

A Strange Celebration

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, Jan. 19 — Twelve years ago—it feels liketwenty—John Kennedy stood on the steps of the Capitol and said: "We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom."

In the tradition of the American Presidency, Mr. Kennedy wanted to rise above the partisan and broaden his support. He had honorable help in that effort from the man he had defeated, Richard Nixon, who declined to challenge Mr. Kennedy's narrow election victory and met him before the Inauguration as a symbol of unity.

How ironically different are the circumstances in which Richard Nixon takes the oath for his second term. After his landslide last November he could so easily have set out to bring the country together by applying Churchill's maxim, "in victory, magnanimity." Instead, he has practiced a politics of revenge and division, abroad and at home.

Why has Mr. Nixon chosen this course? Some possible clues appear in a fascinating new book now being serialized in *The New Yorker*, "The Politics of a Guaranteed Income." It is by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a White House adviser on domestic affairs in the first Nixon Administration, now leaving Harvard again to be Ambassador to India.

Mr. Moynihan's subject is the rise and eventual failure of the Nixon welfare-reform proposal, the Family Assistance Plan. With a pride pardonable in one of its creators, he praises the plan as a uniquely bold piece of social legislation and scorns those he believes killed it, especially liberals.

The merits of the particular proposal will be debated for a long time, as certainly will the blame for its defeat. But Moynihan advances some broader propositions that deserve attention whatever one thinks of his

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suggested remedy for the American welfare disaster.

Like any political class, Moynihan argues, American liberals had developed their own orthodoxies. They were unable to see that traditional methods of social welfare were not solving the mushrooming problems of dependency and poverty. Or, worse yet, they saw the facts but were unwilling to talk honestly about them.

The only way to break out of the pattern of spending more and more on methods of proven uselessness, in Moynihan's view, was for a conservative President to move for fundamental social change in the welfare area. He could make reform acceptable to an increasingly conservative electorate.

That is the role in which Moynihan casts Mr. Nixon. He describes President Nixon as determined, early in his first term, to be a conservative who carries through radical reforms. (Disraeli is suggested as a model—a grotesque misconception of that eccentric imperialist's record, but myths have their own weight.) Mr. Nixon is quoted as musing: "Tory men and liberal policies are what have changed the world."

According to Moynihan, the President therefore tried to be a healing figure. In messages, he offered olive branches to the blacks who had mostly voted against him and to the administrators of established social programs.

He was, says Moynihan, "protective of anyone he would previously (as a candidate) have blamed."

Assuming that all that was true in 1969, what has happened to the man who wanted to go down as the leader of social change, the man who would open his heart to old enemies and bridge the differences? For the Richard Nixon of 1973 is as negative and divisive a President as most of us can remember.

One can speculate from the Moynihan account that Mr. Nixon may have been embittered by the episode of the Family Assistance Plan. It would not be surprising if a man sensitive to past hurts reacted strongly against those who heaped scorn on what he felt was a generous effort to help the poor. Liberals ought to plead guilty to some automatic and therefore unfair opposition to Nixon proposals.

But the picture of a President who wanted to ameliorate conflict and bring conservatives along on radical measures until he was embittered by liberal criticism cannot really be sustained. There were too many examples in the first years of the Nixon Presidency of actions designed to wound, to provoke, not to heal: the handling of the busing issue, the nomination of Harrold Carswell to the Supreme Court, the attacks on the press and many others.

The opportunity for healing that was most sadly missed was Vietnam. That began as a liberal war, and many liberals hoped and genuinely believed that a conservative President would quickly end it. No peace now can altogether quiet the emotions roiled by four more years of war.

Whatever the reasons, we are left with a tragedy of mutual estrangement: a resentful and increasingly autocratic President who arouses bitterness and deep fear in a substantial part of his public. That is the unhappy setting of Inaugural Day, 1973.