

Season of Hyperbole

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 26—In the year-end flood of self-congratulation now flowing from the Nixon Administration, there seem to be one or two currents really worth talking about. This is fortunate, for the end of 1971 and the dread onslaught of 1972 mean that the season of hyperbole is upon us; what the Republicans say they have wrought, the Democrats must soon put asunder, and heaven help the man in search of calm appraisal or sweet reason.

So it was when Herbert G. Klein and Clark MacGregor thumped the tub for Mr. Nixon's 1971 performance. It was full of bold action, daring innovation and historic achievements, to hear them tell it in a performance of programed sincerity reminiscent of the hosannas and huzzas the Administration sent up for itself a year ago when it announced the coming splendor of the New American Revolution. Neither Mr. Klein nor Mr. MacGregor dwelt much upon this revolution, which is incomplete to say the least.

But these public servants are not to be blamed. Their rhetorical tone is set from the top. It was, after all, Mr. Nixon himself who referred to the first moon landing as the biggest happening since the Creation and to the recent monetary agreement as the greatest in the history of the world.

Mr. Klein and Mr. MacGregor were, in any case, talking mostly about the past, which every man can judge for himself. Secretary of Commerce Stans was standing on shiffter sands when he proclaimed a sort of Second Coming of the American economy, with inflation having been "stopped cold," unemployment dropping "precipitously" and prosperity on the farm—even for those many that don't receive fat Federal cotton subsidies. If it is confidence the economy needs, you can't fault Mr. Stans for failure to encourage it, no matter how the Pay Board may be fumbling in the background.

By comparison to this chorus with its lush Fred Waring orchestration, the Democrats so far have been mild enough in their year-end claims, and Chairman Larry O'Brien even conceded that the President's foreign policy initiatives had brought him political profit in 1971. But the primaries and the election-year Congressional session are just around the corner, and if 1972 comes, can Democratic counterattack be far behind?

Maybe that is why, amid the sounding brass, a couple of muted notes

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seemed so interesting—even so promising. Against the usual American political background of boast, brag, bluster and con, it does not take much in the way of originality or practicality to catch the eye and ear.

H.E.W. Secretary Elliott Richardson certainly did that, with his suggestion that the Administration may accept for the Federal Government a major share of the cost of public schools. This would have at least two profoundly important effects. It would be aimed at equalizing the investment in public education made in poor and wealthy communities; and it would relieve the crushing burden that the local property tax has almost everywhere become.

Mr. Richardson did not make clear where the Administration would find the money, nor how it would persuade its penurious leader to spend it. But the news that this subject has been closely studied and may head the Nixon domestic agenda for 1972 is remarkable; it is not often than an Administration addresses itself even that much to the real needs of real people in the real world.

Another welcome note was struck by John Volpe, the ever-enthusiastic Secretary of Transportation. He predicted that 1972 would see the opening of the massive and once sacrosanct Highway Trust Fund to other purposes such as improved mass transit programs, and that the fund ultimately would become an all-purpose transportation fund. That could be the single most important factor in limiting the superhighway juggernaut—fueled so far by its own protected source of big money—and redeeming a useful network of short-haul intercity rail transit, with all the effect that would have on such linked problems as airport construction needs, air traffic safety, clogged highways and polluted air.

But let us not rejoice too quickly at these evidences of solid purpose in the season of hyperbole. Remember, the men of the Nixon Administration are the ones who gave us black capitalism, welfare reform, an end to the war, and the New American Revolution—none of which we have. They are the ones who were going to bring us together, and who took office with a game plan to right the economy. They usually sound good in Phase One, but under Mr. Nixon the thing to watch out for is Phase Two.