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Hail the conquering anti-hero

THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968. By Theodore H. White. Atheneum. 459 pp. \$10.

By Anthony Hartley

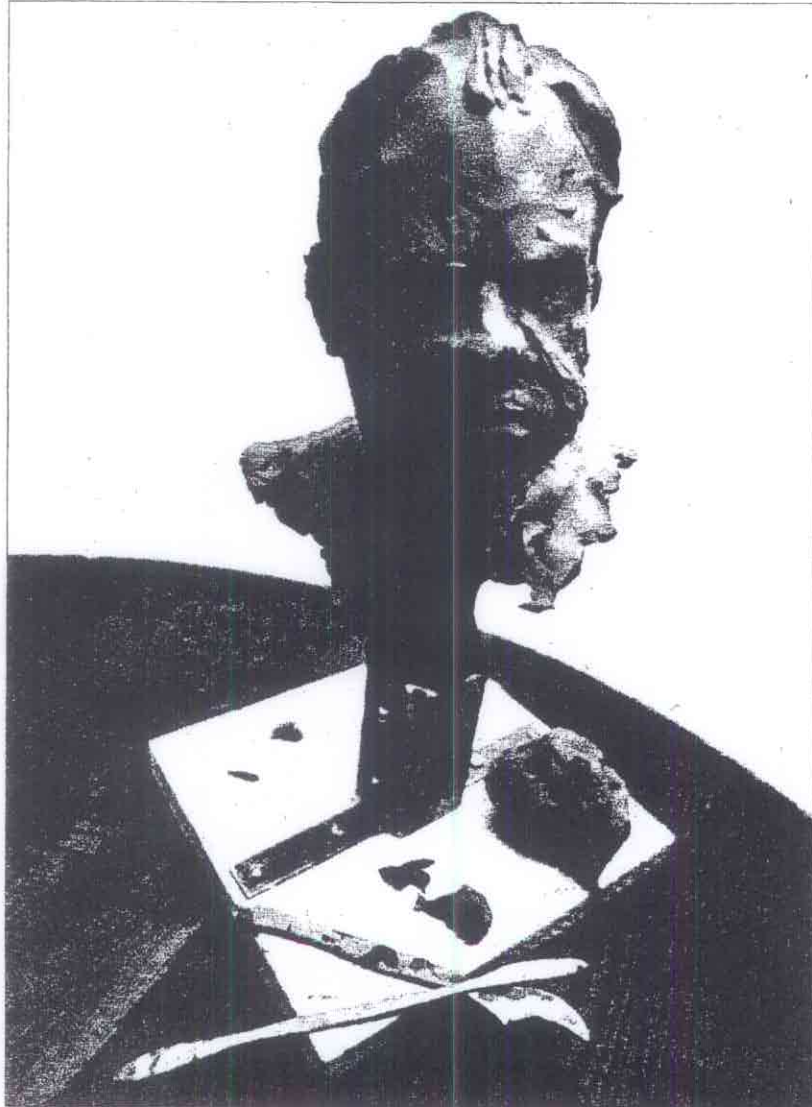
Politics, as we know, is drama. But there are snares waiting for those who choose to write it that way. In two earlier books Theodore H. White has successfully avoided them, but in 1968 politics let him down. In his previous "makings of the President" his own optimism and the self-imposed task of justifying the ways of America to Americans gave his work a pattern. From the outset it was clear that the good guy was going to win. More interesting and more dynamic than their bumbling opponents, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were presented to White's readers as predestined victors in the presidential stakes. In these earlier books there was only as much uncertainty as would add spice to the thought that history was once again doing its bit by the American people.

But 1968 ended in no such organ peals. This was the year of the anti-hero, Richard Nixon, the victory of boring America over hored America. If organ notes there were in January, they were those of the Reverend Billy Graham—and it is hard to imagine White approving of him. Moreover, the winner this time was a man who, in *The Making of the President 1960*, had been presented as unshaven and inept—a poor substitute for avatars of New Frontiers and Great Societies. White tries to get round the difficulty by finding a "new Nixon," but plainly his heart is not in it. Some aspects of the Nixon victory remain curiously unfathomed: notably those concerning the choice, past career, and impact on the campaign of Spiro Agnew.

The 1968 campaign, far from being a classical drama culminating in the promise of heroic deeds, was an Elizabethan tragedy of blood, with bodies on the stage at every scene. Clearly this is not American politics as White has known them hitherto. He shrinks, understandably enough, from describing the assassination of Robert Kennedy. He even fails to remark on the genuine irony, so symbolic of the present position of the United States, by which a murderous Middle Eastern feud could intrude into domestic politics.

Indeed, for an old presidential hand, 1968 was full of new and often unwelcome experiences. There were the students. White tries to make the best of them by distinguishing between the (Continued on page 3)

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Sculpture for Book World by Julio Fernandez

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(Continued from page 1) McCarthy workers, all mini-skirts and shaved beards, and those who abused Humphrey in Boston ("hate distorted the faces of the young"), but the effort is unconvincing. Probably they were the same students, and the difference was in those who controlled them. It is easy to sympathize with White's deep dislike of violence and the attempts to wreck American institutions; and the 1968 student revolts lead him to pose some acute questions about the aims of education in the United States. But perhaps he does not realize to what extent the rational, optimistic values of the New Frontier, which he once celebrated, have been called into question by the confused rebelliousness of the young.

White's reportorial abilities have more scope when he comes to sketch the characters of the candidates. Nixon appears more efficient, more assured than in the past, but still enigmatic — an utter contrast to his rival Humphrey, who emerges as a good, courageous man suddenly projected into one of those nightmares in which nothing moves, nothing is understood. Inevitably Robert Kennedy falls into the role of a doomed figure ("He will destroy himself" was what one loyal Kennedy

man said to me when he announced his entry into the race), but this book has little to say about the demons that drove him on.

Finally there is Eugene McCarthy, so attractive in his appeal to an older style of American politics, in his aloofness, and his rejection of publicity in its crasser forms. That aloofness can become indifference and irony; cynicism may be more a condemnation of a system than of a character. But it comes as something of a shock to learn of his offer to Kennedy through Richard Goodwin: "Why don't you tell him that I only want one term, and he can have it next time." One hopes he was joking.

There is plenty of personality in this narrative, but individuals are dwarfed by the background, by the American political system itself, at a moment of enormous strain. Fortunately, nations rarely have simultaneously to endure racial hatreds, rioting in the streets, a rash of political assassinations, inflation, and the ordeal of an unpopular and apparently endless war. When confronted with such a variety of evils, political institutions often collapse under the pressure. But 1968 was to demonstrate once again the conservative force of the American Constitution and of the political habits that

have grown up around it. The nearest the system came to being damaged or disrupted was when the Wallace campaign looked as if it could throw the result of the election into the House of Representatives. The worst, however, was averted, principally, as White shows, by the efforts of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. — another conservative force — to turn its members away from Wallace to Humphrey. There is some reassurance to be drawn from the fact that organized labor kept its head when all around were losing theirs — and blaming it on the natural-born perverseness of the blue-collar worker.

Nevertheless, 1968 was bound to leave anyone who lived through it with an uneasy sense of the hysteria that can be distilled from social and racial tensions, and expressed in violence. There is a dangerous gap between what government can do rapidly in a complex industrial society, and what is expected of it by a citizen whose appetite has been whetted by television and the press. Technological change is outdistancing the capacity of political decision to control it. These issues were barely identified in 1968. When they are better defined, there will have to be a renewal of politics and of the machinery at the disposition of politicians.