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High Up On the Low Road

By JAMES RESTON

MIAMI BEACH—At no time since he came into public life has Richard Nixon dominated American politics as he does today, and yet he is still not using his vast power and prestige to unify the nation.

The main thing being asked about him now is not whether he will win in November, but what he will do with his victory, and if his acceptance speech here is any indication of the future, we are in for four more years of mistrust and division.

It was a very odd speech. It was clearly intended to appeal beyond his party to Democrats and independents to join him in a "new majority" based on the "common ideals" and "the great principles we Americans believe in together."

But once this Presidential ideal of bipartisan cooperation had been defined, Mr. Nixon descended to a slashing partisan attack that was a jumble of distortions, misleading half-truths and downright lies.

It is simply not true, as he asserted, that the United States has "the highest rate of growth of any industrial nation," unless you jumble the figures out of all rational proportions. Japan, Germany, Canada and Italy all have a higher growth rate now than the United States.

Nor is it true, as he insisted, that the U.S. has the lowest rate of inflation of any of the industrial states—

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Mr. Nixon's attack was "a jumble of distortions, misleading half-truths and downright lies."

Canada, Germany, Italy and Belgium have lower rates over the last four years.

George McGovern has done many foolish and careless things since he entered the Presidential campaign, but to

present him as a man who would add "82 million people to the welfare rolls," increase taxes by "50 per cent," destroy the free enterprise system—"tear it down and start again"—is the same old tricky demagoguery that has stained Mr. Nixon's record in every election since the forties.

He is riding high on the low road again, and the puzzling thing is why he resorts to these destructive tactics precisely at the time when he seems to be calling for reconciliation on the basis of American ideals and principles.

Oddly, it was Spiro Agnew here in Miami Beach who reacted to his renomination with a generous and healing spirit, and Mr. Nixon who talked, not like a President far ahead against Mr. McGovern, but like an opposition leader determined to destroy the other candidate.

Mr. Nixon asked the American people to put their trust in the President, and they must if he is to govern effectively. But even at the moment of his triumph here he did not deal with them truthfully, responsibly and nobly, but cleverly and almost contemptuously.

What is the explanation of this peculiar conduct? Mr. Nixon is not personally an arrogant man. He does have a vision of a fair and peaceful America. His personal moral standards are high and no family in recent history has behaved with more decorum than the Nixons in the White House.

But something is still missing. He proclaims ideals he does not follow in his fierce preoccupation with the tactics of political success—and he thinks, with considerable justification, that he can get away with it in a cynical age.

"A big change has come into American life," Walter Lippmann once wrote. "It is not that our behavior is demonstrably worse than it used to be. It may in many respects be considerably better. . . the big change in our time is that while our conduct may not be any worse, we are much more lax in what we think about our conduct. We are much more ready to accept and excuse the cheating that is so widespread and so common. . . ."

"Why is it bad to shrug off the ideal standards of honesty in politics, business and love? Because it defeats us and frustrates our lives. If we do not harden ourselves by stretching ourselves to reach upward to these not fully attainable ideals, we slump down and settle into flabbiness and footlessness and boredom. . . ."

President Nixon probably does not have to change his tone and tactics to win in November—though sixty days on the low road could make a big difference—but to lead and govern, and for these purposes to heal and unify the nation, there will have to be change—either in the President himself, or in

the Presidents in the White House.

Neither Mr. Nixon nor Mr. McGovern has the answer to all our distracting problems—therefore one or the other has to be taken largely on faith. Nobody can prove he has the answer to Vietnam or welfare or the race question at home—so in the end there must be a measure of trust both ways. And this is precisely the quality that has not really existed at the pinnacle of our national life since the days of Eisenhower.