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Encounters on the Eve

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A YAWN is probably the only natural reaction to the presidential campaign this year. But moving around the country for the past two months has been fascinating. Here are accounts of a few encounters which seem to illustrate the national mood on the eve of the election.

In Detroit I visited an auto plant with Sen. Robert Griffin, the Michigan Republican up for reelection. The senator asked a group of elected workers' representatives what most bothered them.

"The big thing," he was told, "is overtime. It's compulsory and that's hard on some men. But when I call up the Labor Department office in town to complain, I get a record saying they're not on the job and to call back later."

In booming Atlanta, I asked a black candidate for Congress, Andrew Young, how he accounted for the enormous new investment in a city that was tilting black. He explained that a year ago black Atlanta had provided the votes for approval of a referendum on a metropolitan transit system.

"When we did that," he said, "we convinced the white business leaders that the town was going to make it and the money flowed in. But we had talked the thing out among ourselves in the various citizen groups set up under the poverty program and Model Cities program. We got something in return that the whole black community wants. We have a 15-cent bus fare."

IN WINNETKA, an established upper-income suburb outside Chicago, I went to a meeting of independent reformers with Sen. Charles Percy, another Republican up for reelection. The senator agreed to take questions. He

was grilled on such matters as Vietnam, the Supreme Court, disarmament, trade with Japan and peace in the Near East. One question was: "Do you think we're moving towards world government?"

In Trenton, N.J., a young man who was working part-time and going part-time to a community college said he

wasn't much bothered by the Watergate scandal because "the Democrats would have done the same thing." An increase in milk prices, announced after the milk producers contributed to the Republican campaign, made him madder. "But I suppose," he said, "that the hot issue around here, especially for people with kids, is busing."

In Sherman, Texas, a small town north of Dallas which I visited with Sen. John Tower, another Republican seeking reelection, I was driven past Terrin Air Force Base, a recently closed installation. Someone said that the housing on the base had just been bought by a big real estate company. Since it looked like a ghost town, I asked why.

"A new Dallas airport," I was told, "is going up. It'll be not too far from here. When it's completed, all the main national companies will want to be located nearby. When that happens, this won't be a small town anymore. It'll be a suburb of Dallas doing a big business."

In Seattle I met a theoretical physicist just back from a stay at the Atomic Energy Commission's laboratory in Los Alamos, N.M. "For the first time in years," he said, "the place is alive." I asked why.

"Energy," he replied. "It's the big problem for the country. And unlike Vietnam and ecology, it's not a matter where people prove they're right by being pure. Every-

body is against blackouts. Everybody is also against polluting the air with dirty coal. It's a trade-off problem—our kind of problem."

WHAT EMERGES from all this is the spectacle of a tremendously diverse nation, not dramatically in trouble. A few highly educated people are concerned about the big problems of civil liberties, peace and world order. The racial minorities are in a bad way. They make only occasional gains on the local level, and only in those rare areas where the programs of the Great Society are working.

But the great majority of Americans have jobs and are doing well. Suburbanization,

bad as it may seem, is a further step up the ladder. Prices bother people and so does corruption, but not as much as racial tension. Maybe science can contribute something, but there is almost no disposition to believe that government—that player of records on the telephone—can help much.

That last perception is probably right. The country has a strong autonomous inner beat. It may be slowing down, but it is not trending dramatically either right or left. It could take four more years of Richard Nixon in stride and even survive George McGovern.

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