

Politics and Reality

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 5—A central argument for President Nixon in this election, and a most effective one, has been that he is the more practical candidate. Even some who would define themselves as liberal intellectuals support Nixon as the hard-nosed politician, able to deal with the not-so-pleasant realities of American life and the American character.

A good way to test that argument is to try to look past Election Day and ask oneself: What are the really profound internal problems facing the United States? Is a second Nixon Administration likely to deal wisely with these deeper needs?

Everyone will have his own perception of the problems that shadow the American future. For me a few stand out as most significant.

One is the hate in the American bloodstream today—the bitterness of class and race. Economic disparities here are so striking, the contrasts of wealth and degradation, that it is hardly surprising if a large minority feels forgotten and embittered. What must it mean to an unemployed worker to see on television that one individual has given \$1 million to the Nixon campaign fund? In race relations the antagonisms have never been more open: We see them in the faces of Canarsie as we did at Little Rock.

No one can believe any more in panaceas for the problems of economics and race. But is there reason to hope that a second Nixon Administration would at least address them squarely and sensitively? Not after the cynicism of the first four years on these matters, for again and again the President and his men have sought not solutions but political issues.

On school busing, for example, the Administration was urged early on to deal affirmatively with the crisis in urban education; it refused, worked instead to arouse racial fears and then pushed radical antibusing legislation. Or on welfare: As the rolls grew, the President first proposed reform and then abandoned it when an attitude of contempt toward those on welfare seemed more profitable.

More broadly, the state of American society cries out for tax reform and other measures to curb the extremes of economic inequality. A British Tory Government would find such ideas conservative, but they have found no place in the consciousness of John Connally or Richard Nixon.

A second aspect of the United States that casts a shadow on the future is the role of the military. The symbols are in part physical: The acres of Air Force cars parked in Duluth, Minn.; the Army helicopters circling over San

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Francisco Bay. But more important than size and waste is the sense of pervasive military influence in American foreign and even domestic policy.

To expect effective restraint on the military role in American life from a Nixon Government would be fatuous optimism indeed. This President's sense of obligation to the military was nicely illustrated when he felt it necessary to follow the first strategic arms agreement with a call for increased arms spending. The affair of General Lavelle raised sinister questions, still unanswered, about the integrity of civilian controls on the military.

Even more interesting is the Nixon attitude toward what President Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex. To an amazing extent this Administration has adopted the old Marxist view that, to prosper, a capitalist economy needs war or preparation for war. Its budget director said directly that cutting defense spending as Senator McGovern suggested would mean mass unemployment and deep damage to "the economy's technological base."

Civil liberty is a third area of concern. There is a tangible sense today of weakening individual ability to resist intrusion by centralized official power.

Would anyone seriously suggest looking to Richard Nixon for protection of individual liberty? Consider only the last four years: The attempts to intimidate press and television; the audacious claim of a constitutional power to tap anyone's telephone on alleged security grounds without specific legal authority; brazen espionage against the opposition party. The darkest prospect in four more years would be the continuation of that record—and of judicial appointments designed to support it.

George McGovern has made his mistakes as a candidate. But they do not remotely rise to the level of doubt raised by Richard Nixon's attitude toward the most fundamental domestic problems of the United States. Some talk about the President becoming a statesman after this, his last, election. But men cannot change the characters they have made for themselves.

If the miracle happened and George McGovern won this election, I think many who have declared themselves for Nixon would nevertheless rejoice. They would understand that Nixon's genius lay in appealing to the worst in us, to selfishness and meanness masquerading as realism, and they would share in the hopes for a rebirth of American energy and idealism.