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How Election Fits Theory Of a Crisis in the U.S.

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Washington

A remarkable "pre-mortem" on the 1972 election, written four weeks ago by Walter Dean Burnham, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology political scientist, is full of insights into the meaning of the campaign we have all just endured.

Written on the assumption that the predicted Nixon victory would materialize, the memorandum Burnham sent to his colleagues on October 12 suggested that "both the nomination of George McGovern and the emergent Nixon landslide" fit the theory he and others have propounded that "the United States is passing through one of the deepest transitional crises in its history... a crisis of political legitimacy."

It is impossible in this space to do justice to the argument of his tightly written memo, but there are several key ideas worth remembering as the inevitable babel of post-election analysis rises.

The transitional crisis of which he speaks has its roots in the rapid cultural, social and economic changes that together have brought

such insecurity to the mixed and uneasy populations of our metropolitan centers.

FORM

Politically, Burnham argued, the crisis takes the form of rejection of the "interest-group liberalism" that reached its height in the 1960s and repudiation of the political-intellectual establishment that is associated with that kind of liberalism.

McGovern's domestic program identified him to the public "with the bankrupt liberalism of the 1960s," while the circumstances of his nomination and his core supporters seemed to put him on the "wrong side" of the argument between the clashing "new" and "old" cultures over the basic morality and equity of America's economic, social and international policies.

Those factors alone would have made McGovern a rank underdog, even had he avoided the "disasters" that attended his nomination, his vice presidential choice and the handling of the issues in his campaign Burnham said.

ESCAPE

Mr. Nixon's campaign essentially offered voters an escape into nostalgia and familiar values (such as the work ethic and the strongest-nation doctrine) from the ambiguities of McGovern's ideas.

Even more critically, the President managed to avoid

the trap of incumbency and to present himself (as George Wallace did successfully and McGovern only briefly in the primaries) as "the representative of the alienated white underdog," most angry with the effects of two generations of interest-group liberalism.

"If Nixon were another Theodore Roosevelt," Burnham wrote, "he could fashion a landslide against this 'establishment' out of positive support for himself... Since he is not, the landslide becomes almost wholly negatively based; consequently, it becomes manifest by political narcosis, and by the most conspicuous noncampaign in the history of American electoral politics."

FUTURE

As for the future, Burnham argued that it would be a mistake to read the returns simply as a reassertion of the view that "American politics is still dominated by a 'vital center' and that 'extremist' candidacies... are rejected," especially if that center is defined by the possessors of the previous landslides, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

Burnham told his col-

leagues that the Nixon landslide he anticipated would force them "to contemplate the possibility that a counter-revolution of the great middle against the purveyors of a now-bankrupt interest-group liberalism is what the election is really about this year."

"In any case," he added, "there are excellent reasons for supposing that George Wallace represents as much of the wave of the future in American politics as does George McGovern."

VOLATILITY

Failing the emergence of a leader in either party who could resolve the "transitional crisis" in positive terms, by supplying a new doctrine of government, he said it would be wise to expect "extreme volatility of voting behavior at all levels."

There is much more than that in his memorandum but at least these gleanings suggest the extent to which we all must struggle to clear our minds of the clichés of the departed political era if we are to understand the enormous political change of which this election is a part.