

## Washington: The Elections and the War

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Nov. 6—The most interesting reaction to the recent state and city elections in the United States was the President's. For the pundits and new Governors and Mayors can be wrong and even silly without doing too much harm, but the President's conclusions influence all the policies and priorities at home and abroad.

He obviously took these elections seriously. He planned his defense of Vietnam speech on Election Eve. He wrote it himself and aimed it against the antiwar extremists—as if they represented all the people who were against the war. He went into Virginia and New Jersey in support of the Republican candidates for Governor in those states, and when they won, he acted, not like a President, but like a Republican National Committee chairman.

This was a switch. Mr. Nixon has not been a very partisan President. His appointments, outside the Supreme Court, have been comparatively non-political. His policies have not followed the traditional conservative Republican line. He has avoided public press conferences and rejected private conversations with White House correspondents and columnists.

But in this election he suddenly changed all this.

The morning after the vote, by pre-arrangement with NBC, he went on the Today show. At noon of the same day, he had the victorious Republican governors in the Virginia and New Jersey races to the White House for lunch. He called in the reporters and photographers to see all the telegrams and letters that supported his Vietnam speech, and interpreted all this as majority support for his Vietnam policies.

### Policy and Propaganda

This, of course, is standard old-fashioned political tactics. He talked about the elections that seemed to support his policies in Vietnam and ignored the elections like the one in New York that went against his Vietnam policy. Any Republican or Democratic county chairman would have done the same, but in a President who had previously avoided publicity and partisan politics, this raised some fundamental questions.

Does he really believe, as he seemed to be saying, that his Vietnam speech and the elections prove that the majority of the American people support him on Vietnam? And if they do support him, do they support his determination to get

out of Vietnam or his determination to stay there until the Saigon regime can defend that peninsula? After all, he said both things in his election eve speech, and it is not clear either what he meant or what the pro-Nixon letter-writers were supporting.

The critical question, therefore, is how Mr. Nixon interprets the letters and the Republican victories in Virginia and New Jersey. He was in trouble with the antiwar factions in the Congress, the press and the universities a month ago, but since the elections he seems to be persuading himself that he is now in control of the situation and can go on fighting the war as before. This is not a new situation with Presidents: their capacity over the generations for self-deception is almost unlimited.

The interesting question now is whether President Nixon is going through the same process. He has been withdrawing his troops but withdrawing them slowly and hoping for a break and telling himself that support at home might convince the enemy to accept a compromise peace.

Thus when the letters and telegrams came into the White House supporting his speech, he called in the press and said

these letters of support could be more important than all the diplomatic and military tactics in ending the war, for this, he assumed, would persuade the enemy that the American people were united behind his policy.

### Facts and Propaganda

This made the headlines and no doubt persuaded many politicians, but it had some other consequences. It troubled his own colleagues in the State Department and even in the White House, who knew the enemy is not going to be convinced by this kind of political propaganda.

The result is that the really important men reporting on the Presidency—not the columnists but the reporters and White House correspondents—are now wondering about the President after his Vietnam speech and his partisan reaction to the elections.

He invited them to believe that he would not be like President Johnson, that he would be open and candid. But his approach and reaction to the elections have not been open and candid but personal and partisan. Like Johnson he has dealt with the politics of his problem but not with the problem of Vietnam.