

The Brass and the Drums

By ANTHONY LEWIS

MIAMI BEACH—Mencken! Thou should'st be living at this hour.

How we need the invective that so joyfully flayed Gamaliel Harding and the booboisie. Mencken at Miami Beach—it is a thought to revive spirits numbed by plastic hours.

And how he would have savored the New Pomposity. He delighted in the smug and the brazen, and for those qualities not many political conventions have matched the Republicans in 1972.

There was John Ehrlichman explaining why the party managers would not allow Paul McCloskey's name to be put in nomination: That would just have been a "time waster." And why the platform was written behind closed doors: "It gets to be kind of a circus if you let anyone in."

Some of the high points were in a movie called "Richard Nixon—Portrait of a President." With March of Time music swelling in the background, a portentous voice said: "A man matures in the Presidency." The film showed Mr. Nixon asking questions in a Cabinet meeting, and the voice said: "Probing for information, the President demands accuracy."

Henry Kissinger, working out his own Republican destiny, was seen in the film speaking of the President's "heroic quality." For just a moment one tried to imagine a British Prime Minister's foreign affairs adviser ap-

ABROAD AT HOME

"My high opinion of political mountebanks remains unchanged to this day, and I suspect that when the history of our era is written at last it may turn out that they have been one of America's richest gifts to humanity."

—H. L. Mencken.

pearing in party propaganda to celebrate his political master. Or for that matter, a British audience sitting through such stuff without laughing. Unimaginable.

Then there was Nelson Rockefeller—Nelson Rockefeller!—extolling the courage and vision of Richard Nixon. And Ronald Reagan expounding philosophical theories of representative democracy. Or was it the other way around? Ambition makes duplicates of us all.

Mencken would have loved the small moment of truth provoked by H. Harrison Haskell, a delegate from Pennsylvania. He was going to vote against Spiro Agnew for Vice President but changed his mind, explaining: "I haven't got enough guts to do it. I whored out."

The trouble is that we cannot really laugh at those three days in Miami as we do at Mencken's descriptions of American politicians in the nineteenth-twenties. It matters too much now.

"We will never stain the honor of the United States of America." The man who said that in his acceptance speech has ordered more bombs dropped, in the last three and one-half years, than any human being has in history. They have been dropped in the name of the United States on a peninsula of backward peasant societies, and they are still falling.

"We will never abandon our prisoners of war." That from the man whose insistence on carrying on the war has put more Americans in the prison camps of Vietnam and condemned them to more years there—years still without visible end.

The single most sordid aspect of the convention was the failure even to discuss these issues. There was not a question, not a moment of floor debate about the war that for so many years has been staining the American character.

But it was not just Vietnam. The whole process of the convention was an insult to public intelligence, a vul-

gar exercise by cynical men with a deep contempt for ideas. In a country facing difficult and at the same time exciting challenges, there was not a single thoughtful speech on any matter of substance.

Of course the Republican party was entitled to celebrate. Its President in office has turned himself from a strained outsider to a seemingly confident man with affectionate supporters. The party faces a divided and so far not noticeably competent opposition.

Balloons and streams of self-praise were in order. But it was also necessary to remember that, barring a great upset in November, these people would be among the most powerful on earth over the next four years.

They are not just Henry Mencken's laughable provincials. They decide who lives and who dies in Indochina. They heavily influence the world's trade and financial relationships. They fix the balance between rich and poor, black and white, city and suburbs in America. Their judges redefine the Constitution.

And so the men who manipulated this empty affair, this convention without ideas or sensitivity, are really not at all funny.