

Books of The Times

Making Nixon the One

By ROGER JELLINEK

THE RESURRECTION OF RICHARD NIXON.
By Jules Witcover. 479 Pages. G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$7.95.

In 1966 Richard Nixon confided to Jules Witcover in an interview that "I'm not one of those guys who reads his press clippings. I believe in never being affected by reports about me. . . . I never look at myself on TV, either. I don't want to develop those phony, self-conscious, contrived things. One thing I have to be is always be myself." If there is a single striking impression in Witcover's meticulous and invaluable account of Richard Nixon's extraordinary comeback, it is that he was always himself. In the tumultuous six years spanning his crushing defeat in California in 1962 and his Presidential victory in 1968, Nixon was the One, the one constant persona in American politics. Witcover's achievement in portraying exactly the calculation, detachment and insulation of the Nixon campaign is all the more remarkable in that he is already the author of the most diligent account of the last campaign of Robert F. Kennedy.

In 1960 Nixon lost to John F. Kennedy by 119,000 votes. He entered the California governorship race as a sanctuary from J. F. K. in 1964, and he lost to Pat Brown by 300,000 votes; he was a double loser. He capped his defeat with a bitter and intemperate denunciation of the press ("You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore. . ."); he was a bad loser. Yet this was one time Nixon must have read his press clippings, for there followed what Witcover calls "one of the most effective exercises in self-analysis and self-rehabilitation in the history of American politics."

Statesman and Celebrity

Nixon left California for a Wall Street law office, a sleek salary and contact with big Republican money (one new friend and later Secretary of Commerce, Maurice H. Stans, was instrumental in raising some \$33-million in the 1968 campaign, a record). His practice took him abroad frequently, and he cast himself as an unofficial Republican Secretary of State, a statesman and celebrity. After an inept attempt to stop Goldwater in the spring of 1964, Nixon made amends and became a substantial political creditor with 150 campaign stops in 36 states in 33 days. He worked as hard again and was generally credited with the Republicans' spectacular



Jules Witcover

gains in the midterm elections of 1966.

The "new, new Nixon" had still to prove that he was no longer a loser with the electorate. His attack was two-pronged: first, neutralize the media; second, neutralize the voters. Witcover wryly describes how Nixon tamed the writing press with kindness, while he projected his persona through totally managed television. "I am perhaps at dead center," he said of his position on the political spectrum. He avoided all controversy with his Republican rivals. His platform was as vaguely predictable as possible: No retreat in Vietnam, restore law and order, American prestige abroad, and respect for the forgotten Americans. No specifics. Never.

He won six primaries with more than 70 per cent of the vote. He won the nomination at Miami with ease. He had extraordinary luck with his opponents: Scranton crashed in 1964. Rockefeller vacillated, and then polled so frenetically that Gallup and Harris collided and knocked him out. Romney was "brain-washed" out. Reagan was popular, but was a reminder of Goldwater, and his potential ally, Strom Thurmond, was promised the ABM. Of the other nominees, Wallace became the excuse (equal time) not to debate with Humphrey on uncontrolled TV. Humphrey was pinned on Vietnam, drawing the fire from Nixon's identical position.

Let Off the Hook

Nixon was lucky on Vietnam. In New Hampshire he pledged to end the war, and before he had to explain how, President Johnson let him off the hook by announcing negotiations and his own withdrawal. When on the eve of the election Johnson announced a bombing halt and Saigon's participation in the Paris negotiations, Nixon was saved by President Thieu's denial.

Saved! That he should have needed saving is on the face of it astonishing. Nixon had avoided all serious challenges, had controlled his media image, had made no serious mistake, had spent more than any candidate before him—all in face of an acridly divided Democratic party. Yet he beat Humphrey by only 500,000 votes instead of the 3 million to 5 million predicted by his manager, John N. Mitchell. Louis Harris says that had the election been two days earlier, Nixon would have lost it.

Witcover notes the caution and the "fortress mentality" of Nixon's campaign that was to extend into the Nixon Administration itself. "America had two wars going on in 1968, one abroad and one at home, and Richard Nixon declined to get very close to either one." Nixon was determined not to be affected, to be only the self he wanted to project. His immaculate Madison Avenue campaign, designed to conquer the voters, not the issues, was finally sensed as an inadequate response to the historical moment.