

Charles McCabe

Himself

The Embattled Arts

WHEN MR. NIXON released those damning transcripts of those 1972 conversations that led to his resignation, he also opened a nasty can of worms for the nation's artistic establishment.

On June 23 of that year Mr. Nixon was discussing some of the minutiae of his campaign for re-election with his chief aide, H. R. Haldeman. Nothing has ever been too small for Mr. Nixon to supervise, when it comes to getting votes.

The two men were talking about the role of Mrs. Tricia Cox, the President's daughter, and an enthusiastic campaigner. Mr. Nixon noted that Tricia had encountered some hostility at an earlier appearance at a museum in Boston.



Some extremely unfortunate remarks followed. Mr. Nixon said "... now the worst thing (unintelligible) is to go to anything that has anything to do with the arts."

Later in the conversation he added: "The Arts, you know — they're Jews, they're left wing — in other words, stay away."

The anti-Semitism, and the identification of Jews with left wing causes, are appalling; but they are not surprising in Mr. Nixon or in persons of his origins, upbringing and success. So long as some Jews continue to be singular and successful, all Jews are going to be hated by (some) people. This is an unjust and unhappy fact of life.

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WHAT INTERESTS me more, at the moment, is that a head of state should view the arts in terms of votes. We had such a man in Hitler. Yet Hitler, we have to remember, was once a painter himself, and had a commitment to art, so long as it was Aryan, whatever that was. The taste of the German high command was shown in the quality of the paintings and sculpture they stole.

Mr. Nixon's view of the arts was almost pure redneck. Anybody who painted a picture was some kind of a queer. Anyone who wrote books that were other than Right Wing Devotional, or God Bless America, was some kind of a Commie. Anyone who chipped stones with a chisel could do the same to our cherished institutions.

Worse, these mossback attitudes could be translated into votes. Mr. Nixon's specific suspicions of culture were the vague suspicions of his beloved Middle America. A Philistine in the White House could and did bring a lot of Philistines in the country's heartland out of the closet.

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SO COMPLEX a fellow was the former President that it is unlikely his unhappy observations would have been made at all had it not been for the fancied rejection of one of his daughters. Mr. Nixon was a v. sensitive fellow in some ways, was always on the lookout for rejection.

In a way, his relationship to the American people was a sick romance. So long as the adoration kept coming, he felt good. When that infinitely delicate ego was hurt, anger and hatred, those other faces of love, would show themselves.

Just as people tend to believe that in wine there is truth, they tend to believe statements made in the heat of anger reveal the true sentiments of the speaker. Mr. Nixon will be forgiven a lot of things before he is forgiven his views on artists, Jews and the left.

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THIS WILL be unjust to the man, though it will be his own fault. He had a genius for putting on his worst face, in private, as those crazy tapes solemnize.

The fact is that Mr. Nixon, curiously, did more for the arts in a financial sense than any President before him. The budget for the National Endowment for the Arts climbed from about \$8 million in 1969 to nearly \$61 million last year. An administration request for \$82 million for the next year is being argued by Congress.

This reality will be wholly buried when the name of Nixon is associated with the arts, in the footnotes of the history books. You wonder sometimes if the man did not have a bit of Irish blood in him, so great was his talent for cutting off his nose to spite his face.