

Behind the Facade

By WILLIAM V. SHANNON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 29 — When I first started writing about Massachusetts politics, I interviewed Louis Lyons, then the head of the Nieman Foundation for newspapermen at Harvard.

In my naiveté, I asked him what had been the "guiding philosophy" of a certain governor. Lyons, who had covered local politics for many years, chewed on his lower lip for half a minute and then said in a matter-of-fact tone: "You have to realize that he was like most of the other politicians at the state house. The only philosophy he had was what would look good on the front page of tomorrow's paper."

I have occasion to recall Lyons' wisdom as I ponder the activities and language of the Nixon Administration. Most citizens naturally assume that behind the façade of any Administration there are many serious and important things going on. The President and all those busy men around him are presumably working hard, thinking ahead, striving constructively to solve the big problems.

Reporters and commentators, although skepticism is endemic in our profession, generally uphold the public's innocent assumption. After all, finding something to report and trying to determine its significance are what our work is all about.

That is why it is so hard, perhaps impossible, to convey the truth of what is now going on behind the façade of power and glamour which surround the Presidency and to describe the real quality of the Nixon Administration.

It is hard to believe that Mr. Nixon and his senior domestic staff devoted a lot more time to planning last week's appearance at Miami Beach with Sammy Davis Jr. than they have recently to welfare reform. It is hard to believe that the strongest motive for the President to spend the next two days talking with the Premier of Japan is that it might help carry Hawaii in November.

The intellectual barrenness, the preoccupation with techniques rather than substance, the aching concern with tonight's television news show and tomorrow morning's front page, and the subordination of every value to vote-grabbing — these bleak realities are beyond the power of any outsider to depict convincingly and still retain his credibility as a detached observer. Surely, one asks, the picture is overdrawn or the reporter biased?

Only the memoir writer carries conviction. He has been behind the façade as a participant. So far there has been only one memoir of these Nixon years, Richard J. Whalen's

"Catch the Falling Flag." Even it ends just as the President is elected. But it gives a graphic account of Mr. Nixon and his speech writers and political agents in 1967-68. Moreover, Whalen, a conservative intellectual, maintained good relations with the President and many members of the White House staff during the Administration's first two years in office.

Here is Whalen's account of Mr. Nixon during an argument among his speech writers as to whether he should take a liberal or a conservative line on a particular issue: "I soon discovered that he did not wish to be persuaded of the validity of our ideas. Rather, he sought guidance in the procedure that was the sum of his 'centrism'—the pragmatic splitting of differences along a line drawn through the middle of the electorate. The line could go left or right, depending on the persuasiveness of claims made for the popularity of competing views. Nixon's aim was to find the least assailable middle ground. The grand theme interested him less than the small adjustment, which might provide an avenue of escape."

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Mr. Nixon fretted about the political consequences of attending the funeral. Whalen quotes Leonard Garment as saying, "Things have come to some pass when a Republican candidate for President has to take counsel with his advisers about whether he should attend the funeral of a Nobel Prize winner."

"In the end, Nixon attended the funeral and called on Mrs. King. . . . Yet Nixon, after having done the right and necessary thing, continued to be worried by the imagined perils. Several times thereafter, he rebuked those of us who had urged him to go to Atlanta, calling it 'a serious mistake that almost cost us the South.'"

Here is Whalen's background on Mr. Nixon's famous pledge during the New Hampshire primary in 1968 to end the Vietnam war: "If in November this war is not over," he declared, "I say the American people will be justified in electing new leadership, and I pledge to you that new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific."

"This promise," Whalen writes, "implying a plan to fulfill it, splashed across the front pages and brought the reporters and TV crews rushing back to the Republican side of the New Hampshire campaign, eager for details. There weren't any. Nothing lay behind the 'pledge' except Nixon's instinct for an extra effort of salesmanship when the customers started drifting away."

Richard Whalen confirms what Louis Lyons always knew. Pennsylvania Avenue is not so very different from Beacon Hill.