

Measuring the Rites and Wrongs

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Poster

Public opinion polling can be an idiot exercise of asking people the wrong questions in the wrong ways and then peddling the misleading answers to politicians who cash in on such vagaries because they have no settled opinions of their own. The business doesn't have to be conducted that way.

Pat Caddell, the young pollster who first made a professional name for himself working in the McGovern campaign, tries to do more than get people to check the yes and no answer boxes. As the head of Cambridge Survey Research, Inc., he tries to find out what people are really thinking, not get them to answer lists of questions. He gathers people in small groups and listens to them talk. What he's been hearing lately supports the idea that what's been happening in Washington has begun to change people's basic outlook about our country. "The structure of people's thinking is going through a process of erosion," he says.

What he's picking up is a kind of pessimism, an end to the hopeful, expansive, bull market psychology that has been one of our characteristics as a people. "Vietnam began to turn people sour. Going into April, that is before Watergate got so big, people thought that even though we had peace with honor we lost the war, and we have been a country where history has never been visited on us. We made history happen. We didn't

lose wars. We had a tremendous sense of optimism. Today was better than yesterday and tomorrow would be better than today."

No more, says Cadell. "Now people expect the future to be a little better than the present but not as good as the past. Most people who are alive can remember a period when they thought this was a great country, and I mean 10 or 20 years, not two centuries ago, and it's that which makes their reaction all the worse. Many people see 1973 as much worse than 1968, and 1968 wasn't one of our banner years. Ten or 15 per cent think the country has no future at all. They think everything is falling apart, that nothing functions and that we're heading for a worse state of affairs."

Interestingly enough, Caddell finds that Watergate hasn't bothered Nixon's opponents nearly as much as those that were for him: "The people who are going through the worst trauma are the people who supported Richard Nixon. People whom you disillusion tend to be the most hostile and hardened. Those most fascinating are those who voted for Nixon two or three times and have discovered it's all gone up in smoke.

"The war shook us up in the sense of our losing the feeling that we were all powerful in the world, but Watergate has made us question how our democratic

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society works. This is all terribly depressing for someone who believed that Spiro Agnew was an honest man, and then finds he was on the take. It's like a recent letter in the Los Angeles Times where the reader wrote, "If you can't trust Agnew, who can you trust?"

Not that the Democrats should smirk. Caddell's researchings bear out the observation that both parties are taking a licking: "Watergate not only hurt the Republicans, it has devastated politics. It's affected how people feel about all institutions. They have no confidence in any branch of the government. Double the number that we used to record now say that neither party, for instance, can handle our economic problems. Seventy per cent of the people we've talked to think the reason for the fuel shortage is an oil company conspiracy, and those findings come from places like Florida and South Dakota, stable places where opinions don't change rapidly."

Where this is all trending neither Caddell nor anybody else can predict. On the one hand he doesn't find that people have lost interest in Watergate and are now shifting around the dial for a new sitcom: "There's a feeling of fascination and revulsion, but people never thought the hearings should be stopped or the investigation should be stopped. The Ervin Committee has been consistently popular. Sure, people would have

liked it to go away, but they knew it wouldn't and they've had the sense to know the committee was doing a job that had to be done."

On the other hand, he reports that voter turnout this year has been extremely low, and that we could be moving toward the condition of the French Third Republic where the citizenry was simply too contemptuous to bother watching the politicians play their meaningless games. Other long-held viewpoints and ways of behaving may be changing too. "People see the present economic conditions as worse than the last recession," says Caddell who wonders "if the country may not be adopting the classic European inflationary pattern of buying now because money will be worth less later."

Assuming Caddell's findings are right, we Americans are still a long way from having our spirits broken: "People still have a fairly strong belief in themselves. They have a tremendous sense of optimism about themselves and a sense of strength about the country which makes their reaction to what's going on worse because they sit there and say, 'My God! We're a great people!'"

True, but the politicians we've been producing for a generation now are the pits—shifting, shifty men, scared to give people the bad news straight and unable to make good news. It is as Caddell says: "Elected officials have given no perspective, even though people will vote for politicians they disagree with if they lead. As a pollster that's what I hear time and time again, 'Why don't our politicians lead?'"