

How to Lose Even If You Win

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Oct. 27—In a very practical sense, it is not too much or too early to say that President Nixon has already lost the election of 1970. For if the purpose of his campaign was to make it easier for him to govern the country, it is fairly clear that his deceptive political tactics have deepened the divisions and anxieties of the people and infuriated many influential men in both parties whose support he needs to lead the nation.

Moreover, this is true even if the Republicans win a majority in both the House and Senate, for by exploiting the fears of the people and running a cynical campaign in the name of morality, the President can easily pick up a few seats in Congress and at the same time weaken his own moral authority and erode the public and Congressional trust on which effective government depend.

No amount of public indifference to the dirty tricks of politics can remove the plain fact of this campaign: Mr. Nixon has not treated the American people in this election as they need to be treated and deserve to be treated in this troubled time. They are profoundly anxious about the moral and economic problems of the period, but he has not helped them put these problems in perspective. He has not dealt with them responsibly or nobly, but narrowly and cleverly.

Again, as so many times in the past, he has acted as if he could separate and isolate one item on his agenda from all his other responsibilities. He is both the President and the leader of his party, but he has confused and reversed the proper priorities of his two jobs, using the majesty and trappings of the Presidency as if he were back running a cheap-jack Murray Chotiner campaign against Jerry Voorhees.

In short, he is asking for the trust of the people, but he is not trusting them to deal seriously and responsibly with the staggering problems that affect their lives. Instead, he is using

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their anxieties for partisan gain, and arguing the preposterous proposition that the moral confusions of the age are somehow a party issue, and that human frailty, human violence, human selfishness, war, crime, drugs and smut are somehow the fault of the Democratic party and can be minimized by the election of Republicans.

It is true, of course, that the Democrats are also indulging in the politics of fear. They are exploiting the fear of a depression just as the Republicans are appealing to the fear of anarchy, but there are two fundamental differences.

It is one thing to say: Vote for me or you may lose your job. It is much more serious to say: Vote Republican or you lose the moral basis of your life or maybe even life itself.

Also, if the people are not to look to the President for standards and integrity in our political life—especially when this is why he says he's campaigning—where are they to look? They cannot very well turn to the leader of the political opposition because nobody quite knows who that is.

There is a sense of loneliness in the country, even of helplessness and doubt about the fidelity of our institutions. This is something new in our national life—something very dangerous to the American character, something to be approached with sympathy and a reconciling spirit, rather

than trifled with and twisted into a party argument for a few Congressional seats.

There is something very sad and even mysterious about the President's campaign. For over six years we endured the politics of manipulation and exaggeration under President Johnson, much to the detriment of trust in the good faith, though not in the good intentions, of the White House. John Kennedy was killed and Lyndon Johnson was destroyed by this feeling that we didn't quite know what he was doing or where he was going next.

President Nixon came to office convinced that he could govern only if he overcame his old reputation as a gut fighter and followed the politics of reconciliation, but the attacks on his Vietnam policy, his economic policies, his Supreme Court appointments were too much for him. He thought they were unfair and he turned back to confrontation, to combat, to Chotiner and Vice President Agnew for remedy.

There was much to be said for a powerful defense of the President's record in these past two years. He has been grappling with four tremendous problems: how to cut back our overseas commitments without stumbling into isolation; how to cut the military budget and control the arms race without destroying the balance of power in the world; how to combat inflation without slipping into a depression, and how to restore order in the nation without destroying liberty.

This is a formidable agenda and there was plenty of room in this election for a tough, plain-spoken debate on the record—plenty to defend and plenty to attack—but that is not what we have had. The issues have not been clarified, but confused, the political institutions of the country have not been strengthened but weakened; the President's capacity to govern has not increased but decreased, and all that remains now is the judgment of the people on whether the President is to be rewarded or punished for his adventure.

"If a nation values anything more than freedom, it will lose its freedom; and the irony of it is that if it is comfort or money that it values more, it will lose that too."

—Somerset Maugham