

A Question of Values

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LONDON, Jan. 31—President Nixon hardly expects support from the young and radical critics of American life. One nevertheless senses disappointment in his Administration that those who want change in our society have not given him more credit or even attention for the turn he took in his State of the Union address.

For the President there not only pledged himself to new programs against the American social evils of poverty, sickness and pollution. He faced the political alienation identified by the critics, people's feeling that they are in the grip of distant and impersonal forces.

Why, then, did the Nixon program seemingly fall short of touching the emotional chord it sought?

Political memories may be part of it. People find it hard to forget that he is the President who nominated G. Harrold Carswell to the Supreme Court and loosed Spiro Agnew on the voters.

But one can accept the sincerity of the State of the Union program entirely, and accept its objectives, and still find it arousing no real response, no faith in the "revolution" it promises.

The trouble is that it is a revolution of externals Mr. Nixon promises. The ideas for Government reorganization may be worthy, the promise of reform and social spending admirable, but none of it gets at the real problem: the values in our society.

To take an example at hand, Ralph Nader was interviewed the other day by Eileen Shanahan of The New York Times. He proposed a number of changes in law to make corporations and their officers more responsive to

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human desires and more responsible for the consequences of their acts. For instance, he suggested that when an oil company violates drilling safety rules and pours oil into the Gulf of Mexico, its executives should be suspended from their jobs.

Now any sensible person will recognize at once that the Nader program in its own field is really "revolutionary." It seeks to break the monolithic immunity and power of the corporation. And Ralph Nader is a highly practical fellow, not a visionary.

Consider the appalling social discontent fostered by the extremes of poverty and wealth in the United States. President Nixon's welfare reform proposal is undoubtedly a worthwhile attempt to ameliorate some of the cruelest and most degrading aspects of the present system. But it is only that—reform, amelioration—and it does no good to pretend that it gets at the root of the evil.

Anyone who wanted seriously to get at the gulf between rich and poor in America would make radical changes in the Federal tax system, because that system so overwhelmingly favors the rich. Special treatment of capital gains, mineral depletion, entertainment allowances: none of them help the wage-earner. A real reformer would eliminate all deductions.

Utopian? Probably so, given history. A President does have to deal with the political reality of desperate mayors overwhelmed by welfare rolls at the same time that he protects his oil millionaire backers. But there are so

many good things about America—our love of freedom and justice and experiment—that it should be possible to tackle the bad.

President Nixon could easily demonstrate in practical ways an intention to change the attitudes that matter. On money, for example. It is a sick symbol of America's money-orientation that there is no effective limit on political spending. What kind of a country is it where a single member of Nelson Rockefeller's family can give him \$2.8 million for a gubernatorial campaign? The President vetoed a bill that would have done something about that.

Or take the question of the environment. More parks are a fine thing, but what do they matter if the attitudes that have allowed the air and rivers and seas to become poisoned remain unchanged?

Here again Mr. Nixon has an easy way to show that he understands the change really needed. That is to abandon his support of the supersonic transport.

The SST is a fair test of seriousness because it is an extreme example of the social blindness that has alienated ordinary people. For the sake of a handful of first-class air travelers—and aircraft workers whose grievance could be relieved in ways so much less costly and damaging—Mr. Nixon is proposing to build planes that will annoy millions and possibly damage the atmosphere.

We may not share Charles Reich's faith in the inevitable greening of America. But we do know that there are things wrong with the values of our society that will have to change in any movement that calls itself a new American revolution.