

How to Win by Losing

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Nov. 4—It is now just a year before the Presidential election of 1972, and President Nixon finds himself in a very odd situation. The economy is in deep trouble, with both inflation and unemployment running at unacceptable levels. The war is still on in Vietnam, and it is hard to remember a time when the nation's relations with Canada, Japan, Western Europe, Latin America and the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa were in such a state of anxiety and mistrust; but in the face of this general slippage, the President's political stock seems to be rising.

His campaign for Taiwan in the United Nations was a failure. His New Economic Policy infuriated the major industrial and trading nations of the world, and his misjudgment of the foreign aid problem on Capitol Hill has depressed the poorer nations, but his standing in the popularity polls at home has gone up to 54 per cent, higher than it was before his recent failures and disappointments.

The explanation of this paradox is a little complicated. One part of it is that slapping import taxes on foreign competitors and even killing the foreign aid bill, no matter how harsh or capricious, are very much in tune with the disillusioned anti-foreign mood of the electorate.

Another part of it is that none of the Democratic Presidential candidates seem to be emerging with a clear personality or program to challenge the President.

Then there is fact that the President is a shrewd politician who senses the frustrated mood of the country and the need for change. He is no Hoover. He doesn't sit on principle. He moves toward China quickly and secretly, even if this hurts his relations with Japan. He backs Taiwan, even if this irritates Peking, and even when Henry Kissinger is in that city. He goes for wage and price controls, even if this infuriates both labor and the Republican conservatives, and violates all his own budget-balancing lectures of the past.

His theory seems to be that motion is progress, and in American politics he may be right. For a lot of people now seem to be saying that they don't know where he's going but anyway he's making a lot of dust. He hasn't watched all those pro football games for nothing. He is a scrambling quarterback, in deep trouble and throwing the ball all over the field. It may not make sense but it makes headlines, and in politics dominating the news is important.

So here he is, a year before the big vote, with an intriguing formula for

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success through motion and pragmatism, even success through failure. He has abandoned most of the old economic and ideological horses he rode to the pinnacle of American politics and is now running on key policies and tendencies proposed by his opponents and denounced by himself.

He ran for the Presidency in the first place as a superhawk on Vietnam, and as a disciple of Adam Smith's conservative economics—anti-Communism and budget-balancing were his two first commandments—and he is now seeking a second term as a peace-maker in Vietnam, an economic Keynesian and a pragmatist who can negotiate "a generation of peace" with Moscow and Peking.

It is not a new and not a bad strategy. Many politicians have seized or maintained power by saying one thing and doing another. Franklin Roosevelt came to the White House in 1932 as a budget-balancer at home and a peace-maker abroad and then presided over spectacular deficits and a spectacular war. Lyndon Johnson won in 1964 by denouncing Barry Goldwater's militant Vietnam policies and then putting many of them into practice after he was elected.

Mr. Nixon is merely expanding and dramatizing the process, by scolding the opposition, accepting many of their policies and then blaming them for not having any alternative to the programs he originally denounced and has now adapted to his own uses.

It is fairly clear that his policy of withdrawal in Vietnam, his wage and price control policy and his ultimate appointments to the Supreme Court were not his preferences but his prudent adjustments to the pressures of the opposition, for which he took elaborate, almost embarrassing, credit.

One has to admire his flexibility and his tactical skill. The charge that has always been made against him, not without evidence, is that he had no fundamental philosophy or vision of where the Republic should go, and he is such a brilliant political tactician that he has even managed to transform this indictment into an effective platform of political pragmatism.

But looking to a year from now, skillful as all this now seems, is it good enough? It is good enough now to baffle and scatter the divided Democrats, and bring Mr. Nixon up in the popularity polls, but it still leaves the nation divided and bewildered by all the manipulation. And that is bad news, even for Mr. Nixon, if he is re-elected.