

The Absolutist

By Peter Jenkins

WASHINGTON—Richard 2d has assumed some of the superficial aspects of a king. The White House today has the air of a court; the President controls the Treasury as though it were a privy purse; and as Commander in Chief his armies wage war at his pleasure. Within four more years the Supreme Court will be dispensing the king's justice. Mr. Nixon does not claim divine right like Shakespeare's Richard 2d ("The breath of worldly men cannot dispose, the deputy elected by the Lord") but he makes a similar claim for the deputy elected by the "new American majority."

In truth there is nothing very regal about Richard M. Nixon. Kings are usually born for the job; Mr. Nixon is a suburban shopkeeper's son and his reclusiveness, his arbitrariness and his proven capacity for cruelty have their roots somewhere in the inadequacies of his own personality and experience.

There is no need for mystery about Richard 2d; it is all written in the annals of Richard 1st.

The only difference—and it is crucial—is that the first Nixon was a 43 per cent President while the second Nixon has an overwhelming mandate. The mandate, as he sees it, empowers him to do in his second term what he was not able to do in his first. In one of his campaign radio broadcasts he asked himself rhetorically how he would react to the freedom to govern without further regard to the ballot booth. "Would I do what I thought was best for the people or would I do what the people thought was best for themselves?" His answer was not Louis 14th "*L'état c'est moi*" but more nearly Robespierre's claim to personify the general will. What he said was: "Fortunately, what the new majority wants for America and what I want for this nation are basically the same."

In one of the broadcasts he reveals his beleaguered state of mind during the early days in the White House. He recalls, melodramatically, how the "silent majority" in the riotous month of November 1969, "saved the Presidency." The values which he sees embodied in himself are stern but they are traditional ones, rooted deep in American history: strength, self-reliance, hard work, keeping what you've got and not expecting something for nothing.

He admires Woodrow Wilson who set out to use his Presidency "for the purposes of recovery of what seems to have been lost. . . . Our old variety and freedom and individual energy of development." But why does a man need such power when his stated purpose is to "give it back to the people?"

He seems to believe the country to



Après Jacques-Louis David

be caught in some form of crisis. It is no longer the overt crisis of the streets and campuses as between 1967 and 1970; it is a chronic crisis of values and institutions. Public confidence in the Congress, the opinion polls say, has plummeted in the last few years, and in other institutions too. Mr. Nixon intends to restore confidence in the most central of American institutions; according to an aide he will do so by "restoring the mystique of the Presidency." Like de Gaulle.

The other inhabitant of the jumbled pantheon of his mind — along with Woodrow Wilson and Charles de Gaulle — is Benjamin Disraeli. He is the odd man out for he belongs to the paternal Tory tradition, romantically generous, unafraid to set the state to purpose. Mr. Nixon specifically rejects this and uses "paternalism" as a dirty Democratic word.

Disraeli, Wilson and de Gaulle have one trait in common which is that they were intellectuals capable of bold action. Obsession with action is some-

times a symptom of intellectuality and Mr. Nixon has it. On his 60th birthday he dwelt upon his physical fitness (never so much as a sore throat) and spoke of himself as an athlete in training struggling to remain perpetually at peak. At peak for what? For some continuing struggle.

Ideas play an important part in his politics: he is a Conservative by cold conviction. Such are often reactionaries. A professional, he can play the moderate for the purpose of seeking election; but his instincts, as a long career shows, are not those of a moderate. Intellectuals in politics, right wing or left wing, are seldom very compassionate men. Woodrow Wilson wanted to hear his voice "lifted above the chorus and that it be the crown of the common theme." King Richard was crowned the absolutist of the silent majority.

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