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Gary Wills Kennedy Center Shennanigans

MANY OF THOSE who remember his "Checkers speech" feel that Nixon's at his trickiest when he goes all over 'umble.

If that is true, there was reason to sniff tricks in the air when our President got all bashful and backing-out over the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. This is not only a long-awaited social night for Washington, but a symbol of governmental concern for the arts. In that sense, it would normally be among the President's assignments—not merely his prerogatives—to grace the opening with his presence.

But now he tells us he would not dream of stealing the show that night. In a paroxysm of humility he announced, a month ahead of time, that he would rather make it the Kennedy family's night—so he has surrendered the presidential box to Mrs. Aristotle Onassis and her party.

That sounds very nice of him—until one thinks on the matter a bit. Did he, after all, think he could steal the show from all the glittery people bound to be there (Mrs. Onassis, of course, prominent among them)? Or, if it was his intention to give Mrs. Onassis special honor, why not invite her to the presidential box with the President in it (on the face of it, a higher honor?)

For that matter, why should Mr. Nixon think in terms of stealing the show from Mrs. Onassis, when the center of the occasion is an elaborate work, specially commissioned long ago, that will be given its premiere? Competitive glitter in the audience should not entirely distract people from the real centerpiece of the occasion. By saying his presence might distract from her presence, and nothing should distract from her

presence, Mr. Nixon is not so much complimenting Mrs. Onassis as insulting the famous composer—since it is his show that should not be stolen.

But there, I think, we get to the real point. For this composer is Leonard Bernstein, famous for his TV jittersbugging days as conductor of the New York Philharmonic. More recently, he has become infamous to Nixon-types as the paragon of "radical chic." He was mocked for holding a party, last year, to raise funds for protecting Black Panthers.

Even worse, he did not let the mockery (itself a bit chic and reverse-snobish) deter him from supporting other causes he thinks worthy. Just this spring, he threw another party—to raise \$30,000 for the defense of the Rev. Philip Berrigan and other war-protestors accused of conspiring to kidnap Dr. Kissinger. And that is what makes Bernstein dangerous in Mr. Nixon's eyes.

Bernstein has shown considerable interest not only in Philip Berrigan, but also in his brother, Daniel (also accused of the conspiracy by J. Edgar Hoover, though the government could not even get a grand jury to indict him). This interest has extended to communication, and to admiration for Daniel Berrigan's writings.

Which brings us to the composition Bernstein has worked on for over a year the Kennedy Center's opening. It would be bad enough for Mr. Nixon to sit there honoring this giver-of-parties, this radical chic fellow who seems to like Panthers better than napalm. But, even beyond that, Bernstein has composed a modernized form of the Catholic Mass for his ceremonial occasion—one that may quote the very words of Dan Berrigan, and must in any case be sus-

pected as a covert way of honoring the Berrigans.

A pretty situation, no? Grinny, and Dumpy, and Grumpy all in a row—Mr. Nixon, Mitchell, Hoover—sitting through two hours of exquisite torture as their intended victims are celebrated. Mr. Nixon has ducked out—unless Mrs. Onassis has the cool sense and good taste to turn down the presidential box. How many other members of the President's official family will have to find excuses for going all 'umble and getting going all 'umble and getting out of the evening?

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