TIME ESSAY

THE DIFFICULT ART OF LOSING

FOR every exultant winner in the 1968 elections, there is now at least one loser who feels the special bitterness of public rejection. He may reason that defeat is a universal experience, that life itself is a losing proposition. He may even act out the obligatory role of "good loser." But how does one become a good loser? Is there such a thing as an art of losing well?

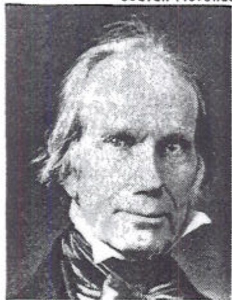
There must be. Most of mankind's religions and philosophies are aimed at steeling humans for the ultimate loss, plus the lesser defeats that lead up to it. Most of the authenticated sages—quite a few losers among them—emphasize a very ancient idea: because the loser alone controls his attitude, he can always change that attitude and regard defeat as unimportant. "Our life," wrote Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor-philosopher, "is what our thoughts make it."

But the U.S. is not a nation of Stoics. From the outset, Americans have been so compulsive about winning that losing is almost un-American. In this sense, the U.S. is only the most extreme example of the Western trait that Oswald Spengler described as Faustian—the refusal to believe in a static order or a fixed fate. The very freedom of Western culture puts a heavy burden on losers. Western man's destiny is largely up to him—and so are his failures. The fabulous opportunities open to a new people on a new continent became the basis of a secular religion, a faith in competition and success. That faith shaped the American's attitude not only about his role in life but also about his country's role in the world. To a nation that has never lost a war, Douglas MacArthur was being logical: "There can be no substitute for victory."

Actually, there are a great many substitutes for victory in American life. Unsuccessful generals or business magnates do not hopelessly lose face, as in some Eastern cultures; they retire amid honors and stock options. Defeated politicians are not liquidated, as in totalitarian countries; they run again. In a dynamic and open society, losers are blessed with enormous opportunities to weather defeat by switching to new directions of adventures. The comeback is an especially American dream. Yet that itself only indicates a desperate need to win. Whole libraries could be filled with American novels whose villain is success, or a misunderstanding of what success means.

Indeed, a society that equates defeat with failure runs the risk of creating angry outcasts who eventually seek revenge and justification. In extremity, such explosive emotions can drive frustrated losers to the crime of "magnacide" (killing somebody big). Lee Harvey Oswald, the archetypal U.S. assassin, almost certainly murdered John F. Kennedy partly to borrow for himself the luster of a glamorous winner. The Oswalds are rare. Still, Americans do need a lot more help in coping with the problems of losing.

CULVER PICTURES



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Play to Play

Americans of course cherish sportsmanship, which asks the loser to leap gracefully over the net and shake the hand of the man he would probably prefer to throttle. As Sportswriter Grantland Rice once put it with classic corn: "For when the One Great Scorer comes to mark against your name,/ He writes—not that you won or lost—but how you played the game." Rice probably borrowed this formula from the legend that Britons play to play rather than to win. In fact, British soccer fans are notoriously sore losers, prone to riot. As for U.S. "sportsmanship," it mainly seems to be a kind of post-game game in which the loser, by voicing a tribute to the winner, can win partial redemption for failing.

Certainly this exercise has value. History contains a rich catalogue of loser statements, whose authors can be ranked according to the sportsmanship code and assigned appropriate moral victories. Even so, the loser himself well knows that he remains a loser; only by heroic mental gyrations can the also-ran restage the race in his favor. Obviously, triumph and defeat are defined by society rather than the individual. If a Ted Williams bats .400, for instance, the grandstand regards a .300 batter as a loser—and so does he.

To regain his self-esteem, the loser typically reduces his anguish by explaining away his defeat. Show business's fallen stars often justify their decline in terms of a mysterious force known as The Breaks (another word for fate). Other losers absorb defeat by joining a less competitive game, such as local community activism, which gives them a new chance to emerge as winners.

Reticence in Defeat

All loser statements, in fact, are probably rationalizations, from the game tears showing through Adlai Stevenson's remarks after he lost the 1952 presidential race (*see box*) to the naked bitterness of Richard Nixon in 1962, when it seemed that his defeat for the California governorship marked the end of his public life. In politics as well as business, the most common rationalization is that the loser has refused to pay a "price" for winning. Henry Clay, who spent 20 years trying to occupy the White House, finally produced that famous sour grape: "I would rather be right than President." A sweeter reaction, "Now I can see my family," was used by William Scranton in 1964 and Nelson Rockefeller in 1968. How would the Great Scorer judge Eugene McCarthy? After losing the Indiana and Nebraska primaries, he sent no congratulatory words to the winners. His grudging endorsement of Hubert Humphrey was delayed on "principle," was issued only after the Vice President approached Nixon in the polls and was probably too late to affect the outcome.

Loser statements are often superfluous as well as dan-

gerous. Often the less said the better: losers who seek an audience court disbelief in their sincerity and should perhaps just carry on in private. As William Butler Yeats once put it:

Now all the truth is out
Be secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat . . .
Be secret and exult
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.

If reticence is advisable, resilience is crucial. Losers should always focus not on what might have been but on what still can be. In both fiction and life, Ernest Hemingway displayed the good loser's grace under pressure and sheer joy in struggle. "I am a little beat up," he reported after a serious air crash in 1954, "but I assure you it is only temporary." Overall, he may have lacked the truly good loser's ability to anticipate defeat and keep alternate courses open.

In some ways, politicians do this better than other losers, perhaps because they can plan ahead in multi-annual cycles. Nixon's switch from defeat to law to renomination is a case in point. In his years of political exile between the wars, Winston Churchill distracted himself from defeat by tapping a wide range of other interests: painting, bricklaying, authorship and breeding butterflies. At the same time, he never once doubted his capacity to lead the nation.

Unsuccessful presidential candidates often achieve high status in other careers, as did John W. Davis, the Democrat who lost to Coolidge in 1924 and is remembered as one of the country's top constitutional lawyers. Thomas E. Dewey twice survived defeat in the presidential race to resume a prosperous career in the law. Instead of berating the man who beat him, Wendell Willkie went on a global fact-finding mission for F.D.R. After losing the Democratic nomination to John F. Kennedy in 1960, Adlai Stevenson gracefully became Kennedy's Ambassador to the U.N. Ex-President Herbert Hoover, rejected for a second term, rebounded to become an elder statesman whose services were often sought by the party that drove him out of office.

In many ways defeat is a better teacher than success, which often tempts winners to keep repeating the tactics that achieved their triumphs. Defeat, on the other hand, is both a humbling and a corrective process. It compels a man to examine why he lost and, beyond that, to discover what he has left. The great theme of Greek tragedy is the inevitability of defeat and the triumph of surviving it.

The U.S. is only beginning to understand that lesson. The most divisive issues of the day—the baffling war in Viet Nam, the Negro's bitter contest for his rights—take much of their heat from the national refusal to entertain the mere possibility of defeat. Why can't the world's mightiest military power vanquish a tiny and underdeveloped Asian state? Why does it suffer a humiliating act of piracy by the North Koreans? Why don't the cops just go in there and re-establish law and order?

Full Speed Astern

Without the American passion for winning, the U.S. would clearly be a far less dynamic place. Men should reach beyond their grasp; it is inconceivable that Negroes, for example, should spend another 300 years or even 300 days accepting their lot as losers. Still, the U.S. ought to be far less grim about losing.

In a sense, that is the message of the hippies and all the white middle-class youth who are fascinated with dropping out and with rebelling against a system predicated on success. In some way, they may carry a lesson for the U.S. Yet their approach, with its faddish overtones of yoga, zen and similar other-worldly philosophies, is hardly adequate.

The art of losing lies somewhere between making a demon of success and a cult of failure. Perhaps Cartoonist Al Capp had a point when he invented a fictitious Confederate general named Jubilation T. Cornpone, who rose above the Appomattox disaster by industriously sweeping up after Robert E. Lee's horse. Before the presidential commission on violence, Brandeis University Psychiatrist John P. Spiegel recently declared that the U.S. needs more good losers, who could reduce the threat of violence by cooling their ambitions. Losing, he suggested, is almost as important as winning. This idea so intrigued New York Times Columnist James Reston that he promptly rewrote some of history's famous winners: "I've just begun to quit" (John Paul Jones); "We have met the enemy and we are theirs" (Oliver Perry); "I shall not return" (General MacArthur); "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed astern!" (Admiral Farragut).

Perhaps the 1968 election losers can spoof themselves out of their gloom by issuing similarly inglorious statements. Not that losing is ever better than winning—of course it isn't. Still, the fact is that losers often learn while winners mostly worry; that ultimately even Faustian man must trust in some power beyond himself and gracefully acknowledge it. "Our business in this world," said Robert Louis Stevenson, "is not to succeed but to continue to fail in good spirits." Given the odds against coming in first, this is excellent advice.

Sweet and Sour Grapes

I AM reminded of the drunk who, when he had been thrown down the stairs of a club for the third time, gathered himself up, and said, 'I am on to those people. They don't want me in there.' "—William Jennings Bryan, after losing his third try for the presidency.

"I certainly did my damnedest to remove the Administration from power, but the majority of the people wished otherwise."—Wendell Willkie, 1940.

"I felt like a little boy who had stubbed his toe in the dark. He was too old to cry, but it hurt too much to laugh." —Adlai Stevenson, after losing to Ike in 1952.

"You can't beat a billion dollars."—Hubert Humphrey, explaining his loss to John F. Kennedy in the 1960 West Virginia primary.

"You won't have Nixon to kick around any more because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."—Richard Nixon, after losing to Pat Brown in 1962.

"A tie is like kissing your sister."—University of Washington Football Coach Jim Owens.

"Winning is not the most important thing about football—it's the only thing."—Vince Lombardi, ex-Green Bay Packers coach.

"There's nothing wrong with being the sixth best in the world."—Harvard Rowing Coach Harry Parker, consoling his crew after it finished last at the 1968 Olympics.

"If you don't think it twists my insides to see what has happened to General Dynamics, you are very wrong. You must know what this kind of defeat does to a man who has been successful."—Frank Pace, who presided over General Dynamics' disaster years.

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
—Dylan Thomas commemorating his father.

"My downfall raises me to infinite heights."—Napoleon after Waterloo.

"Ah, Rouen, I have great fear that you are going to suffer by my death! Jesus, Jesus!"—Joan of Arc.

"Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?"—Socrates' last words.