

Divinity in the Oval Office?

POWER WORSHIP is the sand in civilization's salad, and swooning about the Presidency is an especially tiresome form of that worship. Two new books — hymnals, really — wax mystical about the office.

Theodore White, campaign chronicler, has written "Breach of Faith" in which he is not, alas, content to present a workmanlike account of Nixon's fall. Near the end of the book White strips his intellectual gears, asserting that this is a crucial American belief:



"... that the Presidency, the supreme office, would make noble any man who held its responsibility. The office would burn the dross from his character; his duties would, by their very weight, make him a superior man, fit to sustain the burden of the law, wise and enduring enough to resist the clash of all selfish interests." What applesauce!

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WHITE IS AN incorrigible romantic. He attributes to the unromantic American people his own belief that power tends to ennoble, not corrupt.

White equates the presidency with his romantic misunderstanding of democracy. He seems to think that the rationale for democracy is not just that it produces legitimate and disposable regimes, but that it actually produces government by "the best men."

Certainly the Founding Fathers did not believe that. They drafted a Constitution that would restrain the President, like everyone else.

"Politics in America," White rhapsodizes, "is the binding secular religion." Not true. Politics is the opiate of giddy wordsmiths, like White and novelist John Hersey, who spin the myths of presidency-worship.

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HERSEY RECENTLY FOLLOWED Gerald Ford through a week, and the result is "The President" a "minute-by-minute" account of the adventure.

The "great force" of the Oval Office causes strange emotions to seethe in Hersey: "I have clearly seen each face, to the very pores; in a flood of indirect candlepower that rains down from a pure-white ceiling . . . But there are also dazzling parabolas of power here; authority seems to be diffused as an aspect of the artificial light in the room, and each person who comes into this heady glow seems to be rendered ever so slightly tipsy in it and by it . . . even the President's closest friends and even the President himself, sitting in a bundle of light behind the desk of the chief, seem to me to take on a barely perceptible extra shine in the ambiguous radiant energy that fills this room."

Notice the word-picture Hersey paints. These are devices great religious artists have used when portraying Christ. They are intimations of divinity.

It is worth remembering that there have been writers who could enter the precincts of power without dissolving into puddles of goo.

Once President Franklin D. Roosevelt, than whom no one could be more imperial, was talking with Westbrook Pegler, who lacked Hersey's gift for being dazzled, especially where FDR was concerned. FDR, exercising his royal right to be familiar, said, "Look here, West, . . ." and Pegler snapped: "What was that, Frank?"