



The Country Has No Good Options

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BETWEEN now and election day, the heat of political battle is apt to cause most of us to say and think some silly things about the presidential candidates. So an advance assessment before the campaign gets into full swing is useful.

The basic fact is that the country is faced with an unhappy choice. President Nixon and Senator George McGovern come from the far wings of American politics. What is best in the country is not represented by the candidates.

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TO BE SURE, Mr. Nixon has been a reasonably competent President. He has avoided disaster abroad, and he stood his economic policy on its head when it seemed to be causing trouble at home. Precisely because he does represent a minority in the country, he is not nearly as much of a threat as his political opponents make out.

But Mr. Nixon does come from the right wing of the Republican party. He has no instinct for drawing the country together. Neither does Mr. Nixon have a true feel for liberty. His attitude towards the Supreme Court expresses a contempt for the most hard-won and cherished protections of rule by law.

In foreign affairs, he is perhaps more expert than any past President. He has shown rare skill in maneuvering among allies and adversaries.

Still, approaches to Russia and China constitute the great feature of his record. What distinguishes these approaches is that they were done with the Vietnam war still in progress. In a sense, Mr. Nixon's great achievement in foreign policy has been to keep the war going.

Finally, there is the matter of moral stature. Mr. Nixon, as the cynical comments from the White House about the Watergate Affair remind us again, simply does not have it. He is not a man to keep the conscience of the country.

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MC GOVERN is different but not better. Despite his cautious edging to the center in the past few days, he is clearly a man from the left wing of the Democratic party.

His approach to foreign policy shows no sympathy for the truly constructive role played by the United States during the postwar era through the measured use of force. His original defense budget called for reductions in aircraft carriers and the number of troops in Europe on a scale and at a speed that means it would cost money rather than save it. The isolationist impulse works strongly in him.

In domestic affairs, McGovern is animated by the populist bias. He favors a turn of the wheel, no matter what it does to the social tone of the country or the interests of other citizens.

Personally, to be sure, McGovern has a deep inner decency. The truth is in him. But it seems frequently to be waging a losing battle against presidential ambition. Moreover, McGovern's performance in the campaign continues to raise questions about his capacity to govern.

This year, in short, the country has no good options. The middle ground of American politics has been torn to tatters, and conscientious citizens have to ask what happened to the center.