

Mr. Nixon at Half-Time

By TOM WICKER

It is fair enough for President Nixon to claim that his party won something of a victory in the 1970 Congressional elections. Vice President Agnew's contention that Mr. Nixon won "ideological" control of the Senate is another of those extravagances to which he is given, but the Republicans did pick up seats in that body and they did lose fewer in the House than parties in power usually do at mid-term.

Richard M. Nixon is too realistic a politician to take much comfort from that kind of victory, whatever he says publicly. Past all the self-serving rationales and explanations both parties will offer for Tuesday's results, the fact is that the biggest prize to be won was good field position for the 1972 campaign. Mr. Nixon did not get it; instead, he lost ground, for at least the following reasons:

1. Read the returns as you will, there is simply no evidence anywhere in them that Mr. Nixon's vigorous and visible personal leadership—the most extensive any President has exercised at mid-term—greatly benefited his party. Neither his personal appearances nor the Republican strategy and tactics that he had so large a hand in devising produced anything remotely like a big Republican surge or—in the case of the state governorships—staved off sizable Democratic gains. The best that can be said for the President is the negative and unprovable argument that, without him, the Republicans might have done worse.

2. Read the returns as you will, there is simply no evidence anywhere in them that the Southern Strategy paid off. The Republicans gained a

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Senate seat and a governorship in Tennessee—in exchange for which they lost governorships in Arkansas and Florida, lost senatorial seats they had gone all out to win in Florida and Texas, and lost governorships Mr. Agnew and Mr. Nixon personally campaigned for in Georgia and South Carolina. For this, the Vice President threw his arms around the likes of Albert Watson? For this, the President alienated the Senate by charging it with an anti-Southern bias?

3. Read the returns as you will, there is simply no evidence anywhere in them that there is an inexorable conservative trend in America that will inevitably benefit the Republican party. It is true enough that there were some notable conservative victories; there were even more liberal-to-moderate victories in both parties (for instance, in Connecticut, the new Republican Senator, Lowell Weicker, is not as hard-line on foreign policy issues as was the incumbent, Thomas Dodd). What is really important is that the returns do not suggest the kind of historic swing to the right that Republican theorists have been picturing.

4. Read the returns as you will, the only gains of any magnitude were made by Democratic gubernatorial candidates. This was predictable enough, as most governors of either party have for years been having trouble getting re-elected, and the Republicans held most statehouses that were at stake this year. Nevertheless, just as steady Republican gubernatorial gains during the 1960's heralded the national Republican victory of 1968,

the Democratic gubernatorial gains of 1970 can hardly be interpreted any other way than as a beginning recovery from the 1960's.

5. The net of all these factors is that the Republican party has not been substantially strengthened for 1972 and the President's personal leadership position within that party has not been strengthened by a sure-footed or demonstrably effective performance. The whole thing was capped by the goof that allowed Mr. Nixon to appear on television Monday night in an ill-made and high-pitched campaign film with a bad sound track, in glaring contrast to the quietly impressive appearance of Senator Muskie for the Democrats.

Even so, Democrats and liberals should not be too comforted by Mr. Nixon's wounds. It is a long time until 1972, and in the meantime the country must be governed. It must be extremely uncomfortable today for a minority President, one committed to developing a conservative majority in America, to realize that his own best efforts have gained him little if anything, while he is now going to be flanked on the right by Gov. Ronald Reagan, re-elected in a landslide; Gov. George Wallace, already talking about a third-party candidacy in the same phrases he used in 1967 and 1968, and by Senator James Buckley of New York, unquestionably the most spectacular single victor of 1970.

This gallery of ravens over his door could well tempt Mr. Nixon into further appeasement of the right, in quest of security for 1972. But appeasement is an endless, usually thankless task, in politics as in diplomacy; and moderate Republicans might therefore serve their cause well by letting Mr. Nixon know their latchstring is out if he wants to come calling.