deshler, a town of about 2,000, after dark, and Nixon emerged on the platform in a tan topcoat, shivering in the chill. Deshler, much more than Los Angeles, Key Biscayne or Manhattan, is Nixon's spiritual country, and so in this, his eighth speech of the day (with two more to come), he could talk plain language, and he did. Though he gave essentially his standard speech, I was taken by the fact that so much of it was delivered with his eyes shut, either out of weariness or against the TV lights that shone in his face. He rocked back and forth as he spoke, like a revivalist.

At the time I could not help wondering what a presidential candidate saw at night through closed eyes, in a railway depot, in a town of 2,000—or whether he saw anything. Only later did I realize that earlier Richard Nixon had, apparently, seen a young girl somewhere in the crowd holding up a sign that few of the rest of us had spotted. "BRING US TOGETHER," it read. That sign must have summarized what he had learned in a year of campaigning. The Richard Nixon whom I had followed in 1960 over the same route, through the same Ohio towns, had been a divider, one of the most intensely partisan, sharply competitive men in American politics. Richard Nixon in 1968 remembered, most sharply, a sign reading "BRING US TOGETHER," and decided he would be a healer.

The background of October's events, which were to include some of the strangest incidents of the entire campaign, had been shaped by the Vietnam negotiations in Paris. There, by July, two able Americans—Averell Harriman, chief negotiator, and Cyrus Vance, his deputy—had identified what they thought were the basic considerations rising from the long summer deadlock. For the North Vietnamese, obviously, the first priority was to stop the bombing of their territory; to this priority they attached, publicly, the phrase "unconditional." For the Americans, the first priority had come to be the involvement of the South Vietnamese government in the negotiations. Further, the South Vietnamese could not be expected to participate unless there were a guarantee of the safety of *their* cities from attack as a counterpart for promising that North Vietnamese cities would be safe from our bombs. Thus, no written *quid pro quo* formula would work, since North Vietnamese face-saving required that there could be no retreat from public insistence on an "unconditional" bombing halt.

By September, therefore, under the influence of Harriman and Vance, a working position had been accepted in Washington: we would state our "intention" to stop bombing; we would simultaneously, but secretly, make clear to the enemy our "expectation" of the counterpart. But we would not insist on an explicit "deal."

Thereafter, explorations and negotiations went quietly and fruitfully ahead until by Oct. 29, just a

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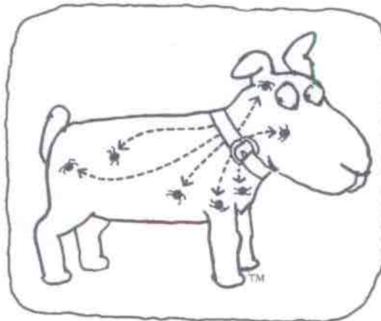

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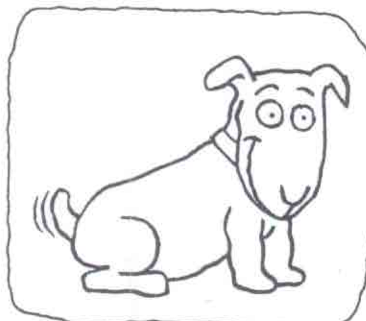

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It was clear someone had blundered—and the Presidency was at stake

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week before the election, word of the promised end of the war was beginning to leak from every news source around the world —Ottawa, London, Paris, Saigon, Washington, New York. Suddenly pressing through the worn rhetoric of the campaign, the hard profile of a peace in Asia began to appear. For some 48 hours of anticipation, the presidential campaign faded to secondary importance; then, on Thursday evening, Oct. 31, it was Lyndon Johnson's moment. The departing President announced, "I have now ordered that all air, naval and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam cease as of 8 a.m., Washington time, Friday morning. I have reached this decision . . . in the belief that this action can lead to progress toward a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese war. . . . What we now expect . . . are prompt, productive, serious and intensive negotiations in an atmosphere that is conducive to progress."

In the public blur of appreciation, commentators and editorialists all concluded that peace was near. This conclusion lasted no more than 24 hours. By Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, it had been succeeded by another headline. THIEU SAYS SAIGON CANNOT JOIN PARIS TALKS UNDER PRESENT PLAN, read the New York *Times* front page, and across the country bewilderment spread. If Saigon had not agreed to the agreement, there was no agreement, and who was befuddling whom? Had it all been just talk? Was the Administration trying to bring an end to the war? Or was it trying to save Hubert Humphrey from defeat? And never was public confusion more justified, for the leaders of both parties and of the American government were equally confused.

There could be no doubt that someone had blundered, and, with the Presidency of the United States apparently at stake, both sides approached the blunder as if it were a political explosive.

There is no way of clarifying what had happened except by introducing, at this point, the name of a beautiful Oriental lady, Anna Chan Chennault, the Chinese widow of World War II hero General Claire Chennault. Mrs. Chennault, an American citizen since 1950, comes of a line that begins with Madame Chiang Kai-shek and runs through Madame Nhu, the Dragon Lady of South Vietnam, a line of Oriental ladies of high purpose and authoritarian manners whose pieties and iron righteousness have frequently outrun their brains and acknowledged beauty. During the campaign of 1968, Mrs. Chennault, a lady of charm, energy and great name, had become chairman or co-chairman of several Nixon citizen committees, wearing the sort of honorific titles which were worn by many but which she took more seriously than most. In that circle of Oriental diplomacy in Washington once known as the China Lobby, Anna Chennault was hostess-queen. Having raised (by her own statement later) some $250,000 in behalf of the Nixon campaign, she felt entitled to authority. And, having learned of the October negotiations by gossip, rumor and press speculation, she had undertaken most energetically to sabotage them. In contact with the Formosan, the South Korean and the South Vietnamese governments, she had begun early, by cable and telephone, to mobilize their resistance to the agreement —implying, as she went, that she spoke for the Nixon campaign.

She had, however, neglected to take the most elementary precautions of an intriguer, and her communications with Asia had been tapped by the American government and brought directly to the perusal of President Johnson.

Although President Johnson had been made aware of Mrs. Chennault's efforts even before his announcement of the bombing halt, he had not taken them seriously. It was not until Saturday, with the repudiation of the Paris agreement by President Thieu, that the President's wrath was lit. By then he had privately accused Senator Everett Dirksen of a Republican plot to sabotage peace, and by Sunday Johnson was in direct and bitter telephonic contact with Richard Nixon in Los Angeles.

What could have been made of an open charge that the Nixon leaders were saboteurs of the peace one cannot guess; how quickly it might, if aired, have brought the last 48 hours of the American campaign to squalor is a matter of speculation. But the good instinct of that small-town boy, Hubert Humphrey, prevailed. Fully informed of the sabotage of the negotiations, Humphrey might have won the Presidency by making it the prime story of the last four days of the campaign. He was urged to this course by several members of his staff. And I know of no more essentially decent story in American politics than Humphrey's refusal to do so; his instinct was that Rich-

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For two years he had planned wisely, worked hard—but now he was unsure

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ard Nixon had had no knowledge of Mrs. Chennault's activities and would have forbidden them had he known. Humphrey would not air the story.

Having probed this episode over the weekend of its happening, this reporter's judgment was that Humphrey's decision was soundly taken. At the first report, Nixon's headquarters had begun to investigate the story, had discovered Mrs. Chennault's activities, and were appalled. The fury and dismay of the Nixon staff were so intense they could not have been feigned. Their feeling on Monday morning before the election was simply that if they lost the election, Mrs. Chennault might have lost it for them. She had taken their name and authority in vain; if the Democrats now chose to air the story, no rebuttal by the Nixon camp could possibly be convincing. They were at the mercy of Humphrey's goodwill.

The country lay broad and beautiful below Richard Nixon as he sped back to New York on election day. As he flew, some 73 million Americans were voting. For the past two years he had sown well, planned wisely, worked at his craft as intensely as he knew how. But now, at harvest time, he was unsure. Below lay a nation at war and rent with hates, preparing for him a rendezvous with crisis darker than that any President has faced since 1860, a nation perplexed, confused and never more uncertain of its own will and national leadership than in the last weekend of the contest.

Since the day in mid-October when President Johnson had telephoned him at Kansas City about Vietnam, Nixon had been concerned. The President had told all three candidates on Oct. 16 of the secret talks that had begun in Paris five days earlier and of the imminence of settlement; he had asked all three candidates to think of "what was best for their country" and to drop Vietnam from public debate.

Shortly after the election, recalling these last two weeks, Nixon felt it was then that matters had really turned against him. Contrary to his staff, he felt the greatest issue of his strength had never been law and order. In his own mind the key issue was the war in Vietnam, the desire of Americans for peace. For months, until the October telephone call, he had been chanting, "I say that after four years of war in Asia, after 25,000 dead, 200,000 casualties, America needs new leadership." But after the President's phone call, just as he had been about to peak the issue, he had felt he must drop the theme from his speeches. He had to become more general in talking of foreign policy, had to let the edge of his challenge to the Democrats and Hubert Humphrey be blunted. If peace were imminent, no one would forgive him if he disrupted it for political advantage. And then had come the bombing halt, the foretaste of peace, and the wild fluctuation of voters' preference reported in private as well as public polls.

Thereafter, Nixon had felt his lead shriveling day by day, down to election eve. He worked all that day, finished his last telecast to Californians at 11, and finally reached his bed at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles at 1:25 in the morning—by which time Americans were already beginning to vote in the hills of New England.

He was up within six hours and at 9:45 boarded the campaign plane. Nixon remembers an *Air Force One* sign someone had playfully painted, and an American flag pasted on the outside of the plane, and the balloons in the plane as he walked through. But he was moody, and, once aloft and in privacy, he called the family forward —Mrs. Nixon, the two girls and young David Eisenhower. He wanted to armor them against the agony that they had gone through on election night in 1960.

I've been pretty optimistic in public, he remembers telling them, but now I want to tell you what's really going to happen. If people in this country are still really concerned about peace, he said, we could win big. But if they've been reassured about peace and now they're concerned with their pocketbooks and welfare, we could lose. The family, he remembers, was shocked.

Richard Nixon went on, explaining: the bombing pause could cost us three to five million votes. It won't hurt us so much in the South or Midwest, but it will hurt us in the East. And if that happened, he admonished them, he didn't want them to go through what they had gone through the night of the election of 1960. This time they'd done everything they could, all the extras they could—the extra two hours of special West Coast telethon, the extra activity in Los Angeles the day before. And if they hadn't made it, it was not

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that they had failed—it was that events had gone against them.

Nixon insisted that no one must turn on television before 9 o'clock in the evening in New York, for they'd only be torturing themselves with the early returns from the East. Then he presented his wife with her gifts—a diamond-and-pearl pin, earrings to match.

An hour and a half out of Los Angeles, Nixon got word that Philadelphia was voting exceptionally heavily. A bad omen. The mood on the plane was subdued—little gaiety, no exuberance. Nixon's staff men ranged in their guesses from the most apprehensive, Buchanan and Finch, to the most confident, Haldeman. Finch was pacing the aisles ("I couldn't keep from remembering our flight back from the Hotel Ambassador in Los Angeles after the election in 1960"). Haldeman had settled back, leafing through folders on transitions in the Presidency, studying how one staffs up to govern the United States. It was quiet on the plane, and remained so as dusk settled.

East of the Mississippi the dark began to fall on the checkerboards of the flat Midwestern plains. "You could almost feel the mood changing," remembers aide Len Garment, "as the darkness came over the land. There was a TV set in the staff compartment, and they were starting to give accounts—from Kansas and New Hampshire and places like that. It was like inviting people to a party and then waiting to see who would come. . . . Everything had been done, and now . . . there was this hemorrhage of votes, this dreadful phenomenon, like a strange disease, and how far would it go, would there be this exponential disaster facing us?"

The plane landed at Newark at 6:15, and by 7:05, when Richard M. Nixon arrived at Suite 35H at the Waldorf Towers, the vote had been coming in on the national networks for over an hour.

With the inflexible self-discipline he has developed over the last few years, Nixon insisted that all television sets be turned off in the suite that was to be his on election night. The candidate who, more than any of his rivals, had rested his election strategy on television would not let it upset his thinking that night. Immediately on arrival he sent his dark blue suit to be pressed. He indulged himself in a luxurious hot bath, the first departure in many weeks from the habit of a quick shower, and then went to nap, leaving instructions with his personal aide Dwight Chapin that he was not to be disturbed by anyone until 8:30, and then only by Haldeman if Haldeman had information that seemed important enough.

He could not nap, however, and emerged into the living room of the suite at 8:20 in an old rumpled suit, called for coffee and then said he wanted to be alone. He was alone for almost three hours, interrupted only by Haldeman bringing him reports every 15 minutes and Chapin bringing in coffee, cigars and an occasional staff visitor.

By 11 o'clock it was obvious that the hastily pressed blue suit would not be needed by midnight. It was going to be a long night, and from that point on Nixon was in constant consultation. On the phone, he checked around the country, adding and subtracting figures from his pad. There seemed very little nervousness about him. But he was still unwilling to accept visitors from the outside world.

At approximately 2:40 a.m. Nixon sent for the Messrs. Finch, Haldeman, Mitchell and Chotiner—all but Mitchell survivors of election night, 1960. Precisely at 3 a.m., in the living room, Nixon reviewed the totals available with his four friends and they could find no fault with his calculations; he would unquestionably have, he felt, California, Missouri and Ohio—and thus enough to make him President of the United States. It was time, therefore, for someone to go downstairs and announce the new President. Haldeman objected—while the result seemed clear to those in the room, he said, it was not clear to the nation at large watching television.

Smoking his fifth cigar of the evening, he reasserted his faith in Agnew

To announce victory prematurely would make it seem as if Nixon were greedy for the prize, snatching for it. Reluctantly Nixon agreed and then, in a moment of mini-drama, made clear why the impulse had come to him.

It was at precisely this hour eight years before, he reminded those present, that he had descended the steps to the pressroom at the Hotel Ambassador in Los Angeles and there conceded victory to John F. Kennedy. His sense of history insisted that someone now punctuate the night with the sound of victory as he himself had punctuated that other night with the sound of defeat.

Nixon was alert now and confident. At 3:15 he finally returned a call from Governor Agnew. "Well, Ted, we've won," he said. At 4 he called Nelson Rockefeller on Rockefeller's private bedroom line, waking the governor from sleep, and thanked him for all his help. Then he directed Chapin to round up any members of the staff still awake on the 35th floor and bring them in for an impromptu open house.

They filed in, one by one, and remained for several hours, unwinding. Nixon smoked his fifth cigar of the evening, nursed a single beer for an hour, finally munched on sandwiches which had been brought up. The conversation rambled back and forth, each man remembering different things. Nixon asserted and reasserted his belief that he had made the right choice in Spiro Agnew for Vice President—the man had capacity, brains, energy and quality. Someone quipped, "Well, we sure concealed that from the American people during the campaign." There was the problem of what to say in the morning acceptance before the television cameras, and Speechwriter William L. Safire, recalling the night in Deshler, Ohio, brought back to Nixon's memory the sign that said, "BRING US TOGETHER."

Illinois was still hanging undecided on the television sets of the nation, and the indecision began to annoy Nixon; momentarily he swung into an executive mood, directing that everyone check on Illinois, that the Chicago *Tribune* be checked for news, that Mike Wallace be reached for CBS information, that the Nixon troops in Cook County be on the alert against a steal of ballots from the last few precincts in Chicago. Finally, at about 8 o'clock, Haldeman urged him to get some sleep and ushered him to the bedroom. There, before he went to sleep, Nixon's sense of history surfaced again—here they were, eight years later, still hanging on California and Illinois; he asked Haldeman to make sure that everything possible was being done in both those states to see that all the ballot boxes were brought in, that nothing be permitted to slip.

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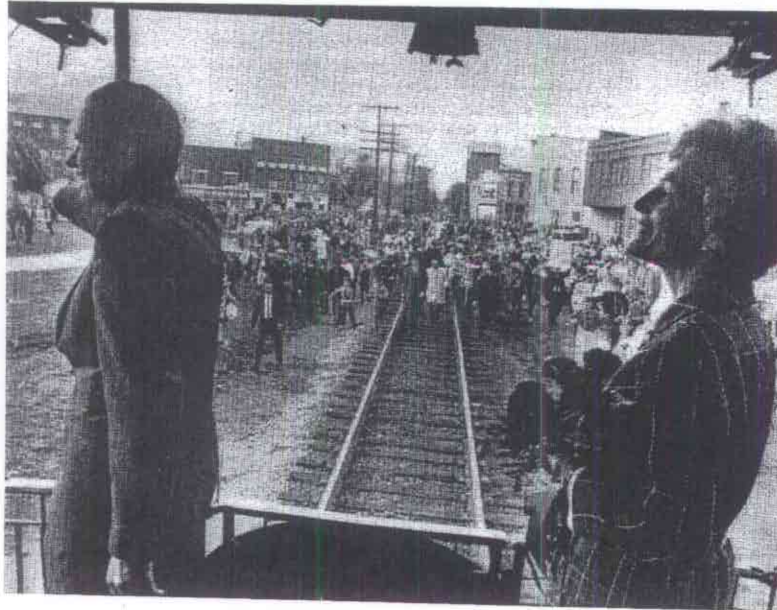
Whistle-stopping in the Midwest, the Nixons waved to the crowd as the campaign train left London, Ohio



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BEFORE AFTER

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By the time Nixon woke, at about 9 o'clock, the election had jelled on television. ABC had already conceded him the victory; as Haldeman and Nixon watched, NBC also conceded, and Nixon, still in pajamas and bathrobe, walked down the hall to his daughters' bedroom to tell them. But they had already heard the news and Julie was ready to present to him the gift she had been secretly sewing for several weeks—the presidential seal, done in crewel.

On Nov. 5, 1968, 73,186,819 American citizens voted, choosing Richard Milhous Nixon President of the United States by 31,770,237 votes (or 43.40% of the total national vote) over Hubert Horatio Humphrey with 31,270,533 votes (or 42.72%) and George Wallace with 9,906,141 votes (or 13.53%).

What the tiny margin of victory concealed, however, was the fact of landslide—for the election of 1968 was a negative landslide, the first in American history. Americans had turned against the whole set of Democratic policy and leadership during the previous four years—but could not make up their minds in which new direction they would move. Of the 43 million Americans who had voted for Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats in 1964, 28%—12 million—repudiated him and his party, a repudiation greater than that suffered by any Administration except Herbert Hoover's. But as they turned their backs on Johnson, Humphrey and the Democrats, and voiced their preference for a conservative alternate, they split their votes between a humane and centrist conservative and a menacing, racist conservative. No more thoroughly blurred election has occurred in American history since the Tilden-Hayes election of 1876.

From the 39th floor of the Pierre Hotel in New York City, one could see Central Park sweeping away in all its beauty. This had been his view for five years; from his apartment two blocks north up the avenue, he had looked out as a private citizen on the same scene. But now he was leaving for a larger view and more distant vistas.

He was easier now, as we talked, than he had been during the campaign, even though a new and different kind of pressure was building. Closed-circuit television, manned by the Secret Service, guarded all entries to the hotel's presidential floor; in adjacent suites waited governors, senators, staff aides with memoranda. He must next week appoint a Cabinet —and it was frustrating, he said; he was more interested in ideas than in personnel, only ideas wouldn't work unless you organized people to get them done.

By exposing Anna Chennault's meddling in the Paris peace negotiations, Hubert Humphrey might have won the election. But he kept silent.

But he was unhurried, leisurely, almost as if relieved to escape for an hour from the pressures of Cabinet-making. He still scribbled self-reminders on the yellow legal pads; but as he draped his legs over the arm of his chair, the flow of his conversation went smoothly as if, in exploring a question, he was exploring himself.

He was, he said, trying to look ahead. And the trouble was that for all the first year the country would be reacting to problems already presented; priorities would be forced on us, not set by a long-range effort. And it was important to look ahead, to look beyond that first year.

Vietnam had become obsessive in American thinking, he believed. Neither the President nor the Secretary of State had been dealing adequately with other problems. Someday the war in Vietnam would be ended; and when it was, there would still be the whole world waiting for attention.

The first of the other problems was the Soviet Union and the United States. Not just the hard matters of offensive-defensive missile systems, or nuclear disarmament, or defusing the situation in the Middle East. But more than that: how do you set up, on a carefully planned basis, a procedure for a continuing dialogue? Such a dialogue, he said, could not only affect the current areas of disagreement; it could also anticipate and avoid other areas of disagreement.

Europe was the next priority of attention; then the Middle East —that cried out for a long-range solution. And so did Latin America. Then the even more difficult problem of Africa—that was even longer-range in its perplexity; not a single African nation, he pointed out, had yet seen its government changed in an orderly election. So we had to go slow there; we could not let ourselves be alarmed by every *coup* in the Congo.

He paused to reflect, as if re-

viewing a first draft to see where he was going, and then observed that he was a "whole-worlder, not a half-worlder." So that if you were looking ahead as far as three or four years, there was the China problem. That's why it was important to have the Asian nations develop their own "collective security." The Asians weren't quite ready for that yet; he meant, he explained, they couldn't yet defend their own internal security, and only when China realized she couldn't overthrow all other Asian nations would the way be open for an eventual dialogue with the Chinese—just as the dialogue with the Soviet Union had begun only after the Soviets had realized that the Europeans were strong enough to protect themselves. He was looking forward, someday, to starting the dialogue with China.

At this point, again reviewing his own thinking, he pointed out that he was talking about foreign policy first because it was the *only* thing you could start with; you couldn't do anything in America internally until you got that solved. He had been looking at the defense budget and "it was the most shocking thing, those damned figures." Unless we could find some means of de-escalating the arms race, we simply couldn't save our own system; our freedom could be lost under the arms burden.

Then, finally, we were on to his America. That, he said, was so much *harder* to put. What do I see? he asked himself. Oh, he said, "I can see the United States years from now as the best-fed, the best-clothed, the best-housed nation in the world—but also the ugliest nation in the world." In a campaign, candidates say things differently. If you're a candidate, you say we've got to get out of Vietnam—right. You say we've got to have law and order—right. You say we've got to save the dollar—right. But anybody who wanted to be President and didn't want to do these things—he shouldn't even reach for the job. Because we can have all those things and still be a pretty unhappy country.

He groped about, trying to explain his thinking. Law and order? The restoration of order wouldn't be too difficult. There'd still be rioting students and Black Panthers. But there *would* be a new Attorney General, and a change in the attitude of court decisions; the country itself was slowly getting aroused to the problem. So he thought of law and order as a temporary crisis, not a long-range one.

What was the long-range crisis, then?

He thought for a minute. The country needed a sense of purpose, a sense of binding ideal. The trouble, he said, lay rooted somehow in this prosperity, in the affluence itself. The young people, for example—they needed a sense of challenge. We were probably doing too much for them; they were given too much too easily, and this weakened them. He thought Kennedy had hit the matter well in his inaugural: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." He agreed with that—but the big question was implementing it, to find the way to challenge and involve them. But how?

Did I remember the kick-off of the campaign? he asked. The phrase he had used in the opening speech at New Hampshire—"the country needs the lift of a driving dream"? That's what he was looking for.

Most Presidents come to the White House as finished portraits. Life has shaped and styled them in advance, and the White House freezes the image. But Richard M. Nixon is still an unfinished portrait. No more flexible President, none more open to suggestion and ideas, none more willing to admit mistakes or learn from error, has sat in the White House in recent times.

The style of the Nixon Presidency and its goals would become apparent only as the years wore on. But the style of the man, as President, had begun to change within days of the election. When I called on him two days after the inauguration, it was as if history itself was already taking a hand in finishing the portrait I had watched so long and seen take shape so slowly.

There was a minute of adjustment as he waved me to a sofa in the barren office, poured coffee, put me at ease. Watching him, I realized that he was slimmer. The movement of the body, the sound of the voice, the manner of speaking—these were different too. And he was calm as I had never seen him before. In the past, Nixon's

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Only you can prevent forest fires.

Hidden in the knee-well of his new desk was the Secret Service alarm

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body had been in constant movement—rising, walking about, hitching a leg over the arm of a chair or gesturing sharply with his hands. Now he was in repose, and the repose was in his speech also—it was slower, studied, with none of the gear-slippages of name or reference which used to come when he was weary. His hands still moved as he spoke, but gracefully, not punchily or sharply as before.

We talked first of how it had come to him—how and at what moment the Presidency had settled on him. The sense had come gradually, he said, but the moment, the actual moment of burden, he felt, had come just after he had finished his inaugural speech. Walking up the broad stairs back into the Capitol, he had turned around and looked down on the crowd —it was then that it all came to him. Yet he was not afraid of the authority; it all would come to rest right here in this room, and he felt ready for it.

I had been looking over the room as he spoke, for I had never been in the Oval Office at such a moment of transition. In the 48 hours since the inauguration, all that had made it the home of Lyndon Johnson had vanished. The rocking chair was gone, the news tickers and television sets were gone, the huge desks were gone, the bookshelves were empty, the console of telephones had been stripped out. Of all that had been Lyndon Johnson's there remained only a shelf and a half of volumes of presidential papers in their familiar green-and-red bindings, and the two sofas facing each other across the coffee table that Kennedy had installed. It was as shabby as any other office undergoing a change of tenants; the green-gray rug was filthy with smears of spilled drinks, the marks of cigarette butts. The room seemed suddenly bare, hollow of everything except Richard Nixon, in a blue suit, with new gold presidential-eagle cuff links, completely relaxed, talking of how he would fill it.

His new desk was still free of papers but, indulging my curiosity, he took me over to it and showed me the device they had explained to him that morning. We both half-knelt to look into the knee-well of the desk; just beside where his left knee would be was an aluminum device. If he had a heart attack, or took ill, or some visitor suddenly went mad, he had but to nudge it with his knee and Secret Service guards outside the door would rush in to protect the President. This, in his second full day as President, was the most precise instruction he had received.

The campaign over and the Presidency his, Nixon takes up the task

Without any show of gaiety or exuberance he was, quite clearly, enjoying himself in the empty Oval Office that he would have to fill with decision and purpose. We talked after that about his first two days—the first meeting with the National Security Council, with the full Cabinet, with others. He rose, finally, and stood there in the center of the room and said farewell, cheerfully, courteously, but obviously eager to get on with his task. ◂

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