

Beware the Tender Trap

by MARGARET HALSEY



PEOPLE WHO have been in concentration camps say that there is almost nothing human beings cannot get used to, after a while. Hence it is quite in the cards that individuals who began in 1952 by admiring Adlai Stevenson may end up in 1960 as, if not admirers, at least resigned to Richard Nixon.

It has been a commonplace for a long time to say that Americans are apathetic about their government. However, a recent interview with the playwright George Axelrod, printed in the *New York Post*, seems to indicate that the electorate is more responsive to what goes on in Washington than might be supposed.

Mr. Axelrod was asked by Mike Wallace why authentic American humor is dying and why the writer of comedy is a disappearing breed.

"Life itself is so satirical," the playwright replied,

it's hard to satirize it. It's all so preposterous and musical comedy, with buffoons running the country and the Russians making us look idiotic. In a grotesque, horrible way, life itself has become pretty much of a joke. And you can't make a joke on a joke.

Some of Mr. Axelrod's words strike a painfully responsive chord in hearts other than those of professional humorists. As the improbable events accumulate—as Little Rock yields pride of headline to Russian moons and American rocket failure—the feeling deepens in many people of being caught up in a sort of gangrenous sunset, brilliant with the streaky pyrotechnics of decay.

In such an atmosphere, it is not too hard to resign one's self to Richard Nixon. We have books like *The Organization Man* to testify that the complexities and contradictions of a business society are markedly erosive in their over-all effect; and so liberal a publication as *The Reporter* has already become sufficiently "adjusted" to the "new" and "mature" Nixon to affirm that, "We don't see any reason why . . . he should be the object of permanent distrust."

This seems reasonable enough at first, but it has a more dubious significance than meets the eye. A flight from moral standards is almost always rationalized as tolerance, flexibility and a sensible, reassuring broadness of viewpoint. Where *The Reporter* leads, perhaps others

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will follow—and they will not by any means be uniformly disreputable or a mere lunatic fringe.

As the President's energies decline, the press—with only a few honorable exceptions—will tend increasingly to thrust Excalibur into Mr. Nixon's Arthurian digits, it is going to be more and more difficult to see what a tricky and artful ellipsis the word "mature," in this instance, actually is. Yet only in dealing with a Mongoloid idiot could Mr. Nixon's past history be completely ignored. The money he accepted from California businessmen, the Checkers speech, his campaign tactics against Congressman Voorhis and Helen Gahagan Douglas and his imputations of treason against the Democrats in 1954 are too well known to be dissolved away by the silent treatment. But the word "mature" makes the necessary and unavoidable reference to this passionate pilgrimage without specifically recalling any of its details.

To describe the Vice President as "mature," now that he has arrived, is to convey—by an expert use of suggestion—that he was immature when he was on the way up. Thus his earlier behavior is transmuted. It becomes—not unscrupulous, treacherous and evil—but merely boyish, inexperienced and ill-judged. By a *tromp l'oeil* of vocabulary, what was actually spiritual gangsterism is scaled down to appear as an innocuous over-enthusiasm.

Similarly with the word "new" as applied to Mr. Nixon. It hums with implications. Less flattering than "mature," it concedes tacitly that the Vice President was absent from Sunday School the day they were teaching the Golden Rule and other restraining amenities. But the word "new" also suggests that the subject has reformed, and that where he was formerly bad, he is now good.

The reasoning behind this affirmation is the kind we grew familiar with during Hitler's rise to power. What this reasoning postulates is virtue-through-satiation—being good because there is no longer any need to be bad—because, that is, one has gotten what he wants. Even without the memory of the Rhineland and the Sudetenland, this picture of virtue as arising from ingestion rather than from inner conviction is too absurd to require comment. Mr. Nixon has no more altered in character or personality structure because he is close to the Presidency than Harry Truman has altered in character or personality structure by reason of having left it.

To be sure, Mr. Truman was by his own admission unprepared, in terms of world statesmanship, to enter

upon the Presidency, whereas Mr. Nixon has been conscientiously readying himself for the office. But Mr. Truman was not *morally* unprepared for the White House. Mr. Nixon, on the other hand, suffers from a disability that all the briefing in the world will not mitigate. He cannot go back to Sunday School.

The point is a pivotal one. If the Vice President's energies are truly as monumental as the Luce publications and others in the swelling chorus say they are, then the Presidency in its present form may prove too narrow for them. Mr. Nixon, as President, may wish to extend the powers of his office the way those other dark-jowled fellows—the ones in South America—so often do. The opposition—the people who think that such an Executive should not overbalance the Legislature and the Judiciary—must then expect to get the “old” Nixon treatment. Such people will have to get what comfort they can, as they watch the mud dripping slowly down their reputable names, from reflecting that it was their own too-trustful natures that permitted the Wunderkind to get out of control.

Until some absolutely unmistakable portent comes along—such as Mr. Nixon's resigning his office and going to Africa as a missionary—common sense requires the working hypothesis that he has not changed and is not going to. It may seem easy enough, at this present writing, to make a moral judgment on him and stick to it. With the passage of time, however, sticking to such a judgment is going to grow increasingly difficult. To judge the Vice President leniently—to modulate as *The Reporter* has done into a lower set of standards—may be expected to become more and more of a temptation, both for professional observers of politics and for persons whose interest in the subject is peripheral.

The past five years have demonstrated that in a business administration, the press has a considerable operational resemblance to one of the priesthoods of antiquity. So far from encouraging controversy, discussion and the exploration of ideas, the priests of Ike, like the priests of Isis, concentrate on incantation. They may know—as hierarchs usually do—that there is nothing in the Holy of Holies but a rusty bobby pin and two chipped moth balls, but they do not divulge, or make it easy for anyone else to divulge, this liberating bit of information.

So far as the press and public relations are concerned, the headdress of Tut-ankh-Eisenhower is already nestled on Mr. Nixon's putatively youthful brows, and as the President's arteries close up like morning glories, it is going to take more and more courage to discuss the Vice President in terms of the known realities of his character.

People who live in our society often complain that it is too fluid. What they mean, however, is that automobile styles become obsolete too fast. Emotionally, our society—so far from being fluid—is in some ways extremely rigid. Once the characterization of a public figure is put on the market, so to speak, that characterization freezes

into place and is no longer susceptible to modification.

The ikon of the Great Leader, for instance, has not been extensively altered by the most crashing, smashing evidence of its sentimental inaccuracies. And as Mr. Nixon's stereotype gets the deep freeze treatment—the stereotype of efficiency combined with an agreeably chastened boyishness—more and more respectable and intelligent people will gradually be drawn over to the side of condoning, forgiving and forgetting. It will get lonelier and lonelier to criticize and speak the truth.

AND indeed one can understand why. Should Mr. Nixon succeed to the Presidency, it will be a great temptation to make exonerating noises about him. To live with him as President, in full awareness of what his actions have shown him to be, will require considerable endurance. One's natural instinct will be to set up a sheltering illusion—to warm up the bleak and wintry truth by arguing that he cannot *really* be so bad. There will be a disposition to believe that merely sitting in an office with the American flag and the Great Seal of the United States has an ennobling effect. Or being the father of two. And so they do—but not on confirmed and habitual self-promoters.

Forced to adjust to Mr. Nixon as Chief Executive, many people will automatically develop a sort of selective morality. They will have one set of ethics—the one they were taught as children and have been used to all their lives—for judging themselves and their friends. They will have another, and a much lower one, for the President of the United States.

At first glance, this might seem like a workable compromise; but it is not. Gresham's Law operates just as immutably in ethics as it does in economics, and cheap morals tend to drive good morals out of circulation. To charitable souls, it may seem vindictive to dwell on Mr. Nixon's past, but the issue transcends considerations of charity. To remember the Vice President's record is to keep alive—if only by inversion—that standard of morality which makes life worth living.

Morality is not just a picnic ground for prigs. On the contrary, it provides the hard substratum of seriousness without which, as Mr. Axelrod points out, comedy and authentic humor wither away. (“You can't make a joke on a joke”—and what could be more indecorously comic than pundits and newsmen, themselves unharmed, generously forgiving Mr. Nixon for injuries done to Mrs. Douglas?)

Morality provides the fabric of trust which—to put it on the simplest level—enables the host to go into the kitchen and fix drinks in the certain knowledge that his visitors will not read the letters on the desk. Sententious as it sounds, morality provides a sense of identification with the past. “Thou shalt not bear false witness” is an indispensable part of the cultural heritage. To write it off, merely for the sake of accommodating a brash

arriviste, is to show the idiot good nature of one who commits suicide because a taxi driver says, "Drop dead."

For those who like to talk in what they describe as "practical" terms, morality provides a sort of space platform for judging people and estimating the probabilities of their behavior. Perhaps if we had all been more ethically alert when Mr. Eisenhower obeyed Senator McCarthy's directive *vis-à-vis* General Marshall, we would have been in time to forestall some parts, at least, of the recent infelicities. Basically, America's present unhappy situation with both friend and foe stems from a circumstance that even the best minds did not observe until it was just a little too late—namely, that while Roosevelt made Mr. Eisenhower a general, Nature made him a second lieutenant.

Morality, for the eggheads and liberals, is the clue to conduct. The present situation is outwardly so extravagant as to justify many times over Mr. Axelrod's reference to musical comedy. The highest office in the land wobbles like a spent ping pong ball between a Kansas Hindenburg and a character assassin. The inner situation is more tragic and austere. What is actually involved, in the tender trap about a "new" Nixon, is an attempt to debase the moral currency. This attempt is unconscious, but that does not make it less important to fight off.

Despite their stylistic differences, Mr. Eisenhower and Mr. Nixon—as holders of public office—have one thing in common. Their authenticity is derivative. It comes at second hand from their roles as ball-carriers for business, and not at first hand from deep inner feelings about

representative government. To neither of them is the Presidency an awesome responsibility, held in trust for others. To both it is a mere adjunct—a showy adjunct, but an adjunct nevertheless—to personal life.

In a recent interview, Mr. Richard Maney, dean of theatrical press agents, said that humor today is considered subversive and that no American newspaper would now print Will Rogers. A check on the newspapers of the 1920's bears out the resounding accuracy of Mr. Maney's statement. Will Rogers was acerb and percipient—and popular—to a degree that we have forgotten. He would certainly have noticed that Mr. Nixon, in his "mature" incarnation, cares more for rectitude and good government than anybody since Juan Peron.

Similarly, a writer like Mark Twain would have had a puncturing thing or two to say about the statement—now on everybody's lips—that Mr. Nixon has done a great deal for race relations. Actually, it is the other way around. Race relations has done a great deal for Mr. Nixon. Race relations, which struggled along without Mr. Nixon in its pioneering days, has ended up in a blaze of glory. It has made even the Vice President an equal.

The mention of the great American humorists suggests that against the ready-mix virtue of the "new" Nixon, we do have weapons. Confronted with a potential President of such a stripe, we can lock up the spoons and the Constitution and treat morality with enough high seriousness to get the humorists out of hock and fetch the writers of comedy back from exile.

Who Will Teach the Teachers?

by DAVID STEVENSON

IF NO classroom in the United States had more than 20 pupils, and if every teacher was paid truck drivers' wages, the schools would still be no good. I know because I have spent four years as a professor in teachers' colleges. That experience tells me, incontrovertibly, that there is no hope for the American school because more than half of the new teachers who enter its doors ought not to have been graduated from high school and, furthermore, learned practically nothing during four years of

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college. There is no hope for the American school because the American teachers' college is hopeless.

As evidence, let me cite my own experience as a professor in two of the state colleges (the term *teachers college* has been dropped as over-pejorative). One is Murray State College in Murray, Kentucky—in a state which struggles, not very hard, to be next to last in per capita expenditure for education. The other, Eastern Illinois State University, is in one of the four or five richest states in the union. Let it be said that Eastern Illinois is vastly superior to Murray, but that the North should take little comfort, since two-thirds of Murray's graduates go to the northern midwest to teach where the high salaries are paid.

When I accepted the position of assistant professor at Murray State College at \$4,200 a year, I was glad to get