

Books of The Times

Mr. Nixon as the Last Liberal

By JOHN LEONARD

NIXON AGONISTES. *The Crisis of the Self-Made Man.* By Garry Wills. 617 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$10.

Before plunging into a synopsis of Garry Wills's astonishing book, one must give some account of Mr. Wills. To say that he is a contributing editor at *Esquire*, a syndicated newspaper columnist and the author of "The Second Civil War" is inadequate. "The Second Civil War" was about America's racial agony. In his newspaper column, Mr. Wills has opposed our role in Vietnam and Attorney General John N. Mitchell's role in Washington. His contributions to *Esquire* include a dissection of Spiro Agnew. And yet this same Mr. Wills took his Ph.D. at Yale in classics, is the author of a book on G. K. Chesterton and has written regularly over the past decade for William F. Buckley Jr.'s conservative journal, *National Review*. Only by keeping these apparently contradictory impulses and interests in mind is the reader likely to be prepared for "Nixon Agonistes," which reads like a combination of H. L. Mencken, John Locke and Albert Camus.



Garry Wills

Mr. Wills achieves the not inconsiderable feat of making Richard Nixon a sympathetic—even tragic—figure, while at the same time being appalled by him. But superb as it is, his "psycho-biography" of Mr. Nixon is merely prelude to a provocative essay on political theory. "All our liberal values track back to a mystique of the earner," says Mr. Wills, whether the "market" is personal (self-regulation leads to individual success) or economic (those Joneses we've got to keep up with) or academic (ideas fighting it out for the allegiance of young minds) or political (if the system works, the best policies and people win).

Lessons of the 1960's

But we have learned in the nineteen-sixties that not everybody can "make it," and that many of those who do are injured, diminished. That the "race" is never won because it never ends. That the promulgators of ideas have to take the responsibility for their consequences. That the best policies and people don't necessarily win. "Belief in the competitive triumph of excellence," says Mr. Wills, "was bound to be shaken." We must abandon the "market mentality," the "earning mystique" and the "race metaphor," and find some substitute.

How does Mr. Nixon fit into this

analysis? For Mr. Wills, Mr. Nixon is the last liberal, the embodiment of the self-made man who has been diminished by his making it, the "least 'authentic' man alive, the late mover, tester of responses, submissive to 'the discipline of consent.' A survivor. There is one Nixon only, though there seem to be new ones all the time—he will try to be what people want. He lacks the stamp of place or personality because the Market is death to style, and he is the Market's servant . . . Nixon does not exist outside his role, apart from politics: take his clothes off, he would be invisible."

Harsh words. Mr. Wills comes to them after traveling with Mr. Nixon's campaign entourage, after visiting Whittier (which is "heavy with moral perspiring"), after interviews and much pondering of "Six Crises." He seems both angry and sad at what the Market has done to the man, and he is not any kinder to Mr. Nixon's competitors than to Mr. Nixon himself. Of Nelson Rockefeller, for instance, he writes: "First-generation millionaires tend to give us libraries. The second and third generations think they should give us themselves. Naturally, some people want to look this gift horse in the mouth—which may be the reason Rockefeller keeps his teeth on display."

Wounds in Technicolor

In fact, one is tempted to quote constantly from "Nixon Agonistes" because Mr. Wills writes with a scalpel, to wound in Technicolor, drawing on literary sources both apposite and various. The reporter in him is as eager for the revealing detail as the theorist in him is eager for the abstraction. His analyses of the thinking of Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Richard Hofstadter and others are marvelous critical essays in their own right. Mr. Nixon's relationship with President Eisenhower—which "was like a Calvinist's relation to God, or Ahab's to the whale—awe and fascination soured with fear and a desire to supplant; along with a knowledge, nonetheless, that whatever nobility one may aspire to will come from the attention of the "Great One"—gets considerable attention, to more effect than any other account I've seen.

Finally, there is the question of what to substitute for the Market. Mr. Wills is a little vague on this, talking about "community." Not power to the community, but the building of communities that are social structures with their own identities and interests, instead of markets of individuals and ideas. He is talking in a sense about our souls, and he doesn't know how to save them. But he sees them being lost daily in his country, a nation of Nixons, of Whittiers, "undefended by coherent taste," at the mercy of our past "without quite possessing it." His book is a stunning attempt to possess that past, that we may all of us escape it.