

Books of The Times

A Ride Aboard the 1968 Nixon

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

CATCH THE FALLING FLAG. A Republican's Challenge to His Party. By Richard J. Whalen. 308 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$6.95.

What has Richard J. Whalen been doing since he published his best-selling biography of Joseph P. Kennedy, "The Founding Father" (besides publishing his not-so-best-selling but provocative study of New York, "A City Destroying Itself")? As he explains in his "Catch the Falling Flag: A Republican's Challenge to His Party": In the fall of 1967, despite earlier doubts about Richard M. Nixon's chances for a comeback, Mr. Whalen became convinced by a series of interviews with the former Vice President that a Nixon candidacy held out the only hope for a revitalization of the Republican party, which Mr. Whalen deemed essential for the future of the country. So he accepted Mr. Nixon's invitation to become a key speech writer and took his place on the team of whiz kids that helped to convince some observers that the 1968 Nixon was indeed a brand-new model.

Soon Mr. Whalen was a leader of the team, earnestly churning out speeches, memoranda and position papers to "DC" ("the code name assigned to Nixon in mail communications, at once a touch of intrigue and hopeful prophecy"), on the need for a clear stand on Vietnam and what the stand should be, on the "legitimate frustration of the middle-income white," on the growing threat of Soviet missile might and the need for an accelerated response, on black capitalism and on "Order and Justice." And Mr. Nixon seemed to be responding. Mr. Whalen's memos came back to him covered with attentive marks; his speeches were delivered. He was convinced that he was helping to construct a new and triumphant Republican philosophy. And when Mr. Whalen's son, upon answering the telephone, shouted, "It's that Mr. Nixon again," the laughter on the other end told him it wasn't necessary to apologize.

Dream Fading Away Into Slickness

Then the dream began to fade. The candidate's performances before live audiences struck Mr. Whalen as too slick. Mr. Nixon seemed to be avoiding direct contact with the press. He was playing it safer and safer. "The grand theme interested him less than the small adjustment, which might provide an avenue of escape." Mr. Nixon avoided taking a stand on Vietnam (which meant he avoided delivering Mr. Whalen's speech on the subject). And it struck Mr. Whalen that the "withdrawal into silence was a brilliantly executed political strike—[but] a cynical default on the moral obligation of a would-be President to make his views known to the people."

By and by, the packagers took over from the philosophers; John Mitchell emerged as staff leader ("Under the guise

of strength, he reinforced Nixon's timidity"); and the whiz kids were caught "under the heel of men basically unsure of themselves, second-raters playing over their heads and fiercely resentful of anyone who dared approach them at eye level." When Mr. Whalen tried to press his Vietnam views home, Mr. Nixon seemed to avoid his gaze; "his expression seemed hooded and wary." And when the nomination was won, Mr. Whalen found himself debating with Leonard Garment and Robert Finch over whether the advertisement should read "THIS TIME, VOTE AS IF YOUR WHOLE WORLD DEPENDS ON IT," or "THIS TIME, VOTE LIKE . . . Mr. Whalen opposed "the transparently slick 'like'" but lost out; that evening his friend Joan Didion remarked "in her tiny but stiletto-edged voice," "Well I'm glad you stood up for what was right."

A View From the Sidelines

Fed up, Mr. Whalen walked out and watched the rest of the campaign, as well as the three years of the Administration that followed, from the vantage point of "a distant yet privileged private citizen, who saw and heard much that the Nixon staff took pains to conceal from the . . . press." And then sat down to write this bitter critique.

The result is many fascinating things. Not only a semi-insider's acid view of the campaign and the years so far with Mr. Nixon: it is the thoughtful, articulate credo of a serious young Republican—a "moderate conservative," he styles himself—which deserves to be heard by everyone; it is a shrewd analysis of recent American history and a penetrating insight into the current voter mood; and it is a testament that is refreshingly patriotic (and it is not easy to be refreshingly patriotic these days). In other words, it is an important book.

There is an aspect of the book that is bothersome, however. One finds oneself wondering throughout to what degree Mr. Whalen fell prey to the servant's illusion of possessing his patron—like the cook convinced that he controls his master's stomach, or the chambermaid who believes she governs her mistress's bed? How much of Mr. Whalen's anger springs from philosophical disappointment and how much of it from personal pique? How justified is he in believing that in the fall of 1968, when the Johnson Administration seemed to be moving toward peace in Vietnam, Republican Presidential nominee could have delivered a speech calling for a strategy of "protect and expand operations" in the field, for emphasizing the relationship of Vietnam to the cold war, and for seeking a détente with the Soviet Union in such a context? Why, in short, was Mr. Whalen taken in to begin with? Was there not a touch of hubris there? And not a little Godlike wrath at the consequences?