

SFChronicle

APR 7 1972

41

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

Have a Heart!

THERE is a curious quality of heartlessness in the public life of America today. Men with flinty faces which reflect hard hearts are at the helm. They have been put there by the affluent middle-class which put them in office, and by the rich. Whatever government we have is largely for the benefit of these two classes. For the rest there is the closed mind; and, worse, the closed heart.



The poor, the old, the mentally sick, the boozers, the heads of various kinds, the minorities of all kinds, have never had a harder time being heard. These classes are inferior kinds of human being, mutants outside the pale. The burden of proof today is on the have-nots, so completely is the volte-face we have made since the days of the Depression and the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Now FDR was something of a phony, a Hudson River valley Dutch squire with the congealed attitudes of the landed gentry. Two things forced him to join the human race: the disease which cost him the loss of his legs, and the terrible freight of human misery he inherited when he took over the Presidency. He learned compassion the hard way. Having learned it, though, he kept that quality while in power, until maybe the onset of the war, which came to occupy almost wholly his energies and his sympathies.

★ ★ ★

ROOSEVELT'S finest hour, perhaps, came after his overwhelming 1936 victory over Alf Landon. In his acceptance speech, he was truly magnanimous. He applied to government his hard-bought personal philosophy when he said:

"Governments can err, Presidents can make mistakes but the immortal Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted in a different scale. Better the occasional faults of a government living in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference."

It is not surprising that these words should have exercised a lifelong fascination for John F. Kennedy. He used them over and over during the 1960 campaign against Richard M. Nixon. JFK was not only making pious remembrances to a great Democrat, and expressing his own personal view of government. He was quite pointedly saying what he expected of the government of Mr. Nixon, should he be elected.

★ ★ ★

NOW THAT we have Mr. Nixon, those words favored by two Presidents have an added resonance. We are indeed caught in "a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference." The chiefest concern of Mr. Nixon, it would often appear, is his public relations. He is master of that national malady which holds you can change a thing by changing its name and its coloration. That malady springs from alienation from self, and even from contempt of self.

If there is a single word to describe our government in Washington, behind all its carefully composed television smiliness, it is grim. Those Mitchells, those Lairds, those Zieglers, those Agnews, those Madison avenue men in the White House! I cannot imagine one of them helping up an old lady who slumped to the street, unless maybe she was white and had on a decent fur coat. And they do not bother to conceal their contempt for those who have not made it. Not to have made it is nowadays almost to put yourself outside the circle of government. To be on welfare is positively to lack virtue.

★ ★ ★

WHAT IS TRUE out of Washington is even more true out of Sacramento. There the milk of human kindness has long since become ice. Contempt for those who haven't made it oozes from virtually every statement on social policy from the lips or pen of Mr. Reagan, whether it be the plight of the mentally ill, or those mothers who have the temerity to have a third bastard.

Curiously, and perhaps significantly, both Mr. Nixon and Mr. Reagan came from the kind of background which now seems to bug them. They were poor boys, and they made it. Perhaps that fact of making it, and the complicated guilts it engenders, is what causes the closing of the heart which is, diminishing the life of all of us.