

Somebody Else for President

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Sept. 27 — After Edward Kennedy withdrew from the call of destiny the other day the political reporters put in a hard day's work and came up with a small list of men the Democratic party might send to the White House in his stead. A sad list it was. Not because the men on it lacked merit — some of them didn't—but because it was so small, and so predictable.

There was Governor Wallace, of course, messiah to disgruntled American yeomanry and the burnt-cross set alike. The more ambitious Senators of liberal, middle-of-the-road and conservative persuasion, a Congressman or two, the usual scattering of Governors little known across their state lines but said to be, as they always are, young and attractive.

Not a woman, not a black, not a Jew, not a pauper, not an industrialist, not a banker, not a labor leader or working stiff, not a doctor or lawyer or manager or administrator or artist. Nobody but practicing politicians, and very few of them.

The reporters don't invent these lists. They get them from Democratic politicians who know what kind of people can be nominated by a Democratic convention. Same for Republi-

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cans, whose list right now would be even smaller than the Democrats'.

There is very little substance to the popular notion that the President is chosen by the people. The people's role is limited to picking between two possible Presidents chosen by the parties. This made some sense when party loyalty counted for something but it leads to absurdities in the present condition of party decay.

Being confronted in 1968 with a choice between Nixon and Humphrey was typical of the frequently bizarre workings of this two-party system. Imagine going to a well-stocked supermarket to buy victuals for Sunday dinner and being told you may buy only ginger snaps or popsicles.

There is no clear way out of the two-party trap, but there is a way to place restraints on the unsatisfactory Presidents that result from it. It requires only a small ballot reform. At election time the ballot should have a third line on which people could vote for Somebody Else.

Not anybody else in particular. Not a write-in. The candidate would be Somebody Else. In 1972, for example, this system would have enabled the voter to choose among Nixon, McGovern and Somebody Else.

Is there any doubt that millions of voters who might otherwise stay home would gladly brave sleet and lightning to cast a vote for Somebody Else in the typical Presidential election? It is a certainty.

And what of other millions who trudge leadenly to the polls to cast a reluctant vote for the lesser evil because they believe good citizenship requires them to vote whether there is anybody they want to vote for or not? The country prefers Somebody Else, would satisfy their sense of civic obligation without requiring them to connive in electing a man they believe to be unworthy.

It is conceivable, though not likely, that Somebody Else might beat both party candidates. No problem arises. The party candidate who finished next in the polling would still become President, but he would be on notice that the country prefers Somebody Else which would place healthy restraints on his instincts toward grandiosity.

The present system encourages such pretensions without foundation. President Nixon, despite the talk of his great 1972 landslide, which was said to have given him a "mandate," was in fact a minority President, misled by the deceptive two-party ballot into believing he was a vast popular choice.

Here are the figures: The number of Americans old enough to vote was about 140 million. Of these only 55 per cent—or 77 million persons—went to the polls. Of this 55 per cent turnout, Mr. Nixon won 61 per cent, or 47 million votes. The Nixon "landslide," then, was created by 47 million out of a possible 140 million voters, or 34 per cent of the adult population. A man who has only 34 per cent of the vote is deluding himself if he doesn't suspect the country really yearns for Somebody Else.

If Somebody Else runs strongly in three or four elections, the two parties might even change their ways, quit nominating men whose chief qualifications are enough money to run a two-year campaign for the party's favor and skill at manipulating the party's machinery, and make an effort to offer us Somebody Else.

It is not likely, of course. Indeed, it is far likelier that they would use their genius to drive Somebody Else off the ballot, perhaps on the ground that Somebody Else is not a native-born American citizen.

Ford and Jackson, everyone?