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The forces that made Nixon crack

By Theodore H. White

TO understand the story of Richard Nixon's presidency, one has to go back to the simplest definition of history: That it is the tale of the great forces that bear down on solitary men who accidentally stand at their junction.

For at least 20 years before Richard Nixon's departure, the American Presidential system had been coming under growing pressure. At some point in that 20-year span these grinding pressures would intersect in a personality whose flaws of character, whether small or great, would cause him to crack, as surely as a bearing in a giant machine cracks under strains for which it was not designed. When such forces and strains intersected in Richard Nixon, his character did crack. But the forces had been there long before Aug. 9, 1974, and the forces are as important as the man.

In many ways the most representative President of the 20-year span was Richard M. Nixon. He understood the politics of the times: he understood the changes going on both at home and in the world. He had grown up in California politics, and it was in California that a new style of politics had been born which was ultimately to corrupt the White House: in California that the post-war restlessness of Americans first made them prey to a new breed of professional manipulators who were to take over, without ever understanding it, the delicate meeting ground of politics and government.

California was Republican by inheritance. Until 1930, the Democratic Party there was little more than a sect. Then, in the late 1930s, the political landscape buckled as strangers arrived: Okies and Arkies, later the war workers and soldiers, university people and technicians. To control the state, the Republicans had to develop new political techniques if they were not to be doomed forever as a hopeless minority.

Republican politicians in suburbia all across the country were struggling with the same problem: The incoming tide of Democratic migrants from the city. But in a state of traditional politics like New York, a Republican boss was often there to receive them. In California, no such system existed. Party machines had been wiped out 35 years before by a progressive Republican governor named Hiram Johnson.

His reforms eliminated political patronage more completely than anywhere else in the Union, forbade party nominating conventions, fumigated every cranny of conventional party politics. In the process, he bequeathed to California one of the finest state governments in the country, but wrecked its party system. And Johnson had never envisioned the wave upon wave of the uprooted, wanderers and horizon seekers that would engulf his state.

How could the Republicans reach such people? How could they penetrate the minds of the newcomers who lived in suburbs from end to end of the Golden State?

The answer that came in the '30s, '40s, '50s has now become so standard all across the country that there seems nothing novel about it. You reach suburban America — which by now means most of America — not face to face but through manipulative techniques. You do it by sophisticated public-relations planning, by the deliberate management of images, phrases, symbols, by careful orchestration of emotions, by specialized issue-oriented citizen or volunteer committees.

Under Hiram Johnson's reforms, to get a program or referendum on the ballot required a certain number of signatures: Five per cent of the total vote in the preceding gubernatorial election. In Johnson's day that meant 30,000 signatures; today it means 312,404.

Public-relations firms collected such signatures at 25 cents per name; moreover, they would provide a complete political valet service of literature, radio, billboards and, later, television to incite the public to do what the special-interest groups required.

And thus we come to the parents of the new professionals of politics: Clem Whitaker and his wife, Leone Baxter. For 25 years, Whitaker and Baxter were to California what Tammany Hall was once to New York. Managing 60 statewide political campaigns between 1936 and 1951, then won 55 of them. Their principles were simple: The best kind of campaign is an attack; in any campaign, an enemy has to be invented against whom the voters can be warned; issues are to be few, but must be clear and must confront the voter with an emotional decision; a campaign must have a pace, a timing that captures the attention of the news system.

Whitaker and Baxter were themselves sublimely uninterested in any substantive issues. Their ethics were those of a skilled lawyer who does his best to win a case. They could, for their fee, deliver a tailor-made campaign for any person or any cause. PR — public relations — was the name of the game in California, and to master PR required ever larger sums of money.

This was the stage on which Richard Nixon would make his entry into politics.

Perhaps historians of the future, insulated from passion by time, will see Nixon more clearly than his contemporaries do. Perhaps they will be able to balance his known crimes against the achievement of peace and the release of American from its years of war.

They, perhaps, will be able to weigh his hypocrisies against his convictions. Perhaps they will even be able to explain the essential duality of his nature, the evil and the good, the flights of panic and the resolution of spirit, the good mind and the mean trickery.

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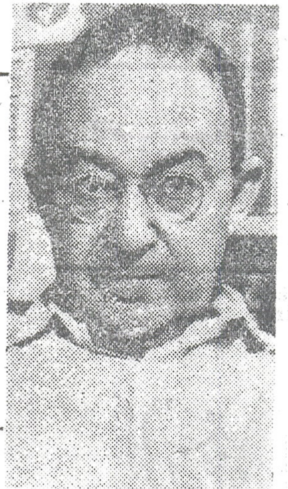
—Theodore H. White



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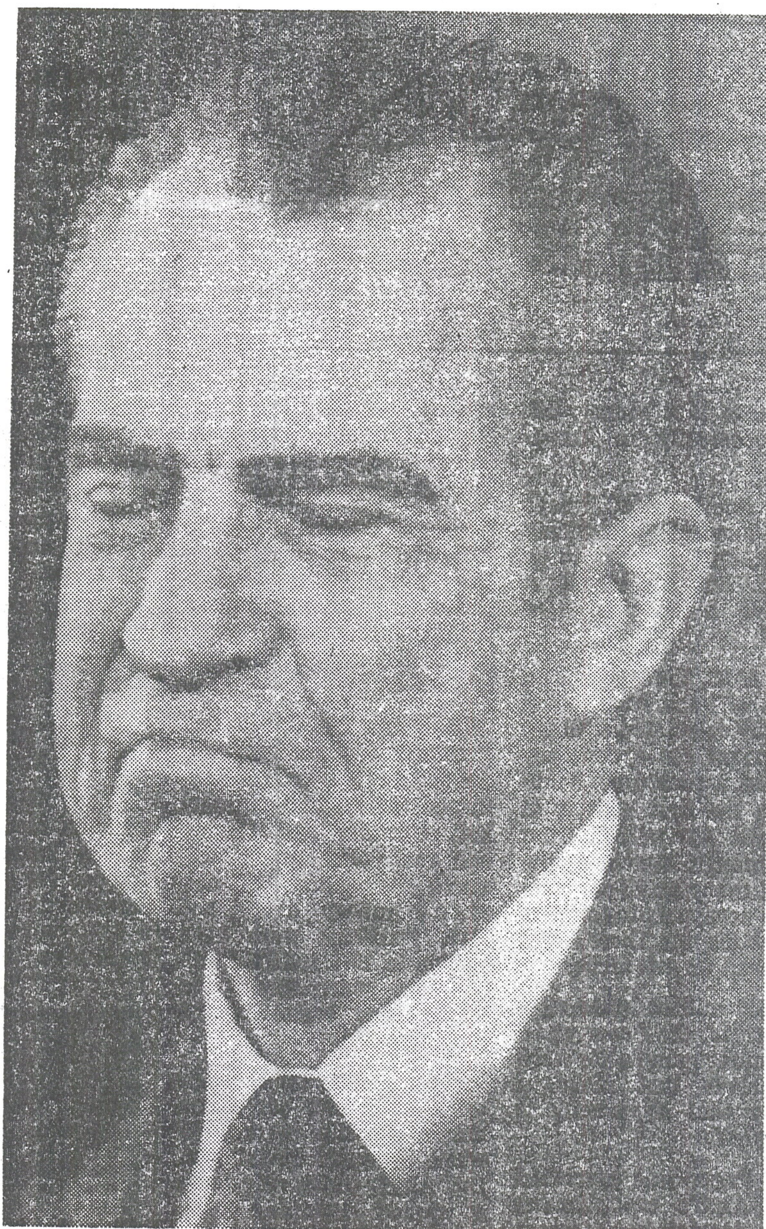

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