

Joseph Kraft *Post*
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The Ghost

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Of Nixon

A spectre haunted the 1976 presidential race. The ghost of Richard Nixon shaped—not to say deformed—the character of the campaign, the choice of the candidates, the major issues, the attitude of the leading journalists and the underlying climate of public opinion.

Begin first with the last. Poor performance of government in many areas over a long period of time had no doubt turned off lots of voters, especially younger ones. Vietnam intensified the disaffection.

But Nixon—by his cheating and lying—confirmed the worst suspicions of government. For a year, moreover—as that insightful man, chairman Robert Strauss of the Democratic Party, has repeatedly pointed out—Nixon used the “bully pulpit” of the presidency to tell the American people that what he did was normal. Thus millions of Americans had it on the highest authority that the standard mode of behavior in Washington was criminal.

Out of that widespread misperception there was born the salient issue of 1976. It was not the economy or foreign policy—though in both cases the country has entered a new era and the national leaders require a fresh mandate. “The issue,” as Robert Teeter, President Ford’s pollster, said to me in early August, was “trust.” About 60 per cent of the people regularly volunteered to pollsters that the quality they most sought in the next President was the exact opposite of what Nixon embodied—integrity.

The two candidates sprang from that overwhelming public yearning. When Spiro Agnew was forced to resign as Vice President, well-founded suspicions in the Congress, which had to approve the next Vice President, obliged Nixon to pick a man the Congress trusted. So Nixon was forced to abandon the leader he wanted—former Secretary of the Treasury John Connally. He picked instead a man, he calls (in the sample chapter of his latest memoirs which I have seen) “decent and honest” but also “weak in foreign policy.” Which is how Jerry Ford, who otherwise never would have made it, reached the White House and became the Republican nominee in 1976.

If anything an even more unlikely prospect for nomination was the virtually unknown, one-term former governor of Georgia. But alone among the Democratic contenders, Carter reassured the American people with talk of love and God and family. More importantly, he was able to turn public mistrust to advantage by being the anti-Washington candidate—the fresh figure with no corrupt ties to the political Gomorrah. Having struck the poses of Mr. Honest and Mr. True, neither candidate could afford prolonged scrutiny by a public unhappy about national politics. So both campaigned in short bursts, periodically returning to the safety of their fiefs in Washington and Plains.

That behavior inevitably stimulated the instincts of press and television journalists eager to make their mark by the discovery of some new Watergate. The most serious questions regarding the economy and the handling of foreign policy were little pursued. Instead the focus was on the Playboy interview, a bank account in Grand Rapids, misstatement on Eastern Europe and taxes, and other such bagatelles.

I do not agree with Carter’s press secretary, Jody Powell, when he says: “The national news media have absolutely no interest in issues at all. . . . There’s nobody on the press plane who would ask an issue question unless he thought he could trick me into some crazy statement.” But I know what he means. The 1976 campaign defined (the not unsevere) limits that should probably be placed around investigative reporting.

No doubt this year’s campaign was so bad that there is blame enough for all of us. Still there is no doubt about the main culprit, and if there is a hope that attends this campaign, it is that the ghost of Richard Nixon will finally be exorcised.