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The Biggest Hood

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

To ride along in the wheelhouse with the burglars, the shakedown artists, the buggers and the White House toughies, the FBI has discovered that Nixon has forgers and *agents provocateurs* on his payroll.

Still the polls tell us the voters aren't impressed. Maybe they think all politicians are hoods and, therefore, being President entitles you to act like the biggest hood.

In the past, however, hoodishness was kept out of the White House. Probably every President has had a couple of his disreputable stinkfishes, loyal followers from best-forgotten beginnings, hanging around the back door; but they were kept in the rear, out of sight and off the payroll. Even such a mediocre talent as Warren Gamaliel Harding felt such reverence for the office that when he learned his friends had cleaned up on the Teapot Dome it killed him.

Sure, the President has always been a pol; but once he was sworn in, he put the worst of that contemptuous word behind him. Not so Nixon, whose campaign resembles how they used to get elected alderman or county assessor in places like Brooklyn and Boston. Granted this campaign is much more highly organized into a startling admixture of General Staff and street criminals.

Running for alderman was simply engaging in what you'd have to call electoral strife. It had almost nothing to do with anything that might be considered the democratic process—like debate over matters of public interest—or even a personality contest in which the voters pick the candidate who seems the better man. One of the traits of big-city machine elections is that the candidates often never campaigned. If you were running for judge or councilman or coroner, you just brought in the five, ten or how many thousand dollars you were expected to kick into the organization and then you went home until they told you to come down to city hall and get sworn in.

There was no reason for such candidates to go about bothering people with speeches. They were running for only one reason: to get the job. In this type of campaign, when the candidate does open his yap, it's not to the voters, but to closed meetings of precinct captains and election day workers. Those speeches are short: You take care of me—I take care of you.

The Nixon campaign is much the same. The candidate talks only to the workers. Communication with the voters is left to those two Barbie Doll daughters, a regiment of surrogate human beings and the art of the TV ad producer.

This sort of campaign suits the ward heeler. He doesn't have anything to say. He doesn't believe in anything so strongly that he wants people to know about it. He just wants the job. A proud and leading President would find he isn't able to stay quiet.

Electoral strife differs from a presidential election in other ways. Since convincing people to vote for you is an accidental and unreliable way of prevailing, in electoral strife the ward politician relies on tricks. Again, Nixon is hardly the first pol to use them, but he certainly is the first President. (Others have used them on behalf of Presidents who didn't allow the frauds and forgeries to be organized and orchestrated in the Oval Room.)

The bogus Muskie letter is as old as American politics. There are infinite variations, the most common of which is circulating phony campaign literature. This year, it will probably take the form of distributing a flier in all-white neighborhoods quoting black leaders praising candidate X for taking a strong pro-busing stand.

The business of Nixon's people fouling up the starting time of McGovern rallies or forging tickets so that too many people try to get in the hall—and go away mad—are all ancient stunts. There are a million others, like calling in false alarms on the polling places so that voters in districts you're going to lose get tired of waiting and go home.

Nixon has an entire section of his campaign organization given over to this sort of electoral strife. The whole of America is to be treated like the Chicago River wards. This may explain the strange screw-ups last spring in the Ohio and California Democratic primaries. The Nixon campaign CIA may have been at work.

Nothing is without its redeeming aspects, however. The ward bosses of electoral strife are incapable of restraint. Even when they have a clear win like to pile it on. They want to do everything they can to guarantee they are in a sure-win, no-contest situation.

A politician, as opposed to a pol, would naturally like to do the same but he is restricted by the things he believes in and the politics he espouses. Nixon isn't, and if he thinks he needs it for his fail-safe victory on election day, he'll sign the odious peace treaty with the North Vietnamese that he swore he never would. That will be a blessing; but, peace agreement or no, the man has missed his calling. He should have run for county clerk.