



William Greider

The Nixon Year That Was

From the euphoria of his landslide, from the golden mandate of a new majority, the man drew a fresh sense of his political destiny, a new zest for the struggle ahead.

"Let's make the next four years the best four years in American history," the candidate declared on election eve.

The following evening he was surrounded by cheering admirers gathered at the Shoreham Hotel to celebrate his victory.

"When you are looking in the next four years at the domestic front and the international front," the man promised then, "it will be an exciting period."

His counselors were already at work, drafting a grand design for reform—a counter-revolution, some called it—

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which would remake the shape of the federal government, breaking up the old centers of power and creating new ones.

"I believe in the battle," he confided to an interviewer at inaugural time, "whether it's the battle of the campaign or the battle of this office."

It was only a year ago this week. Richard Nixon was basking in the glow of 47 million votes, a grand vindication for his policies, for his political shrewdness. With 61 per cent of the American electorate behind him, the tide of history seemed to be shifting, every dream seemed possible.

Nov. 8, 1972: "... it was a great victory, but the greater the victory, the greater the responsibility, the greater the opportunity."

Nov. 7, 1973: "Tonight I would like to give my answer to those who have suggested that I resign. I have no intention of walking away from the job I was elected to do."

Now it's gone. The events of 12 cruel months have corroded his mandate, shattered his personal stature, and now threaten his presidency.

The year has frightened Washington, a town which abhors the unpredictable. It's as though history had run amok, jumped the tracks like a runaway engine, and is now careening wildly from one shock to another.

Think of it. As recently as May, John Ehrlichman was gazing bullishly

from the cover of Nation's Business magazine with a headline warning from the White House: "Cut Spending—Or Else." Now he is home in Seattle, awaiting trail for perjury and conspiracy to commit burglary.

The "Year of Europe" is almost over and the President never got further than Iceland.

Spiro Agnew is dead, politically.

And OEO is still alive.

"OEO," said White House speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, "would have had by now a decent burial in Potter's Field—had it not been for Watergate."

It is difficult to remember the sense of promise, the ebullient self-confidence which launched the administration's second term, all erased by scandal now. Watergate was a twist of fate which not only sank powerful men, but perhaps also their ideas. The story has focused on how the mighty have fallen, but it also involves important issues which have been swept aside, an important debate postponed. In the long run, that may be the greatest loss for the republic—the great debate over new directions that never happened.

Pat Buchanan, among others, thought that Mr. Nixon might be "the Republican FDR," a leader who would usher in deep change in American voting habits, the man who might lead the Republican Party to majority

status. The possibility was taken seriously, even by those who disagreed.

"If the President can begin dismantling the unwise and unsuccessful social programs of the past and begin diminishing the size, role and responsibility of the federal government in our national life," Buchanan wrote in February, "he will reverse a tide that has been running strong for 40 years. Conceivably, he has settled upon an issue on which the long-awaited, long-predicted political realignment may come about."

Bright young men from the White House inner circle, men like Egil Krogh, fanned out through the government, taking key posts in departments and agencies in order to insure that the President's initiatives permeated the bureaucracy.

A new batch of reform proposals

went to Capitol Hill, reshaping and consolidating federal programs from the farm to the urban slums. The President signaled early, however, that he would not await cooperation from Congress to achieve his goals. If Congress was stubborn, the White House would move anyway via executive action — impoundment of unwanted money, vetoes of unneeded legislation, executive orders to reorganize the federal innards.

"The new American minority," Ehrlichman said, "dies very hard . . . In effect, they are trying to steal that election in Congress, by pushing for policies the American people rejected at the polls. I think it's going to take a couple of elections to convince them they are badly out of phase with the people."

The targets for this persuasion included the news media. Columnist Kevin Phillips accurately described the sentiment in a Harper's article entitled "Conservative Chic," but it was ill-timed, appearing in the June issue after events had already collapsed the White House confidence.

"Post reporters," he wrote, "have been barred from White House functions and the administration is giving its newsbeats to the conservative-leaning Washington Star-News . . . Nothing comes higher on the target list of the New Majority than network television, linchpin of the liberal establishment. Presidential advisers smile like Cheshire cats when they talk of network hierarchs taking cyanide by 1974. The idea is to force control of TV news and programming out of the New York-Washington axis and back into the hinterland."

Thus, a crude symmetry has emerged in the events of recent weeks. Just as the year began with confident plans to reorder the "media axis," it is ending with the White House invoking the same familiar attacks. Only the difference is that now, instead of rewarding only the friendlies with exclusive interviews, the administration is virtually pushing its defense spokesmen at any network which will give them a few minutes of broadcast time.

The grand design for a popular assault on the Great Society collapsed. Or, more precisely, it was pre-empted in prime time.

It would have emerged as a conflict of philosophies," Buchanan said wistfully. "We would have been able to sell our philosophy to the country, not just the vetoes, but the wisdom of our views. I think it would have been a terrific year frankly."

For the most part, the special revenue-sharing proposals which embodied the new philosophy of governmental power are languishing in Congress. House Democrats and the administration are approaching a compromise solution on one of them — revenue-sharing for manpower programs. Others, like education, are dormant.

This setback for reform, however, obscures an important irony. If you leave aside the President's ambitious goals for reshaping the federal government and look instead at more conventional issues, his past year looks a lot better. Indeed, he has prevailed on many important matters, despite his Watergate troubles.

When the history books are written, however, the political roller-coaster of the last year will pose another imponderable—how much did the economy and its traumas affect the decline of the Nixon stock?

Last fall, he promised: "When it comes to cracking down on prices, this administration means business. We've already cut inflation in half and we're not about to let up now."

The goal was an annual rate of inflation under 3 per cent. In the last 12 months, September to September, the rate has been 7.4 per cent. In the last six months, the annual rate was 8.8 per cent. In the last three months, the annual rate has been 10.3 per cent—plus shortages of meat, paper, gasoline, heating oil, chemicals, fertilizer, plastics.

"Prosperity without inflation," he promised again and again.

In terms of popularity, those words have haunted him almost as much as the "inoperative" explanations for Watergate.