

Call to Fear

President Nixon's acceptance speech to the Republican National Convention was an extraordinary address for an incumbent to deliver. Instead of expounding the accomplishments of his own Administration and explaining how he plans to extend and improve upon them in the next four years, Mr. Nixon devoted most of his energies to calling upon the electorate to fear Senator McGovern and the Democrats.

"In asking for your support, I shall not dwell on the record of our Administration which has been praised, perhaps too generously, by others at this convention," he said. Coming early in the speech this sentence sounded like a bit of engaging modesty, until it became evident that it was, in fact, a line concocted to enable him to pivot away from his own record and make savage, partisan attack on the opposition.

Except for a concluding "upsweep" section on the hope for peace, the thrust of the speech was overwhelmingly negative. It was as if Mr. Nixon has not been President at all but is still the office-seeker and partisan sharpshooter, ever on the attack. It was also an intellectually tired and empty speech—one that fell back on old material and barely reworked "cheer lines" from previous campaigns.

Thus, the quote from Lincoln about America being on God's side was lifted from the last paragraph of the first Nixon acceptance speech in 1960. The passage about Tanya, the Russian girl, was the same one that he used in his address to the Russian people earlier this year. "Peace is too important for partisanship," is a slight variation of the line Mr. Nixon used in the last campaign to avoid any discussion of how he intends to "end the war and win the peace" in Vietnam.

Indeed, Wednesday night's speech had the same purpose as the carefully crafted "basic speech" which he repeated over and over again in 1968 and—with some different phrases—in 1960. That purpose is not to engage in the democratic process of debate, of argument and counter-argument, of explaining problems to the people and trying to guide them in the direction a leader thinks they should move. Mr. Nixon seeks the opposite. He seeks to obscure the hard choices, to package issues in ways that sound pleasing to listeners but actually commit him to nothing, and thereby to evade a leader's responsibility rather than to exercise it.

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There can be little doubt that Mr. Nixon's performance was effective in partisan terms. With the skills he has relied upon in a quarter-century of campaigning, he set up straw men and bravely struck them down. He placed the well-calculated innuendo; he deployed the usual dubious or unprovable statistics; he made complex issues pivot like dancing bears and leap through rhetorical hoops; he stirred fear and then came down firmly on behalf of convictions shared by everybody.

"I believe in the American system." And who in this campaign does not?

"We have launched an all-out offensive against . . . permissiveness in our country." What does it actually mean, if anything, to launch an attack on permissiveness?

Dusting off an applause line from his 1968 standard speech, Mr. Nixon said, "I want the peace officers across America to know that they have the total backing of their President in their fight against crime." Does that mean they did not have the backing of President Kennedy or President Johnson? Or that Senator McGovern is pro-crime?

"Let us be generous to those who can't work without increasing the tax burden of those who do work," Mr. Nixon said. No one can be generous and thrifty at the same time; the President's own welfare reform plan would involve substantial additional Federal expenditures. In like vein, the President denounces the local property tax but says nothing about the broad-based tax that would have to be imposed to take its place.

The taint of demagoguery sadly infected even the President's discussion of the Vietnam tragedy and also of his initiative toward China and Russia, where his critics would readily concede his constructive efforts. Mr. Nixon laid down three unexamined but applause-provoking criteria for a Vietnam peace. He promised never to abandon American prisoners of war, but did not say how endless bombing would get them back. He promised never to impose a Communist government on South Vietnam, but did not explain how he would end a war in which the political future of South Vietnam is the central issue. He promised never to "stain the honor of the United States of America," but did not say why it is honorable to rain bombs on the Vietnamese people because they are Communists at the same time that he is making friendly overtures to far more powerful Communist nations.

If he keeps to the pattern of his past campaigns, President Nixon will reiterate endlessly between now and November what he said on Wednesday evening. Sections of the speech may be omitted or their order of delivery shuffled on other occasions, but this is probably "the speech" for the Nixon campaign. If so, it is no happy augury for a reasoned and responsible discussion of the nation's serious problems.