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Wanted: A New Man on a White Horse

TAKING SIDES: A Personal View of America from Kennedy to Nixon to Kennedy. By Richard J. Whalen. Houghton Mifflin. 320 pp. \$8.95

By LOU CANNON

NO ONE LOVES an unindicted coconspirator, least of all if the coconspirator used to be President of the United States. In the wake of Watergate, and particularly after Richard Nixon's attendant resignation from the presidency, the Nixon-saturated reading public has been drowned in analyses ad infinitum, ad nauseum about the deficiency of the Nixon character and the meaning of Watergate. For those Americans who would prefer to step back a few paces from the scandal of their sullied presidency and take a longer view of their country's political condition, *Taking Sides* may prove a useful stepping-stone. It is not that former White House aide Richard Whalen is uninterested in Water-

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gate manifestations. Far from it. It is simply that Whalen, who had the sense to leave the White House before all hell broke loose, has already had his say about the pre-Watergate siege mentality in *Catch the Falling Flag: A Republican's Challenge to His Party*, a defiant 1972 book about a presidency that failed long before the burglary of Larry O'Brien's office. This present collection of essays focuses instead on the social, political and cultural developments that produced both Nixon and his collective nemesis, the Kennedys, and that have now created a near vacuum in American leadership.

In Whalen's view that vacuum seems closest to totality in strategic defense and detente, the one aspect of Nixon Administration policy where even the former President's fiercest critics are inclined to grade him with at least a B-plus. Assembling arguments and data which shatter Henry Kissinger's happy claims for detente, Whalen contends that the Nixon legacy in foreign policy is a Soviet Union that by any measurement "has gained both nuclear parity and a truly global military capability, which we fail to recognize at our mortal peril." In this splendid chapter on "The Second Cold War," Whalen demonstrates how the Soviets, rather than the West, mastered the central tenets of such master Western strategists as Alfred Mahan and Halford Mack-

inder and then applied them to their own situation. He shows, too, how the Vietnam War tied down and drained the United States and argues that Robert McNamara, under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, became the prisoner of his own notion that the Russians shared his concept of "assured destruction capability." Nixon knew that detente was failing, Whalen believes, and would have been fully justified in repudiating the first phase of the arms-limitation (SALT-I) agreements after satellite photos showed that the Soviets were installing large new multiple-warhead missiles in existing silos. "But the desperately weak Nixon could not afford the further embarrassment of having hopes of detente cruelly deflated," Whalen writes. "Our children would pay for his deception and our self-deception."

Considering the contents of this chapter, it is not surprising that Whalen looks favorably upon the presidential candidacy of Senator Henry Jackson, if not upon his prospects for the Democratic nomination. But Whalen is a Republican—a truer man to his party than many of those he left behind in the White House—and he writes best about other Republicans. Particularly recommended is a chapter on "Barry Goldwater and the New Conservatism," which tells the non-Goldwaterite reader everything he needs to know and nearly as much as he can

stand about a movement where the arguments on doctrinal questions "would tax the dialectical agility of a third-third-degree Trotskyite." Whalen, however, appreciates the diverse strains of American conservatism and the sturdy character of the American conservative.

But this essay and most of the others fail, almost totally, to explore the options available to those whose course of action Whalen is criticizing.

In the chapter on conservatism, for example, we learn that Joseph McCarthy was "a supreme opportunist," that Birchers are simple-minded folk who sometimes graduate to normal partisan politics and that Goldwater and his friends failed to exploit their early political leverage with the Nixon Administration. After 35 pages of useful history and critical judgments, Whalen then devotes four paragraphs to flailing "knee-jerk conservatism" for "stale 'free enterprise' rhetoric" and for failing to come to grips with the reality of the corporate state. What, one wonders, would Whalen have the conservatives do—other than bone up on economics? Where are his remedies, his programs? What, indeed, is his frame of reference other than a vague Republicanism? Most of the time we do not know even what airport his flights of criticism take off from let alone where Whalen wants them to land. It is a curious

falling in a book called *Taking Sides*.

Whalen's most abiding interest seems to be in the men he has written most about—Nixon and the several Kennedys. If he is not prescriptive, Whalen has at least caught the dynamic of the original Kennedy appeal, and he understands the importance of a legacy that is more than a mythological Camelot.

"What matters crucially is the core of the Kennedy legacy," Whalen writes. "That core is patriotism. From the first to the last of his thousand days in the presidency, Kennedy told his fellow citizens that America was a good country which could become better. He expressed the faith they felt in themselves, their values and their ideals. He called for individual and national sacrifice on behalf of those ideals, and this struck a deep chord. . . ."

It is Whalen's belief that this legacy has been abandoned not by the American people but by its leaders and that they will once again respond to a call to their better natures. "Our sickness of the spirit arises from a prolonged absence of just pride in what we have attempted and what we have accomplished," he writes. "Our cure will come with the restoration of honest, truthful and effective leadership that demands the best in us—as we remember John Kennedy once did. His legacy awaits the leader who can claim it." □