

A French View of the Election

By JEAN-FRANCOIS REVEL

PARIS—The idea, taken for granted a few months ago, that President Nixon would be automatically re-elected in 1972, could only stem from the illusion that no basic changes had affected America during the sixties. Last fall, and even in early spring this year, it was generally admitted that all the "movements" born after 1960 had just faded away. American youth, one would argue, was in a state of complete apathy, back to the fifties. Besides, many people thought it had been obvious from the beginning that all the so-called revolutionary trends of the sixties would never find political expression. The young people, eligible to vote, were not even bothering to register, deplored some good citizens who, at the same time, were trying to prevent the students from doing so.

Such an unrealistic point of view was shared by the conservatives and the classical left. The first always believe that revolutions are just fashions. The old left could not think outside the framework of the nineteenth-century European type of revolution (still valid today in the Third World). But how could the need for change, that had proved so strong and effective during the previous decade, have just vanished in 1971?

It would have been historical nonsense. In fact history was just changing tactics. Campus unrest, the demonstrations, the sit-ins and more violent forms of dissent could not be used or be useful forever. They had yielded a lot of results. The skeptics were both wrong and unfair to reproach the "counterculture" with political impotence and at the same time for realizing at least the limits of purely moral protest.

The 1972 Presidential elections are going to be the big showdown between old and new America. This does not mean, of course, just between the Republican party and the Democratic party. A lot of the old America is inside the Democratic party. The Democratic position of old America has already been defeated in the primaries.

Even if it succeeds, using last-minute moves and tricks, in dumping McGovern's nomination, the price paid for that political sin will be very high. Not only would the Democratic party then be absolutely sure to lose the November election and the 1972 Democratic Convention leave behind an even more poisoned atmosphere than the 1968 convention, but the party would commit a kind of historical suicide by turning out the youngest and most creative part of American society. The McGovern supporters,

feeling cheated and embittered, would drop out of the contest, and, judging the political system hopeless, would feed future forces for a violent period of civil strife.

The same thing will happen if, once nominated, Mr. McGovern loses the November election to Mr. Nixon. Why? Because America has no choice today between the basic changes and complete disintegration—and the absence of choice is more or less the definition I would give of a "revolutionary system."

So, the only question is: Will the American political system, the American Constitution manage to mint a new society or will they be blown up by the endless American crisis? If Mr. McGovern is elected, the basic changes will have a chance of occurring legally. If Mr. Nixon is re-elected, complete disintegration has even more of a chance of occurring, also legally. But then, since problems have to be solved in one way or another, violence will spread throughout the country and disrupt the American system. Violent revolutions have always been substitutes for pacific ones, except they usually fail and leave a country ruined and ready for dictatorship.

I personally have no confidence in constitutional earthquakes as the best way to achieve social and cultural changes. As a Frenchman I have lived under five different political regimes, but I have not witnessed any substantial transformation in French society, as far as the roots of political, military, cultural and economic powers are concerned. The virtue of the American political system is its ability to assimilate social transformations without the dissenters having to overthrow the Constitution violently or, generally speaking, the rules.

A good example of this flexibility is the anti-establishment code of reform rules that has revolutionized the Democratic party since 1968 and led to the new way of choosing delegates. I know of no West European political party having democratized itself to such a drastic extent since the war.

In reality, a "critical election," to use the fashionable phrase, is long overdue. After President Johnson's "resignation," the logical move in 1968 was a move toward the left. The death of Senator Robert Kennedy, the fact that Senator Eugene McCarthy had not the time to enlarge his constituency (electorate) outside the circle of war dissenters, gave the nomination to a Johnsonian, the former Vice President Humphrey, hence the victory to Mr. Nixon. But in a way, Mr. Nixon's success in 1968 was an accident. The fiasco of the Republicans' law-and-

order strategy during the midterm elections of 1970 proved clearly that America was still in search of creative solutions and not ready to go back to sleep.

The Presidential election will provide

a unique opportunity to achieve the pacific but very deep change that America needs badly. For the first time, the old liberalism, the new populism, the new left, the racial minorities, the women's liberation, the young voters, the poor, the educated and the uneducated, organized labor and war dissenters, followers of Ralph Nader and future-minded executives in the corporations, will be able to concentrate their forces on one candidate and get their President elected, instead of fighting separate battles. So America will get, at last, a majority having something to say.

So, the American people will be in a position again to play a role in world affairs. For, what the world is expecting from America is not the B-52, but a new model of civilization, able to provide solutions to the contradictions between production and pollution, freedom and organization, wealth and poverty, personal creativity and collective planning and the like. Only if America faces its domestic problems are those solutions going to be found and not for the sole benefit of America.

And that, and nothing else, will restore America's international prestige.

I do not want to underestimate President Nixon's efforts toward entente with Russia or China. But the kind of diplomatic tourism that brought him to Peking and Moscow is, from now on, completely outdated. It did not even serve to end the Vietnam war in due time. Frantic trips abroad have always been, for statesmen, a way of escape from domestic failures. We Frenchmen saw, in May 1968, De Gaulle, in the midst of national collapse, fly surrealistically to Rumania, in order to get the applause he was badly lacking at home.

The real ability for a country to help in solving world problems depends on its ability to solve its own problems first. This is why the United States Presidential election is so important to us West Europeans, as it is also for the Third World. The American people can elect a President determined to build a new American civilization, or not, and so provide for the rest of the world a model for a new type of domestic society, or not.

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