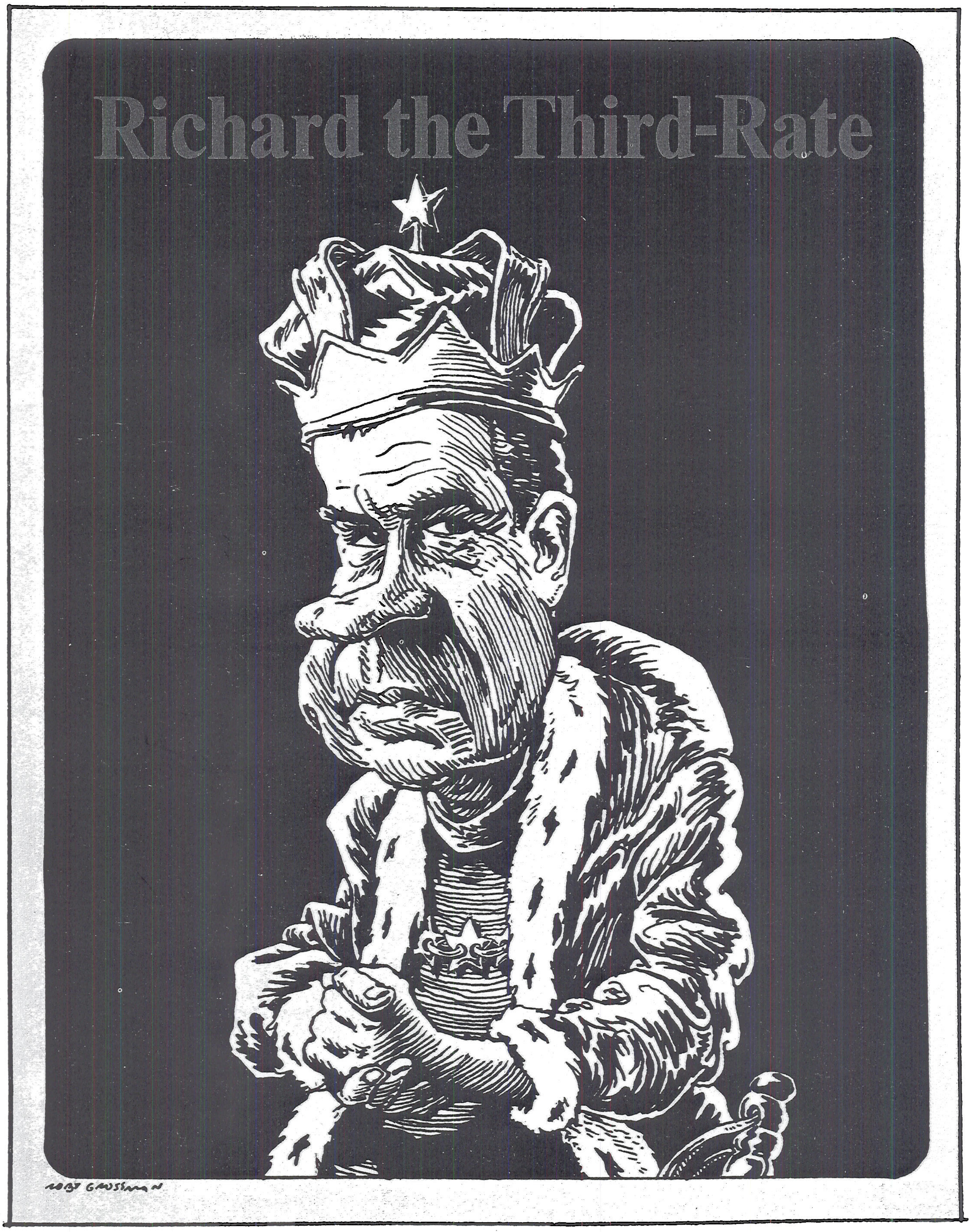
Richard the Third-Rate



ROBT GROSSMAN

17 Nov 68

Illustration by Robert Grossman

THE FEATURES HAD NOT CHANGED MUCH in eight years. The face had made its deal with the man who wore it, and the nose and the plastic teeth and the neat ears had ceased all struggle to become something else. Only the jowls seemed different—trimmer, devoid of their earlier sickbed blueness.

The key to how much Richard Nixon has changed, how much he has managed to control his own vagrant passions in eight years, lay in his eyes. Once those eyes would glitter in dark panic when someone refused his proffered hand, when Eisenhower's pink skull nodded in command or when he first saw Jack Kennedy stride across the floor of a television studio. In 1960, the eyes revealed fear and unease and ill-disguised envy.

That was behind him now as he stood in the chill autumn brightness of a Nassau County afternoon. The eyes betray nothing today, and neither does Nixon. He is no longer from any special place, neither from California nor New York nor even Washington. He inhabits the country of politics. And on this afternoon the button eyes were searching the far reaches of the crowd, counting perhaps, while the mouth stretched into a series of toothy horizontals and the hands shot up into a triumphant V. "Thank you, my friends, thank you. . . ." The serene voice came from some distance, dripping with confidence and triumph and self-righteousness.

Richard Nixon stood there on that platform with the defeated shell of Nelson Rockefeller beside him, a lily-white sea of strangers cheering, and you knew that Richard Nixon's candidacy, his style, his rhetoric and his very life was a masterpiece of schlock.

I suppose we have had nothing like him since Warren Harding. Nixon had been going around the country these past weeks talking and talking and talking and saying nothing, badly. Every time he talked and said something emptily and badly, the American people cheered and his rating in the polls rose. He knew that nothing he said could really matter to the people who were listening to him. He needed no masterpiece of prose, no daring issue, nothing that might disturb a midwestern editorial writer. He just had to be there to be cheered by people who do not truly love him, but who at least respect the telling quality of great schlock art, its ability to endure. For Nixon had discovered the one great secret about America. It was a first-class nation with a third-rate people, and he was the champion of the third-rate. Jack Kennedy had taught him that lesson about himself—that he was third-rate—and he no longer cared.

". . . and here's the man who's going to unify the country," said Nelson Rockefeller. Nixon stepped to the microphone. You could hear them all cheering from the corners of the shopping center and you could remember all the other times you have seen him performing the same routine. The times had caught up with him. There is no new Nixon, there is only a new America. And it doesn't care much anymore about excellence or justice or the rights of human beings. It just wants things to be quiet.

"This administration has set a record for striking out for America in the last four years," Nixon was saying. "They have struck out on peace abroad. They have struck out on peace at home. They have struck out on stopping the rise of crime. They have struck out on stopping the rise in prices . . . [cheers, applause, Rockefeller's crafty grin] They've been up at bat long enough. I say let us get up and we'll hit a home run!"

That's it. Baseball and a shopping center on Saturday afternoon and the plea for help from Decent America. Nixon gets that in at every stop, the pitch to all those Decent Americans who don't riot or picket or take drugs or call the cops "pigs" or complain or burn draft cards. They wash their cars on Saturdays and respect the flag and pay their bills and live in the suburbs. At night they watch TV in their undershirts and they think Richard Nixon is just fine.

"What do you think of all the things Nixon did in the old days?" one of them was asked, a man who was standing at the edge of the crowd carrying a "Nixon is the One" sign.

"What things?"

"Well, Alger Hiss and Helen Gahagan Douglas and the rest."

"Never heard of them," he said. "He was Eisenhower's Vice President, he knows what he's doing."

The Nixon fan was thirty-three years old and he was a chemical engineer. To millions of people his age, the old tawdry Nixon has no meaning at all. He is one of those millions who, in a Chicago delegate's phrase, "can't remember the bad Nixon and can't remember the good Humphrey." He is just Richard Nixon, intoning warnings about the decay of the republic, the permissiveness of the society and the need for a new home run hitter.

For many of us, Nixon has been with us forever: slandering Helen Gahagan Douglas, hounding Alger Hiss with the grim ferocity of a Protestant Savonarola, linking Hiss to Adlai Stevenson and intimating that Stevenson, Truman and Acheson were "traitors." He was always doing something in those years that seemed at least vaguely disgraceful, like taking $18,000 from a group of California businessmen and then going on television to talk about his wife's "Republican cloth coat." He was Joe McCarthy's friend and the hatchet man in Eisenhower's two campaigns, which were among the most vicious campaigns of this century (because of Eisenhower, not Nixon). Nixon was everywhere: getting spat on in Caracas, going through a silly platitude contest with Khrushchev in that kitchen in Moscow, talking in the TV debates with Kennedy about the "bad language" that Harry Truman had used about the Republicans and Jack Kennedy cutting him dead with a smile. He lost the election without grace, although only by 113,000 votes, and then he lost again in the California gubernatorial race of 1962.

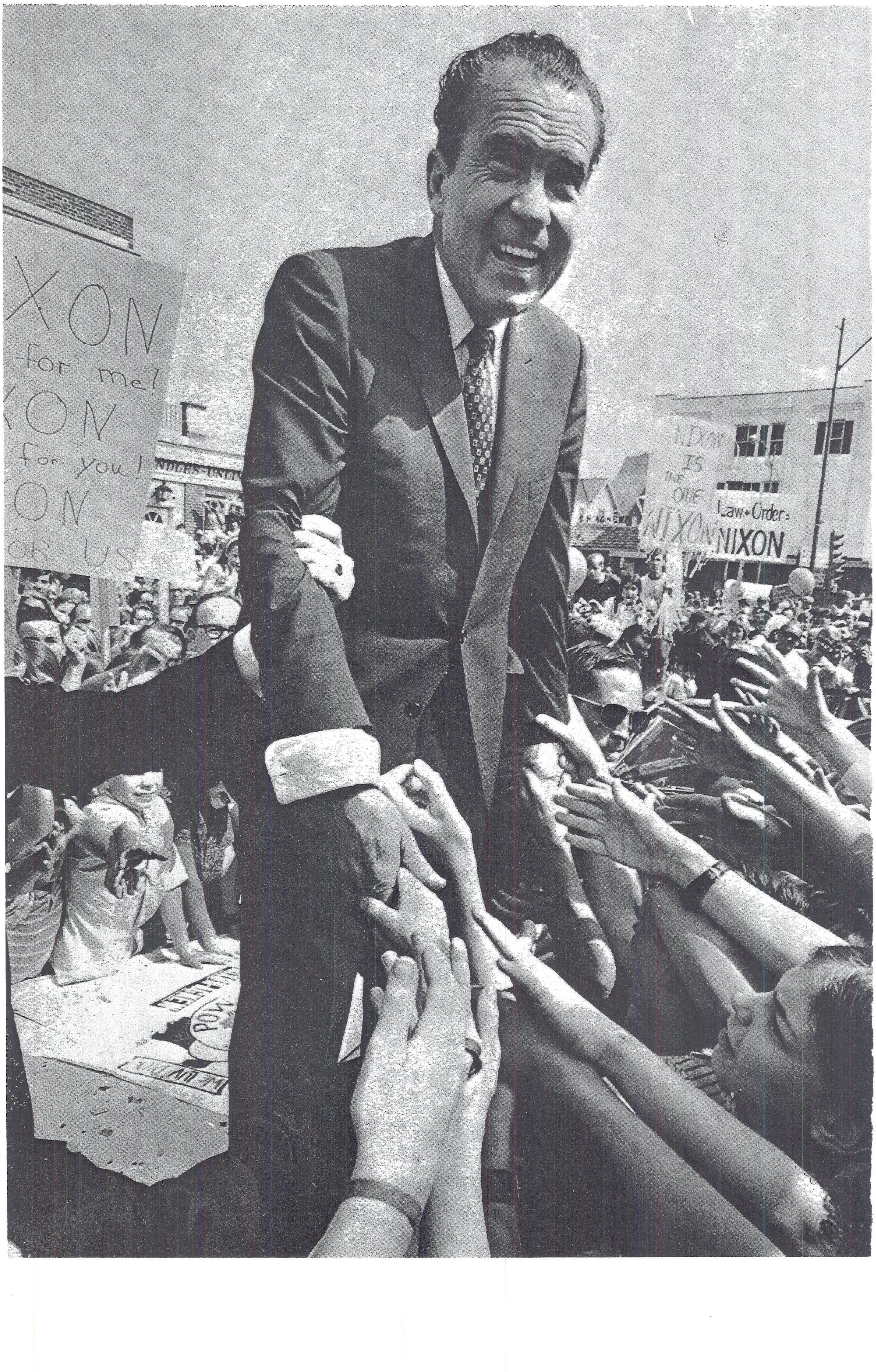
Finally there was the famous press conference when we all thought he must have been flipping out or half in the bag and all the columns said that he was politically dead. And then the long, slow comeback, building the organization he had never had, enduring the trials of the rubber chicken circuit and all the mushy garrulity which one must live with in the company of Republicans.

ALONG THE WAY HE LEARNED some secrets about America and particularly about the Republican Party. In San Francisco in 1964, when the rank and file booed Rockefeller and nominated Goldwater, Nixon discovered that Republicans were really just bigots of the country club variety. They respected money and success and despised failure. They wanted the trains to run on time and you did not have to promise them much to excite their passions. But it was absolutely necessary to be successful.

So Nixon ran after success in private life with the same rigid determination he had shown in the early years of his public

(*Text continued on page 40*)

by Pete Hamill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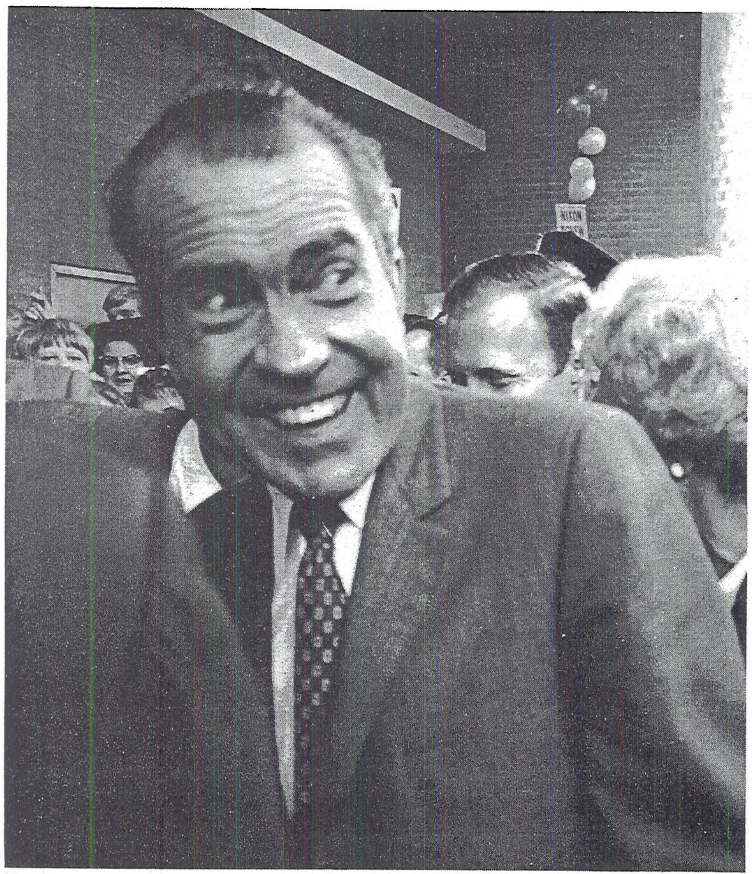

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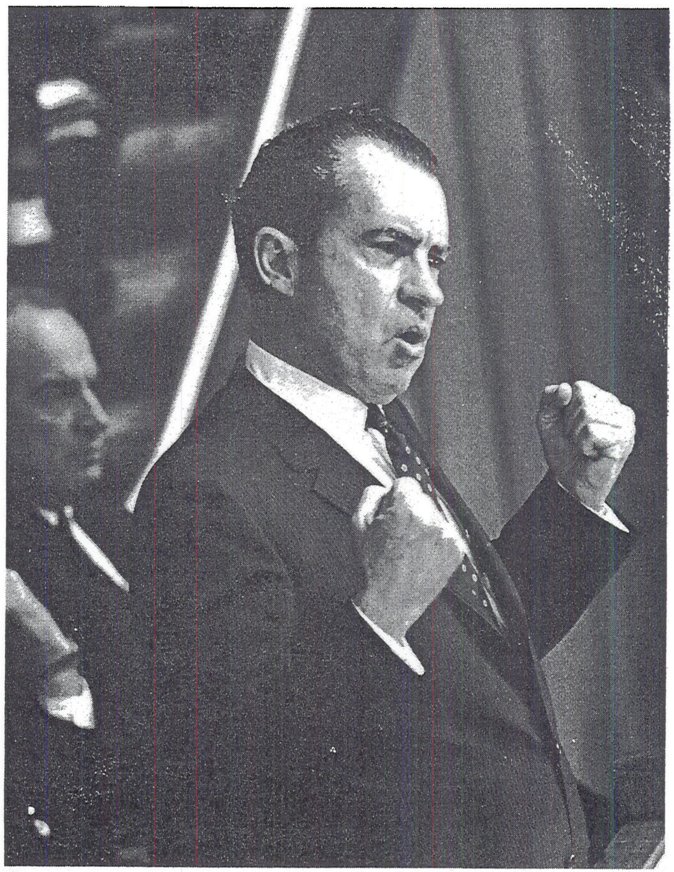

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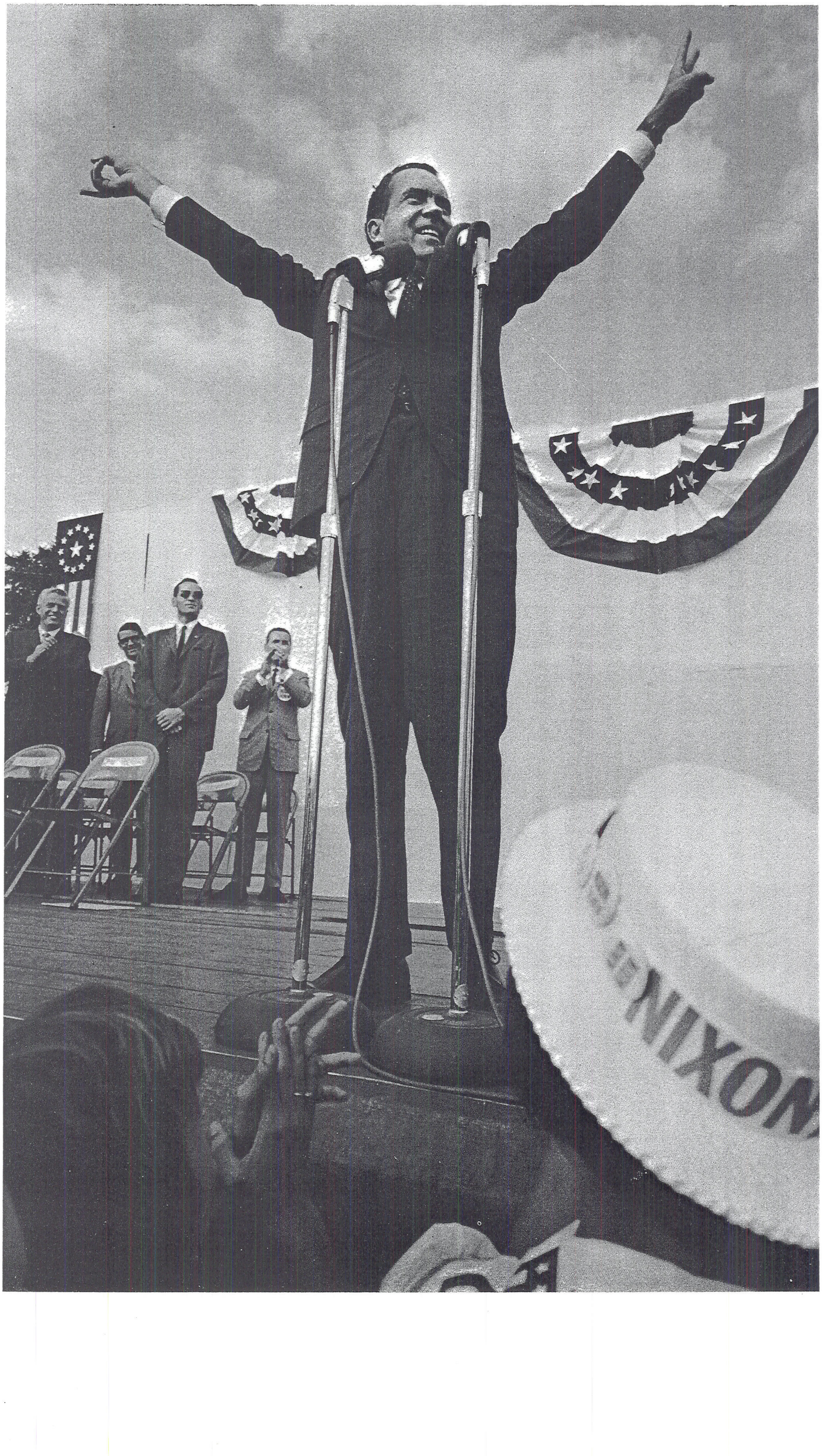
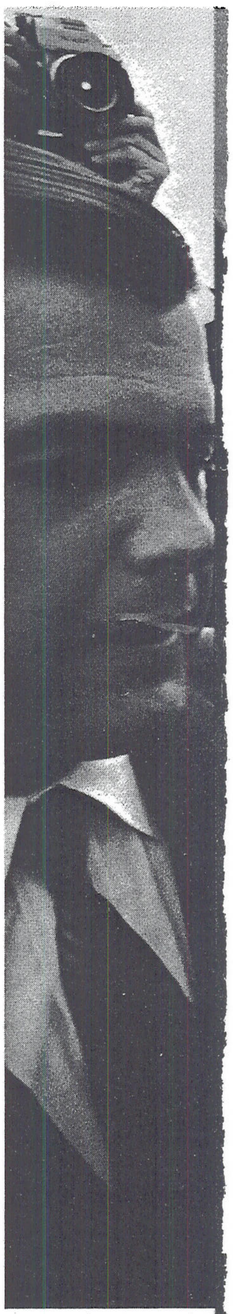
Photographs by Black Star





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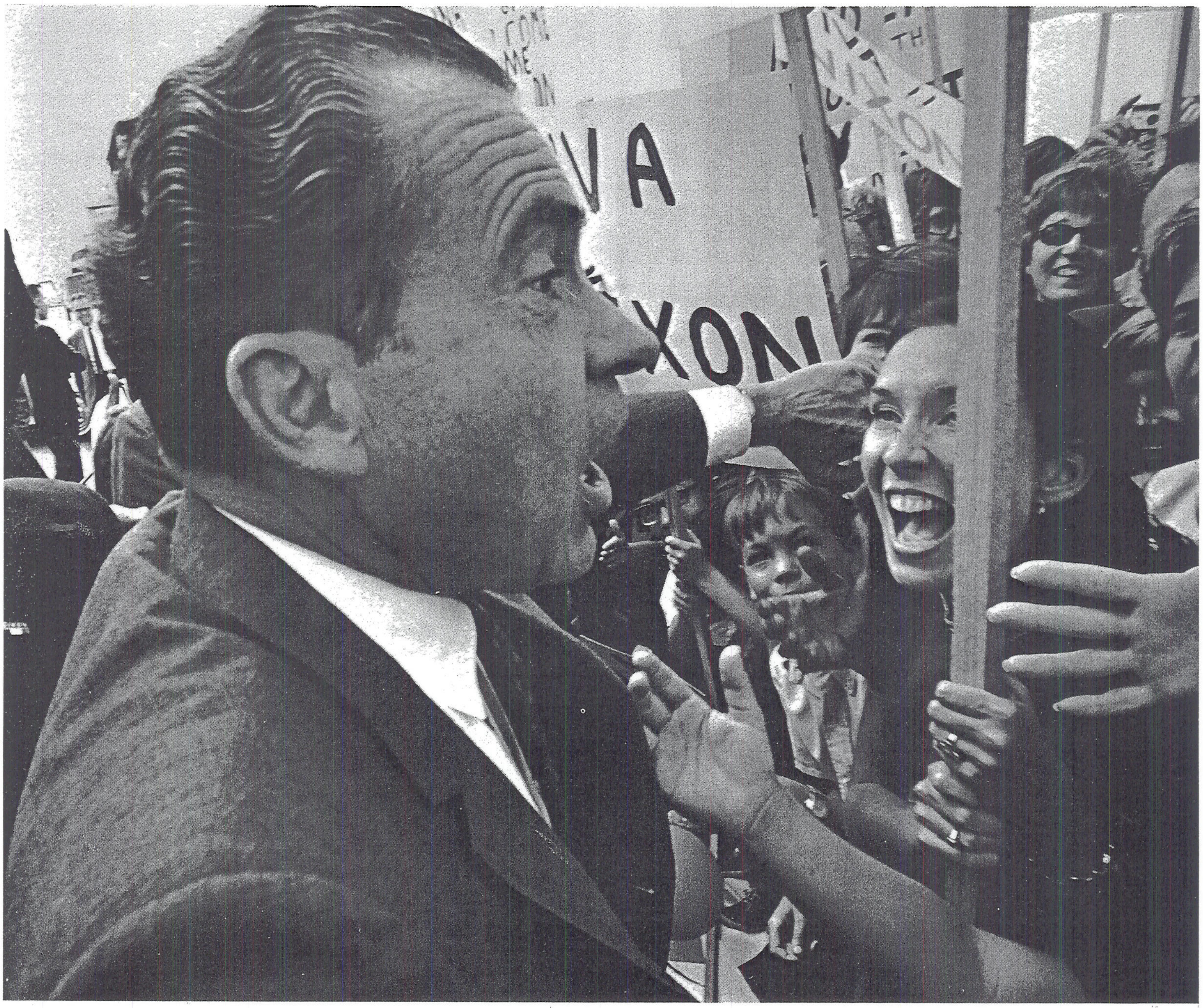

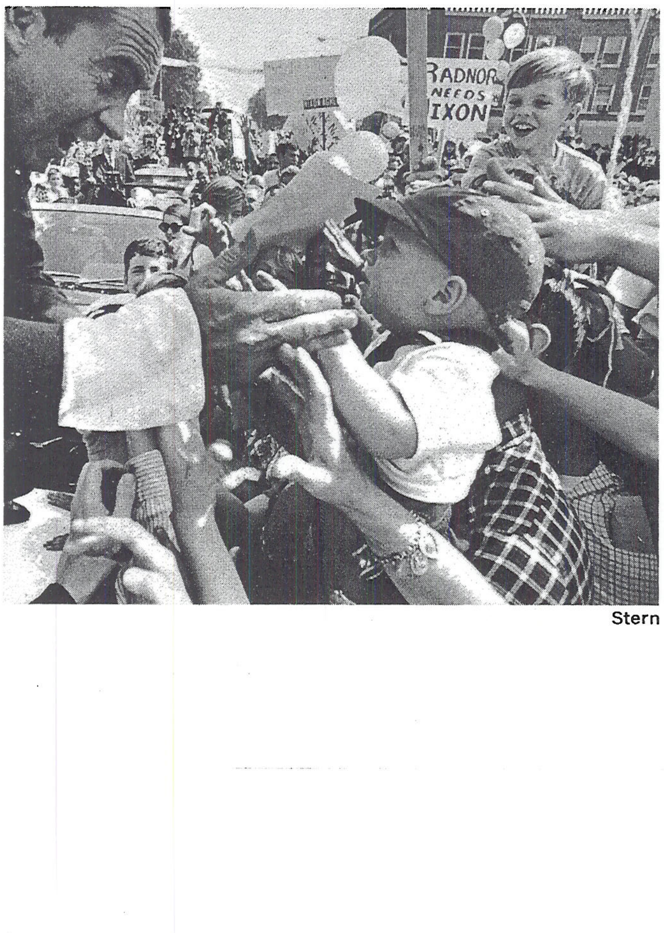
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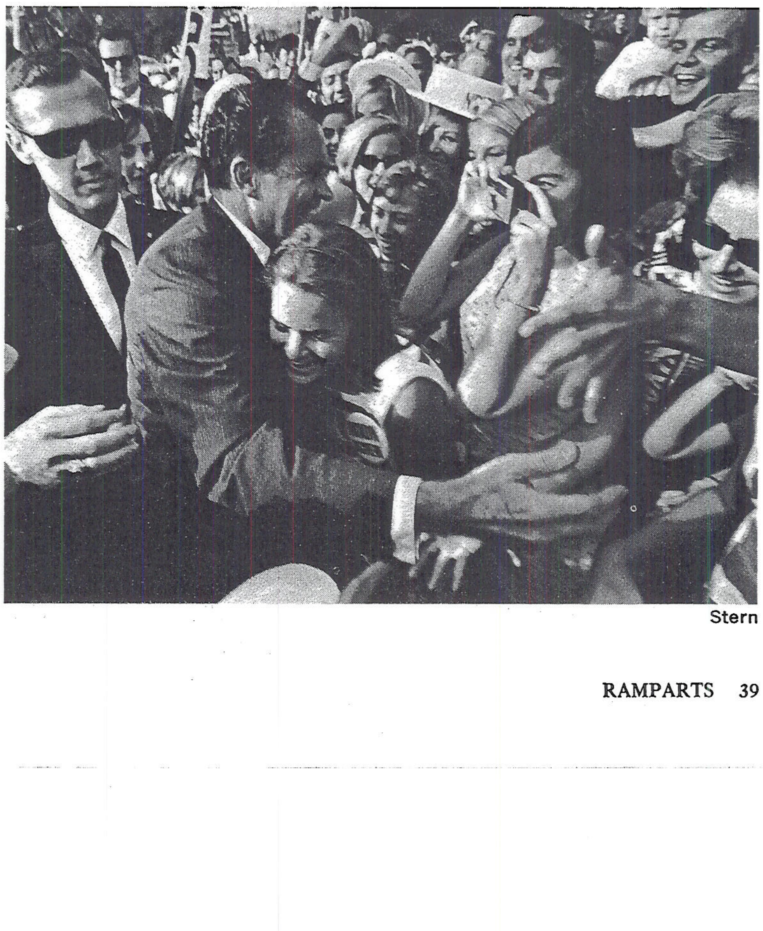

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career. He joined the New York law firm of Mudge, Stern, Baldwin and Todd and helped pull that old but sagging concern out of the doldrums. The rubber chickens came back to roost as clients and the firm started to boom.

Almost from the beginning Nixon prospered. Fletcher Knebel of Look magazine reported that Nixon's tax returns from 1963 to 1966 showed an average gross income of $200,000, about three-quarters of it from the law firm and the rest from royalties, speeches, real estate and investments. He moved into a 12-room apartment at 810 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, a co-op that cost $135,000 to purchase and about $10,000 a year to maintain.

By the time he arrived on the podium in Miami Beach this year, money had cured him of his old terrors. He had never believed very much in anything, and during those years when most men's personalities and viewpoints are being formed, he was in Washington. Nixon had done what Hubert Humphrey was also doing in the years after 1960. He had paid those dues which a politician must pay to go after any real power: to party chairmen in a thousand counties across the nation, as well as to the fat cats in the party's national structure.

But Nixon had always been an empty man, so the process only changed him for the better, adding ease and comfort and a kind of dull confidence to his exterior. After the assassination of Robert Kennedy, he understood that the Presidency was his for the taking. In such a contest he knew that the American people would always take the safe-looking man.

So there is little to discuss about traveling with Nixon. He already travels like a President, with his own party and a group of pool reporters on one plane and the scriveners of the press in separate planes behind him. He does nothing that is not calculated. Every stump speech is the same as every previous stump speech: the need for law and order, the need for peace, blah, blah, blah. He assures his audiences that there is nothing wrong with them, that they really shouldn't believe what the intellectuals and the media and the other knockers are telling them about themselves.

"There is a growing attitude," he will say, "that many opinion molders, community spokesmen and political leaders are promulgating, that each person has a right to decide what laws are good and what laws are bad and that he should break the laws he doesn't like and obey the laws he does like. This kind of attitude is one which inevitably creates a tendency toward lawlessness across the country. The role of poverty as a cause of the upsurge of lawlessness in America has been grossly exaggerated. If the conviction rate was doubled in this country it would do more to eliminate crime than a quadrupling of the funds of any governmental war on poverty. . . ."

Some of Nixon's eastern defenders say that his alliance with Strom Thurmond and his choice of Spiro T. Agnew were just exercises in practical politics, that he is not really like that. But there is nothing in the record to support such wishful thinking. Nixon is a rightist. Not the Birch Society type—he has publicly attacked the Birchers—but the country club type. He is one of those soft children who think you can always win by talking tough and you will never really have to fight very hard. He has played the law-and-order bit with the same innuendo-filled approach as George Wallace. His program for "peace and tranquillity" would give direct block grants to the states for enlargement of police forces. He would pass strong wiretapping bills for government use only, pass legislation to overrule Supreme Court judgments, such as the Miranda and Escobedo decisions on confessions, fire college faculty members who aid or abet rioters, expel student rioters and ban their organizations from the campuses.

He doesn't say much about Viet-Nam, claiming that he does not want to imperil the peace talks in Paris; more likely it is because he senses that Americans are tired of the war, tired of talking about it or hearing about it or even seeing it on TV. He might have a better chance of ending the war than Hubert does, but his past record of Johnson-like vanity and anticommunist paranoia does not afford much hope. It was, after all, Richard Nixon who said in Saigon in 1964, "There is no substitute for victory in South Viet-Nam."

THERE IS NO HOPE EITHER that Nixon will do anything at all to repair the various ruptures that have occurred in recent years. It seems unlikely that he will move to normalize our relations with Cuba, since the chairman of the Cuban Americans for Nixon Committee is Dr. Emilio Nuñez-Portuondo. The Nixon people have proudly described Portuondo's ties with the U.N. and his father's role at the time of the Declaration of Independence from Spain. They don't mention that he was Batista's foreign minister, one of the brains of the pre-Castro government and a founder of the White Rose, a counterrevolutionary organization composed almost entirely of former Batista police and army officers.

Among those serving on Nixon's committee of economic advisors are Robert T. Stevens and Roger Milliken, two of the most antiunion businessmen in the country. Milliken, head of the Deering Milliken Corporation, closed his Darlington, South Carolina, manufacturing company plant in 1956 because its 550 employees voted to join the Textile Workers Union of America. Stevens has been waging a five-year battle against unions, which have tried to organize his J. P. Stevens & Company, Incorporated. At latest count, 111 former Stevens employees were still out of work because of their union activities.

Nixon's panel of Republican congressmen, who are charged with advising him on major policies, are almost entirely members of the conservative wing. They include Senators Tower, Texas; Baker, Tennessee; Hruska, Nebraska; Mundt, South Dakota, and Representatives Arends, Illinois; MacGregor, Minnesota; May, Washington, and Morton, Maryland. All but one of these men voted against the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. All voted against the Appalachian development program. All but two voted against the anti-poverty program in 1965. Three voted to kill the program in 1966, and six asked for reduced appropriations in 1968. It goes on.

Yet there should be little surprise if Richard Nixon is the next President of the United States. He is the candidate with whom the most people would feel the most comfortable. He is a man with no beliefs, no private life of any mystery or gaudiness, a man who is beyond roots, beyond true passion, a convenient cipher whom millions of people seem determined to choose as President. He is the best symbol we now possess of all the terrible things that have happened to us in the past five years. We have passed so much time in the company of hate, we have committed so many foul and unholy acts, that as a nation we no longer care what anyone else thinks about us. We are at last shameless and alone like Richard Nixon.

ONLY FOUR VOTING DAYS LEFT UNTIL 1984