

The Political Legacy: A Climate of Cynicism, an Atmosphere of Distrust

By Jules Witcover

RICHARD M. NIXON, famed as a master politician, set out in 1969 to change the politics of the country—to make his Republican Party the majority. Instead, in the end, he probably did more than any other President of either party to destroy public confidence in all politics.

With his departure, he leaves behind a political legacy of negativism that far transcends the damage to his own party. By indulging in abuses of power himself, and by tolerating and encouraging them in his subordinates, he raised to an unprecedented level public disenchantment toward all politicians and elected officeholders.

The public skepticism that always had been regarded as a healthy thing in the electorate was escalated in the Nixon years to rank cynicism, tarring the honest and the dishonest politician alike. In a system whose effectiveness is predicated on the informed consent of the governed, this ramification of the Nixon presidency may be more destructive in the long run than any other.

The rape of legitimate political campaign activity demonstrated in the Watergate break-in seemed to trigger the worst expectations among voters, giving rise to the callous view that in politics anything goes—in both parties. There was ample evidence that the break-in and the consequent cover-up were excesses well beyond normal campaign “dirty tricks” practiced in the past by either party. Nevertheless, the acts were taken widely as confirmation that, as voter after voter interviewed said, “both parties do it but only one got caught.”

Democratic incumbents complained that it wasn't so, but they—like Republicans who had nothing to do with Watergate and denounced it early and often—cringed in anticipation of voter revolt against incumbents in the November elections.

The upshot of all this cynicism is likely to be, in the immediate future at least, not the sharpening of party lines and identification that Mr. Nixon sought in trying to build a majority party, but a further blurring, as candidates seek to distinguish themselves from the discredited pack of professional politicians. A clear trend toward independent voting patterns and identification was under way well before Watergate; it seems certain to grow in its wake.

Already, more voters consider themselves independents (34 per cent) than Republicans (24 per cent), according to the most recent Gallup Poll on the question.

NOR IS IT JUST the parties that have been damaged. In a Senate-financed poll by Louis Harris, the

White House ranked the lowest in public esteem of 22 institutions of American life, with only 18 per cent of those surveyed expressing confidence in it.

Similarly, in a survey by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, 2 of every 3 persons questioned felt they could trust government only “some of the time.” More than half believed that “quite a few” of those running the government were crooked. Also, the President as the most-trusted public official fell from 42 per cent in 1972 to 24 per cent in 1973.

Congress, too, has suffered in the climate of cynicism. Another Harris Survey in early August showed both the President and Congress at only 29 per cent public approval.

But it is the presidency, more than any other political institution, that has been scarred by the Nixon years. There had grown up in the public mind a respect approaching reverence for men elected to the White House, and a kind of mythology about the high plane on which they conducted the nation's business.

The revelations of the true tone of the Nixon presidency, as disclosed in the transcripts of Watergate-related conversations, stripped away those illusions and only intensified the public disaffection.

Some deflation of the presidency, which had grown in the public mind to be an approximation of royalty in the United States, was long overdue. Mr. Nixon inadvertently helped bring about that deflation with the excessive trappings of office he embraced, with the expensive additions to his San Clemente and Key Biscayne homes at taxpayers' expense, and with his own personal income tax troubles.

Also, in his partisanship and the atmosphere of political siege he saw all around him, he subverted the lofty image of the presidency by using the office as a command post for waging political war. He waged it not only against the opposition party, but also against Congress, the press and any segment of the population, like war protesters and student dissenters, that dared be critical of him.

He spoke of ending an era of confrontation in foreign policy and ushering in an era of negotiation, but in domestic politics confrontation was the byword. The presidency was less often heard as a voice of persuasion than as a voice of accusation or intimidation, with resultant alienation of the target group. Under Richard M. Nixon, the public was exhorted repeatedly from the White House to join together for

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the common good. But the nature of his excessively partisan leadership often caused the public to question whether he himself had the common good in mind.

Politics has been called the art of the possible, and Richard Nixon in his rise to the presidency had been widely lauded as a master of the art. Yet there was seldom in his presidency the essential quality of compromise that is the essence of achieving the possible. Rather, he was a fiercely give-no-quarter politician, driven by failure not to accommodation but to isolation and divisive excess.

From the start of his political resurrection after his 1960 presidential and 1962 gubernatorial defeats, his concentration was on partisanship. From the Republican Party's depths in 1964, when the landslide defeat of Sen. Barry Goldwater led some to predict the party's demise, Mr. Nixon more than any other single Republican leader rallied the troops and returned his party to national power.

AS A PRIVATE CITIZEN in the congressional elections of 1966, he campaigned tirelessly for others and received much of the credit for an impressive 47-seat GOP comeback in the House that signaled the party's rejuvenation. Three Senate seats, eight governorships and 540 state legislative seats also were picked up by the Republicans that fall.

That performance projected Mr. Nixon into the presidential politics of 1968, and although his own narrow victory that year failed to bring in a Republican Congress, the presence of the party's first authentic political practitioner in the White House since Herbert Hoover raised hopes of a party renaissance.

Once in the presidency, Mr. Nixon set out on a mission not simply to bolster Republicanism, but to purge it of liberalism and of dissent. As he had done throughout his career, in the White House he played hard-ball politics not only against the opposition party but against those in Republican ranks who dared to differ with him.

With his personally selected Vice President, Spiro T. Agnew, employed as an oratorical battering ram—just as he himself had functioned as Vice President to Dwight D. Eisenhower—Mr. Nixon undertook what Agnew called the politics of "positive polarization."

In his first years the Vietnam war colored all politics, and the President sought to win support for his policies by castigating the motives and the patriotism of those who disagreed with him. Agnew was the chief weapon, but the President himself chimed in. Agnew characterized antiwar youth in 1969 as "rotten apples" to be cast out; Mr. Nixon called them "bums." The objective in each case was the same: to isolate and destroy the opposition.

Mr. Nixon, commenting once about President Lyndon B. Johnson's sniping at him in the 1966 congressional elections, recalled the old adage, "Never strike a king unless you kill him," and converted it into his own political strategy: "You don't hit your opponent unless you knock him out."

That always was the Nixon political style, as a candidate for Congress, for the Senate, for the vice presidency, for governor of California, and for President.

In the 1970 off-year elections, he joined Agnew in a broadside attack not only on Democrats characterized as "radical liberals"—those who criticized his policies—but also on a senator of his own party—Charles Goodell of New York—who openly opposed

him on the war.

THE ATTACKS ON the Democrats, which failed to produce a Republican Senate, were clearly part of Mr. Nixon's strategy to deal a body blow to the opposition party, ushering in an era of a "New Republican Majority." The purge of Goodell indicated he was after not just a Republican majority, but the right kind of Republican majority.

Having already administered a shellacking to the party's increasingly ineffectual left wing in his own 1968 capture of the GOP presidential nomination, Mr. Nixon worked to emasculate it.

In his administration, the liberal voice of the party was stilled to a whisper, and its attempts to have a say in the 1972 party platform were pathetic, so tightly did Mr. Nixon hold the apparatus after four years in the White House.

His New Republican Majority was to be constructed of old Republican conservatives and moderates, converted Southern Democrats, plus blue-collar and ethnic voters brought over by appeals to law and order and other concerns of "Middle America," like opposition to school busing. Middle America in this context was more economic and attitudinal than geographical.

Deep inroads into the blue-collar and ethnic votes were made by Mr. Nixon in 1972, but they were misleading. They were much more a negative response to his Democratic opponent, Sen. George McGovern, than a positive embracing of Mr. Nixon, or of his party. While the President was winning re-election resoundingly, both

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houses of Congress remained in Democratic hands, as they had been throughout his presidency.

AND AS THE revelations of Watergate and of his personal financial transactions spilled out in the first months of his second term, Mr. Nixon's political dream and his own political power turned to ashes. Fellow Republicans in special elections sought to run on their own and GOP members of Congress looked toward the fall general elections with trepidation that he might be an albatross around all their necks.

When the first serious and concerted calls came for his resignation from Congress, they came, notably, from fellow Republicans who were both disenchanted and dismayed by all the disclosures and fearful that in his own destruction their party would be destroyed too.

Ironically, just as in 1964 before he led the GOP's climb out of the abyss, talk is heard again that the Grand Old Party may be on the verge of breaking up. The liberals already have been all but shut out; the conservatives, shocked by the constitutional abuses of Watergate, actively speculate about realignment.

Kevin Phillips, the young analyst with firm lines into the party's right wing, noted in his newsletter earlier this year that such conservative spokesmen as William F. Buckley, F. Clifton White and Gov. Ronald Reagan of California are voicing interest in a new ideological vehicle.

"One overriding concern of conservative strategists," Phillips wrote, is "that great opportunities come and go in history, and that Richard Nixon has flubbed the GOP opportunity. Denied effective political expression through Nixon Republicanism, conservatives are talking about the possibility and timing of a new party."

It is much more likely, however, that just as in 1964, Republicans will address themselves to rebuilding the old, rather than starting something altogether new. A major part of such a rebuilding job must be re-establishing public confidence in the whole party after the ravages of the Nixon years. And that confidence will not be achieved simply through the departure of Mr. Nixon.

It is convenient but not very persuasive for Republicans to paint Mr. Nixon and his arrogant White House coterie as a total aberration, a political barnacle that attached itself to the party along the way.

Actually, the Nixon political operation was an excessive product of GOP organizational politics, always known for its diligence, determination and attention to detail.

The establishment in 1972 of the

Committee for the Re-election of the President—a separate campaign arm from the Republican National Committee—was no more than an over-zealous, overfinanced application of a tactic long utilized in presidential campaigns by candidates of both major parties.

As a result of the Nixon experience, it might be expected that from now on the parties will eschew this organizational approach and run future campaigns from within the established national party structure, to achieve greater oversight and to avoid the excesses of 1972.

Indeed, Gerald R. Ford as Vice President in one of his few strongly implied criticisms of Mr. Nixon, blamed Watergate on the establishment of "CREEP," calling it "an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents" that tarnished the whole party with its stupidity.

He suggested that future Republican presidential aspirants be required to pledge they would run their campaigns through the Republican National Committee, staffed predominantly with veteran professionals.

But presidential campaigns nearly always have been waged by a relatively small group of masterminds around the candidate; the temptation to cut away from the structure and set up a separate command system may prove just as irresistible in the future as it has been in the past.

LIMITATIONS ON campaign spending and greater accountability requirements, among the positive outgrowths of the Watergate climate, may bring more integrity to presidential elections. For one thing, they are likely to increase the influence of professional campaign organizers and managers, who presumably at least can be expected to reject Watergate-like excesses as potentially self-destructive.

Large corporate givers, burned for their clandestine generosity in 1972, are likely to be more wary, if not more stingy, than in the past, thus forcing presidential candidates to rely on smaller contributors or on federal money that will be available to them through the income tax checkoff for the first time in 1976.

While the 1972 campaign of Richard Nixon will be remembered by the public for Watergate, professional politicians are still likely to study it carefully for the legitimate techniques that helped fashion Mr. Nixon's landslide victory.

Some young functionaries in that 1972 Nixon campaign have boasted with what seems laughable detachment that "except for Watergate, we ran the most effective campaign in history." That exception is, of course, a huge

one; like a Christian saying that except for the lions, he had a swell afternoon in the Coliseum.

But if the premise is accepted, it must be acknowledged that the remaining Nixon techniques—voter identification, media manipulation, keeping the opposition on the defensive, astute and tightly controlled exposure of the candidate—were most effective and doubtless will be copied in future campaigns.

But a political legacy consists of more than the passing on of new campaign techniques and mechanics. The Nixon legacy more importantly is one of increased public doubt that voters really can have an effective voice in shaping their own lives through the ballot box. It was bad enough when they believed politicians would say anything to get elected, and then ignored their promises. It is far worse when they believe the ballot box is stuffed or otherwise monkeyed with by campaign techniques of manipulation, deception and—in the extreme—outright criminal subversion of the political system.

Before Mr. Nixon's time of political glory and trial, there had always been a kind of assumption among the American people that politics was unsavory, but within certain limits. Politicians played pranks and cut corners, but at the presidential level at least, the shenanigans did stop short of subverting the system.

Compared with other countries where citizens have the franchise, voter turnout in the United States always has been distressingly low. Government by consent of the governed requires citizen participation at the polls once every four years, if nowhere else, or it is a sham. If the Nixon political legacy is the further alienation or apathy of the voter, it will inflict damage on the system far beyond the weakening of one party.

If, on the other hand, the public mistrust toward politics engendered by the Nixon years generates a new awareness among politicians that a more candid and nonmanipulative kind of politics must be practiced to restore public interest and confidence, Mr. Nixon's departure could signal a revitalization of the system.

Already, both parties have been openly in search of candidates who either are fresh to elective politics or carry a distinctively "clean" image. Former astronaut John Glenn, open and still boyish-looking at 52, won the Democratic senatorial nomination in Ohio at least in part on the strength of that kind of image.

Images, of course, even "clean" images, can be misleading. Mr. Nixon's hand-picked first Vice President, Spiro Agnew, nurtured a "Mr. Clean" reputa-

tion to within a heartbeat of the presidency before he was exposed as a taker of payoffs through most of his meteoric political career. Once burned, the electorate is going to be, or should be, more discriminating.

CONSIDERING the track record of politicians of both parties through the years, a skepticism among the voters that politics will be cleaner post-Watergate is inevitable, and not necessarily bad. But when public skepticism is driven to cynicism and the voter drops out, the hand and the influence of the manipulative politician is immeasurably strengthened.

Richard Nixon as politician has been one of the foremost practitioners of the art of voter manipulation. It will be among the greatest of ironies if, as a result of his political excesses, voters turn their backs and the system is thus rendered even more vulnerable to manipulative politicians of the future.

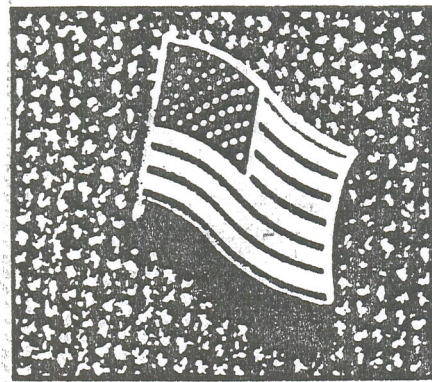
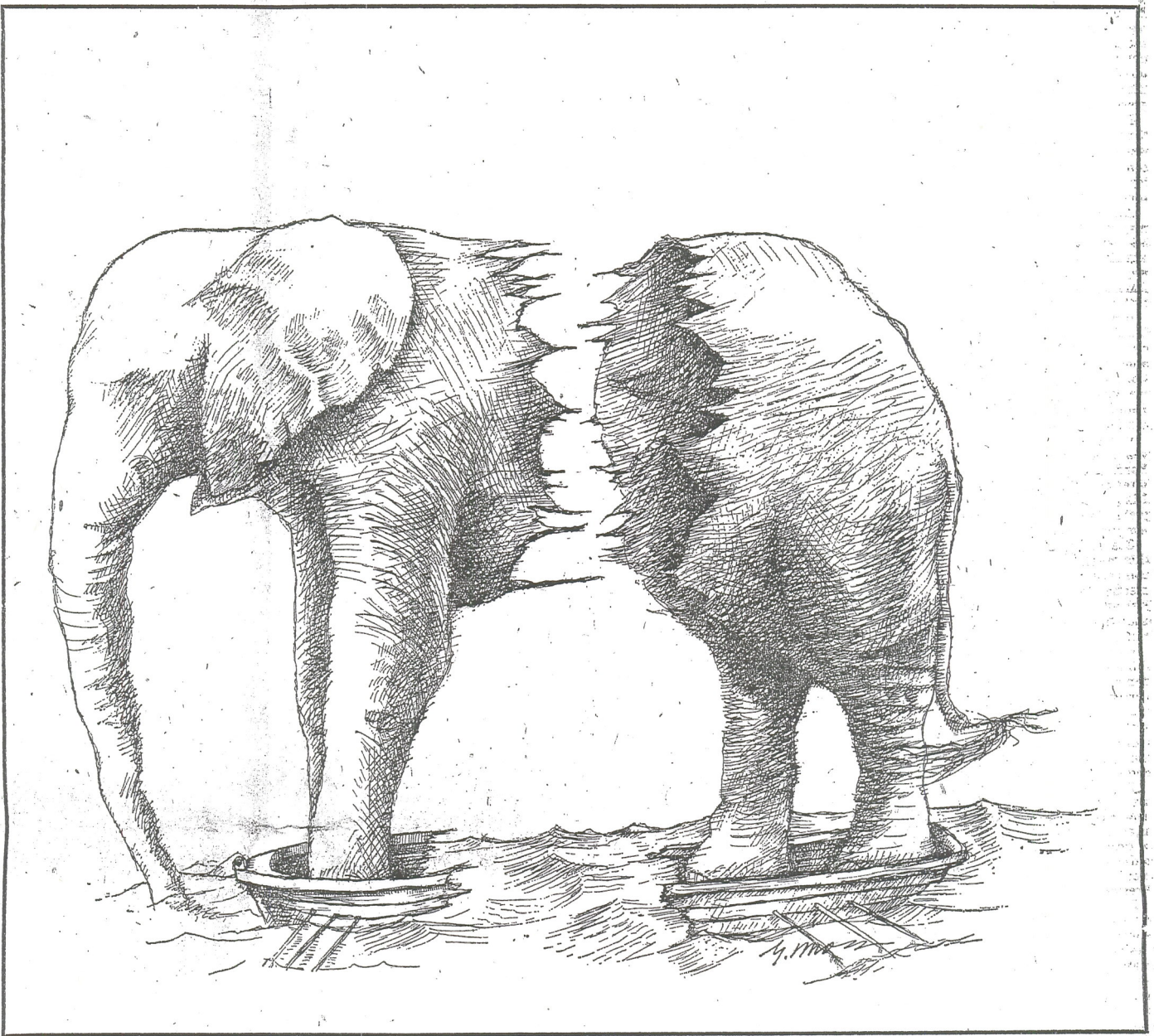
It will not be known for some time what the Nixon years have done to the presidency itself—how severely its power has been diminished. That the office has been tarnished in the public eye cannot be denied; the impairment of its power, with a consequent ascendancy of Congress, may depend largely on how the new occupant of the White House conducts himself.

Gerald R. Ford, himself for nearly three decades a partisan Republican politician, embarks on a presidency he never sought amid some hopeful signs. In his short tenure as Vice President, while remaining loyal to Mr. Nixon, he has been a more conciliatory figure. For all the public lack of trust in politicians, he enters the White House with that same general good will that the American people bestow on any individual who assumes that burden, especially in adversity or in national crisis.

He has an opportunity to take his decimated and demoralized party and make what he will of it. More importantly, if he conducts an open and candid presidency and an above-board political apparatus sustained by his personal integrity, he has a chance to convert the good will extended into a rehabilitation of public confidence in the presidency and the whole American political system.

It will take time. The Nixon political excesses have seen to that. But the system has shown itself to be remarkably resilient, and the people optimistic over the long run. Besides, Mr. Ford has no choice now but to try.

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