

Mr. Nixon's Two-Level Politics

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Oct. 13—All governments operate on two levels—the moral and the political—but seldom in recent history has any Administration matched the Nixon Administration's spectacular combination of priggish moralizing and political expediency.

One day it sounds like Billy Graham and the next it acts like Machiavelli. One day it lectures the young on the virtues of truth, and the next it circulates "useful quotes on Democrat leaders" taken out of context to smear the opposition. One day it says "reform" is its watchword, and the next the President vetoes efforts to reform the cost of TV campaigning, which is the most corrupt and illegal scandal in the whole of our national political life.

There has, of course, always been some confusion between the moral and political themes of all Administrations because the President is both the chief magistrate of the nation and the leader of his party, and it's not always easy to tell when he's speaking as President and when he's speaking as politician, but why do they have to give us "the Tactics of Murray Chotiner" in the binding of a hymn book.

The election campaign is picking up speed and losing altitude, as usual, and the only new thing about this one is its revivalist tone of moral superiority. Actually, the Republican themes and tactics are not unlike those employed by Mr. Nixon in the 1958 campaign, when he was rebuked by President Eisenhower for going too far against Democrats whose votes were needed to put over the Republican program.

Nevertheless, then as now, Mr. Nixon insisted on a strategy of attack. "I think this is a proper position for the President," he said, "but for us who have the responsibility of carrying the weight of this campaign to stand by

WASHINGTON

and allow our policies to be attacked with impunity by our opponents without reply would lead to inevitable defeat. . . ."

Accordingly, while bowing to Mr. Eisenhower's advice to pipe down on the foreign policy issue, he switched to domestic themes almost identical to those now being used by Vice President Agnew: he attacked "Democrats from the free-spending wing of the party . . ." and "runaway inflation which a Congress dominated by radicals will inevitably bring about." The big difference then, other than the lack of moral ardor, was that Mr. Nixon classed big labor with the "radicals."

It is true that President Nixon has made progress on his promise made just a year ago, to reform the draft, the welfare system, the tax code, social security, the postal system, and Office of Economic Opportunity (whose next budget has just been ordered cut by fifty per cent), but Mr. Nixon is the first of the last three Presidents not to come forward with specific proposals for the desperately needed reform of financing campaigns.

On the basis of hard-knuckled politics, his veto of the TV bill is fair enough. It would have permitted, almost forced, TV debates in the next Presidential election, and conceivably his enthusiasm for Presidential campaign debates is somewhat limited. Also, the Republicans can raise more money for TV time than the Democrats, and signing the bill would probably have given the Democrats a more even chance to get on the air.

So on these grounds alone, even though the bill clearly was not ideal and did not cover non-TV expenditures, he could, as party leader, have vetoed

it on political grounds. After all, he is not under any obligation to help the opposition, but he made his veto sound as if he were actually doing the American people a favor and acting in the interests of everybody but himself.

"I am opposed to big spending in campaigns," he said, "as I am to big spending in government. But before we tamper with something as fundamental as the electoral process, we must be certain that we never give the celebrity an advantage over an unknown, or the office holder an extra advantage over the challenger."

On the basis of this it will be interesting to see how Mr. Nixon, who is the biggest "celebrity" and "incumbent" in American politics, implements this principle in the 1972 campaign.

In short, the Administration is running a hard, tough political campaign, which it has every right to do, but the assertion of moral leadership on top of it is another question.

Here, for example, is the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame and Chairman of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, whom Mr. Nixon has praised in the past, calling for more White House leadership.

"In the final analysis," said Father Hesburgh, whose report the White House tried to suppress until after the election, "achievement of civil rights goals depends mainly on the quality of leadership exercised by the President. . . . The commission is convinced that his example of courageous moral leadership can inspire the necessary will and determination. . . ."

The Scranton Commission said virtually the same thing the other day on campus disorders: "We urge that the President exercise his reconciling moral leadership as the first step to prevent violence and create understanding. . . ." So the moral side of the political equation still seems in doubt.