

SFChronicle 43
MAR 7 1973

The Fearless Spectator

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One Man Rule?

SENATOR GEORGE McGOVERN told some people in London recently that he wouldn't go so far as to say the man was insane, but he would go so far as to say he found the man's behavior peculiar.

This description of the President so annoyed McGovern's Senate colleague Barry Goldwater that he was impelled to call the description "one of the major examples of bad taste I have seen in American politics."



A lot of us feel somewhere in between Scylla and Charybdis. Major examples of bad taste that far exceed Senator McGovern's are easy to come by. On the other hand, even bringing up the question of whether Mr. Nixon is certifiable is a decidedly low blow.

I'll go along with the word peculiar, however, and I suspect a lot of other Americans will also. Something rich and strange happened to Mr. Nixon when he digested the November election returns. He contracted a bad case of power. Though the popular vote was surprisingly small, and a Democratic Congress was voted in, and he was presented with an opponent of almost incredible ineptitude, Mr. Nixon took the view that the election was all about him. It wasn't, quite.

The election was to provide, among quite a few other things, a chief executive of this country. Mr. Nixon has come to think of himself as considerably more than that. He treats Congress like something less than a poor relation. Increasingly he treats the courts as agencies to rubber stamp White House policies. He will not permit his chief assistants, who wield the true executive power, to appear before Congress to explain and justify their actions.

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IN ONE SUCH RARE appearance of a top White House aide, John D. Ehrlichman, we got a mighty troubling insight into the way Mr. Nixon is regarded by his staff. After defending Mr. Nixon's budget, which in governance represents a formidable step backwards to Commodore Vanderbilt and Mark Hanna, Mr. Ehrlichman was addressed by a reporter: "But you're getting into the area of one-man rule."

"Sure," replied Ehrlichman, "well, that's what the President of the United States is." "One-man rule?" was the incredulous reaction. "Yes, sir, and he is the only elected officer elected by all the people of the United States, unlike the Senators and Congressmen."

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THAT LITTLE SOPHISTRY has comforted a few other presidential aides and their principals. When FDR won big in 1936 he decided to castrate the judiciary by packing the Supreme Court. He rapidly discovered that there was a Congress and a formidable body of public opinion against him, a government in fact. He turned his attention to other matters.

After Mr. Nixon won big last year he broke off Vietnam peace talks without any real explanation, and took off on the worst bombing of the whole wretched war without any kind of explanation at all, to Congress or anyone else. He sat up there on top of his job on top of his mountain at Camp David, which has been described bitterly as his Berchtesgaden, and just ruddy well ran the world all by himself. It was a scary spectacle. Until Mr. Nixon decides to explain things, the word peculiar is going to have to stick.

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A WISE OBSERVER once said that the only prize cared for by the powerful is power. Hitler and Mussolini were not in the game for loot. Loot merely bought that power which they had in almost limitless amounts. They didn't need loot, nor does any other tyrant. At this juncture, Mr. Nixon worries a lot of us. I keep thinking of that Hindustani saying Churchill was so fond of: "Dictators ride to and fro upon tigers from which they dare not dismount."