

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, March 22—One of the few compensations for a life sentence to Washington is the opportunity it affords to observe the circularity of history.

After you have been here long enough—or perhaps too long—you begin noticing the past repeating itself. Oh, there are character inversions and ironic role changes, of course; history doesn't really repeat itself, at least not very often; and those who study the past in order to avoid reliving its mistakes usually end up fighting the last war. Still, patterns recur.

At the moment the sense of being in a revisited past is particularly strong. There is, for one thing, suddenly a smell out of the past, a smell evoking the memory of "the mess in Washington" against which the Eisenhowerites crusaded in 1952.

The famous "mess in Washington"—does anyone still remember it?—was a product of the Truman Administration and consisted generally in the considerable evidence that small-bore chiselers with pals in the Justice Department and White House could have things their way for the price of a fur coat.

"We're going to clean up the mess," General Eisenhower promised. His Vice-Presidential candidate, Richard M. Nixon, starring in the nation's first political teledrama that year, brought many to the edge of tears by announcing that he could not afford a fur coat for his wife and that she wore, instead, "a good Republican cloth coat."

Well, the general did a good job on that "mess." It was so good, in fact, that we haven't had a really first-class long-run, full-scale, close-to-the-bone Congressional hearing on dirty work at the Justice Department until this very moment when, suddenly, the Washington air is thick with stories about I.T.T.'s antitrust problems and the \$400,000 gift to the Republican party.

General Eisenhower, Mr. Nixon and most of the rest of the Republican faithful had a jolly time at President Truman's expense in 1952. They were running hard against Communism, and this was good politics. And also easy politics, since, as long as you made enough noise about being against Communism, you didn't have to answer questions about what, if anything, you were for.

Suddenly, we have the return of

OBSERVER

"against" politics this spring. Everybody who deserves the brand of "front-runner" is "against" busing schoolchildren, just as everybody in 1952 was "against" Communism.

Just as in 1952, the press—how does the press know so much about our baseness and so little about our decent impulses?—assures us all that we will destroy any politician who is not an "againster."

And so, as in 1952, our leaders have become our followers, cheering us down dark, dank and overgrown low roads, in return for which, they anticipate, we will elect them with enthusiasm ("Stunning Landslide Victory") and sit down with them in the dark, fully satisfied in our craving for "againstness."

"Againstness" in 1952 had its great demagogue in Joseph R. McCarthy. This year it is represented by George Wallace. There is no point in forcing the parallel between the two; history doesn't repeat itself quite so nicely. Still, Wallace, like McCarthy, has the power to make strong men degrade themselves by committing acts of public cowardice, and the ability to persuade good men that the electorate will prefer the man of mean spirit.

It was good politics in 1952 to run "against" Communism because, for one thing, there was a dreadful war in Asia in which American men (then, as now, always called "boys") were dying before Communist armies.

The symbol of Communism that year was Joseph Stalin, of whom President Truman, so the story went, had once said, "I like old Joe." (Stalin and Truman had met at the Potsdam Conference.) The Republicans had a wonderful time with that. How did we feel, they asked us, about being governed by a party whose leader had said, "I like old Joe"?

Now, twenty years later, Mr. Nixon anticipates vast political mileage from his recent visit to China. There is a good news picture of his being greeted there by Premier Chou En-lai and of their handshake and smile.

Chou's name, we are told, is pronounced "Joe." There can be no doubt that the least souring of the President's China policy will produce a Democratic campaign built around that picture. The caption, of course, will be "I like old Joe." If the China policy goes well, the Republicans will use it themselves.