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What Is The Question?

By Anthony Lewis

One day during the campaign Michigan's Democratic candidate for Senator, Frank Kelley, saw a line of people waiting for unemployment compensation. He went up and asked a man what was on his mind in this election. The man answered: "Busing."

The story illustrates the failure of perception on the part of many liberals in 1972. We thought such issues as busing, amnesty and pot were mere distractions from the real domestic problems facing America—economic injustice and social disorder. But in the terms that decide elections that was simply wrong: the voters cared more about the supposed distractions.

Senator McGovern was seen by many people as someone challenging basic American values, such as thrift and puritan morality. To those who know him it must seem absurdly unfair to regard such an old-fashioned, decent man as a figure of the counter-culture. Some might also find a good deal of hypocrisy and illusion in Americans' view of their own culture. But illusions matter, and George McGovern could never escape from his identification with threatening ideologies.

That must explain, in some measure, the extraordinary immobility of the public opinion polls in this campaign. There was justified criticism of McGovern's defensiveness and failure to frame issues, but, in fact, nothing seemed to matter. President Nixon's judgment is accurate enough: "This election was decided the day he was nominated."

But there were factors apart from the image of the challenging candidate. Undoubtedly the most important was race. No one likes to say so, the whole of election night went by with hardly a word on television. But the fact is that many white Americans feel themselves threatened by black people, and they think Richard Nixon is the man to keep down the threat.

One of the most interesting pieces of analysis in the campaign was a look at voter attitudes by Jack Rosenthal of The New York Times. People's views on welfare, education, crime and other such issues, he found, really added up to race. He concluded that the white

ABROAD AT HOME

view of blacks, however unspoken, was central to current politics.

Such realities should be recognized not only as a matter of hindsight, to explain the election result, but in order to understand the present prospect in American politics. For one can detect familiar misconceptions creeping into liberal conversation already.

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Surely Mr. Nixon will want to be a statesman, it is said, now that he has had this great victory: He will want to make a record on the great domestic problems of a kind that history will praise as it will his foreign policy initiatives toward China and the Soviet Union.

The trouble with that view of a likely Nixon approach in the next four years is that it makes a very large assumption about what constitutes historical wisdom or statesmanship in domestic affairs. It assumes that a President free of partisan considerations would want to take bold steps to cure this country's social ills—for example to moderate the worst extremes of wealth and poverty.

But President Nixon does not accept the premise. He made that admirably clear in his candid and fascinating talk with Garnett Horner of The Washington Star-News just before the election.

In talking about what he saw as the problems facing this country, he did not emphasize the crisis of the cities or racial tension or the fact that millions live in corrupting need and squalor. He spoke of ending "permissiveness," of resisting new taxation and Government spending, of continuing legal and judicial conservatism.

In short, it would be altogether surprising to see large new Federal programs in the next few years, as it would have the Administration propose tax reforms with the aim of even modest income redistribution. The President does not believe in such approaches. And to put it mildly, he has no mandate for them.

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That is why those who opposed Mr. Nixon should not fool themselves about the mood of the voters who elected him. That landslide majority did not vote for new openings to the black minority; it voted at most for benign neglect. It did not vote for new Government expenditures; it voted for tax restraint. It did not vote for experimentation in society; it voted for the status quo.

Liberals may continue to be skeptical of the argument that America needs a time of relative repose, that

time will solve more problems than radical change. They may be even more concerned that years of neglect will make this country explode in renewed tension.

But liberals have to realize that they lost this election—and understand that others have fundamentally different perceptions. They might remember the words of Gertrude Stein on her deathbed. She murmured, "What is the answer?" There was silence, and she said: "In that case, what is the question?"