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Shrewd Nixon appealed to the traditional 'values'

By ROBERT B. SEMPLE JR.

WASHINGTON—During a campaign stop in Greensboro, N.C., last week, Richard M. Nixon, bothered by heckling from a small group of antiwar demonstrators, paused in his speech and asked the television cameramen to train their equipment on the group so that the country could "see the kind of people who are supporting our opponents." Then, with an imperial wave and a triumphant smile, he directed the cameras to the vast sea of white, middle-class faces who made up the rest of the crowd so the country could see "the kind of people who are supporting us." Suitably aroused, both by the presence of the protesters and the injunction of their President, the audience erupted with a loud, almost visceral roar of approval.

It was an instructive moment in the 1972 campaign, not only because it revealed that four years in the Presidency had diminished neither Nixon's zest for combat nor his capacity to inflict political punishment. What was even more revealing was the response

(Editor's Note: Jack Anderson's column appears today on Page 11.)

of the crowd, for in their roar lay all the evidence anyone will ever need of the remarkable symbiosis that Nixon has been able to establish between himself and the millions of voters in Middle America who propelled him to victory.

Certain words tend to recur

In the literature that attempts to describe this elusive man, certain words tend to recur: persistent, durable, clever, ambitious and lucky. Nixon has been and remains all of these. But what brought him to power four years ago, shaped his first term in office, and has now given him a second, was and is a shrewd understanding of the aspirations and complaints of the Middle American.

There is, of course, some irony in the fact that the man who turns out to have best understood and exploited the stirrings and strivings and discontents of the majority has himself done everything possible to rise above the mass. His closest friends are silent and loyal millionaires. He has never been comfortable on the political stump, mingling with the "people"; his low-visibility campaign this year perfectly suited his aversions and instincts. And despite his frequent references to his humble beginnings in the little California town of Yorba Linda 59 years ago, the simple frame house there stands unattended and unvisited by its former occupant, who now lives in a large Spanish villa in San Clemente.

There is further irony in the fact that it was not Nixon but George McGovern who was supposed to have capitalized on the "new populism" of the masses. But either the populists did not exist in the numbers attributed to them, or, if they did, they decided somewhere along the line that their grievances about the system were nothing compared to their fears about McGovern's remedies for those grievances.

A champion of Democrats, too

In any case, it was Nixon who, astoundingly, emerged in the end as the champion of not only Republican voters but a goodly number of Democrats. But the President himself was not surprised. Some weeks ago, a public opinion poll suggested that the serious complaints about McGovern's early schemes to increase inheritance taxes and distribute cash grants to the populace came from ordinary workingmen and their wives who wished to preserve for their children the opportunities offered by the American dream that they themselves had never been offered. Nixon sensed the outcome of the poll before it was taken, and campaigned accordingly, portraying himself as a guardian of those who had won the race and those who had yet to run.

Understood aspirations

The President understood these aspirations in part because he had lived them. Much has been written—and whether it is rubbish, nobody knows—about how Nixon as a child would lie awake in Whittier, Calif., where he moved nine years after his birth in Yorba Linda, and dream of getting out and getting ahead. But what is verifiable is that he soon showed a capacity for work and a driving ambition and an uncanny sense of timing which, together, propelled him onward to honors in college, through nights of drudgery at Duke University's law school, to Congress in 1946, to the Senate in 1950, and on to the Republican national ticket two years later.

Traits helped him survive defeats

These same traits helped him survive difficult defeats. When Nixon won his party's nomination in 1968, it occurred to those who watched him accept that honor that by all the usual rules of logic, he should not have been there at all.

Few men have been written off as "finished" in American politics more often than he. In 1948, friends predicted disaster when he set out to pursue Alger Hiss, a State Department official later convicted of perjury in a sensational congressional investigation involving charges of domestic subversion. In 1952, when he was caught in controversy over a secret "fund" raised by friendly businessmen, his chances of political survival were conservatively estimated at 100 to 1. And 10 years later, following his defeat by Edmond G. Brown in the California race for governor, Nixon himself seemed to have accepted the inevitability of permanent political exile.

Helped by events, shrewdness

Yet he not ony survived and captured the nomination in 1968 but won the election as well, helped as much by events as by his own perserverance and tactical shrewdness: George Romney's miserable campaign, Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller's uncertainty, Lyndon Johnson's decision to withdraw, Robert

F. Kennedy's assassination, Hubert Humphrey's inability to shake the legacy of Vietnam. As President, he continued to benefit from the unexpected, notably George C. Wallace's near brush with death and subsequent withdrawal from the 1972 race.

But Nixon's re-election was hardly the

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result of happenstance alone. Carefully and systematically, he tailored the style and substance of the Presidency not only to his convictions and habits but to his desire to run and win again.

He stressed order

In terms of style, Nixon stressed order, which he thought he could impose, rather than charisma, which he knew he couldn't project. His ambition, he once said, was to restore "respect" to the Presidency, and with that in mind he sought from the outset to conduct his business quite differently from the flamboyant, driving style of his predecessor, a style that had begun to annoy and even exhaust the country.

With countless option papers provided him by a controlled staff system that prided itself on its efficiency, he made many of his most important decisions in private, consulting few outsiders. Publicly, meanwhile, he presented a sober and largely colorless facade, resenting and resisting the continuing efforts of some members of his staff to turn him into something he was not.

Flights of rhetoric

Nixon tried on occasion to compensate for his lack of charisma with flights of rhetoric, describing each achievement with superlatives. The phrase "historic first" proved to be his favorite. But even this turned out not to be his kind of theater and, besides, his penchant for careful planning and surprise produced achievements that did not require verbal embellishment. The most prominent of these occurred in the field of foreign policy, which Nixon has long considered his "strong suit." In the campaign of 1968 he had spoken of the need for negotiation and conciliation, but neither the Capital nor the country was prepared for the spectacle of Richard Nixon, inveterate anticommnuist, banqueting in Peking and agreeing to a mutual limitation of armaments with the Soviet Union.

Perhaps, as he once speculated in an interview, only a man with his anticommunist record and Cold War views could have moved so swiftly toward detente without provoking domestic discontent.

Ending the war proves difficult

Ending the war in Vietnam on a basis satisfactory both to him and the country has proved more difficult. The question at the beginning of his administration was whether he would succumb to his political antennae, which told him the nation was tired of involvement, of his residual Cold War instincts to punish Communist aggression. He chose a middle course, withdrawing ground forces while escalating the war in the air and sending his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, on a seemingly endless series of diplomatic rendezvous with the North Vietnamese. On election day, a negotiated settlement seemed near but Nixon's pledge to end the war on an "honorable" basis remained unfulfilled.

Despite his profitable balance sheet overseas, however, future historians may well conclude that it was Nixon's domestic policy that accounted for his margain of victory. "Policy," of course, may be the wrong word; what captured those who voted for him was not so much a systematic or programmatic strategy for dealing with the nation's problems — although he did, indeed, submit many conventional programs — but rather his responses, rehetorical and real, to its grievances.

Building, expanding strategy

Building and expanding on the strategy he had used to outflank the Wallace threat in 1968, responding not just to Southerners but to a vast army of restless and confused suburbanities, he invested big new sums in the war against crime, denounced radical protesters, dispatched Vice President Agnew to condemn the press, honored his pledge to appoint "constitutionalists" to the court, wooed parts of labor with his Vietnam policy and Catholic voters with promises of help for the struggling parochial schools and a tough stance against liberalized abortion.

He quietly desegregated Southern schools, as required by the courts, but when the courts went faster than the country wished them to go he offered up to Congress and to his admirers in the nation legislation designed to slow busing and preserve neighborhood schools.

A basic perception

Underneath these tactical responses to periodic problems lay a basic perception: A majority wanted "orderly change," to use Nixon's own words, but not "radical" change. The Democrats nominated George McGovern, who seemed to symbolize all those dangers—principally elitism and revolutionary change—against which Nixon had been warning for four years.

Given the chance to draw a "clear choice," Nixon campaigned accordingly. McGovern had hoped to make Nixon's personality and character a major issue; the President remained in the White House, wore his presidential mask (or hat, as he preferred to call it), and watched as McGovern's personality became the issue. In his rare public appearances and utterances, he stuck to the themes he had been developing for four years and which McGovern's presence made all the more salable: the work ethic, law and order, national security, busing, traditional "values."

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