

Nixon: Total Presidency

THE FUTURE WHILE IT HAPPENED. By Samuel Lubell. Norton. 162 pp. \$5.95

By JULES WITCOVER

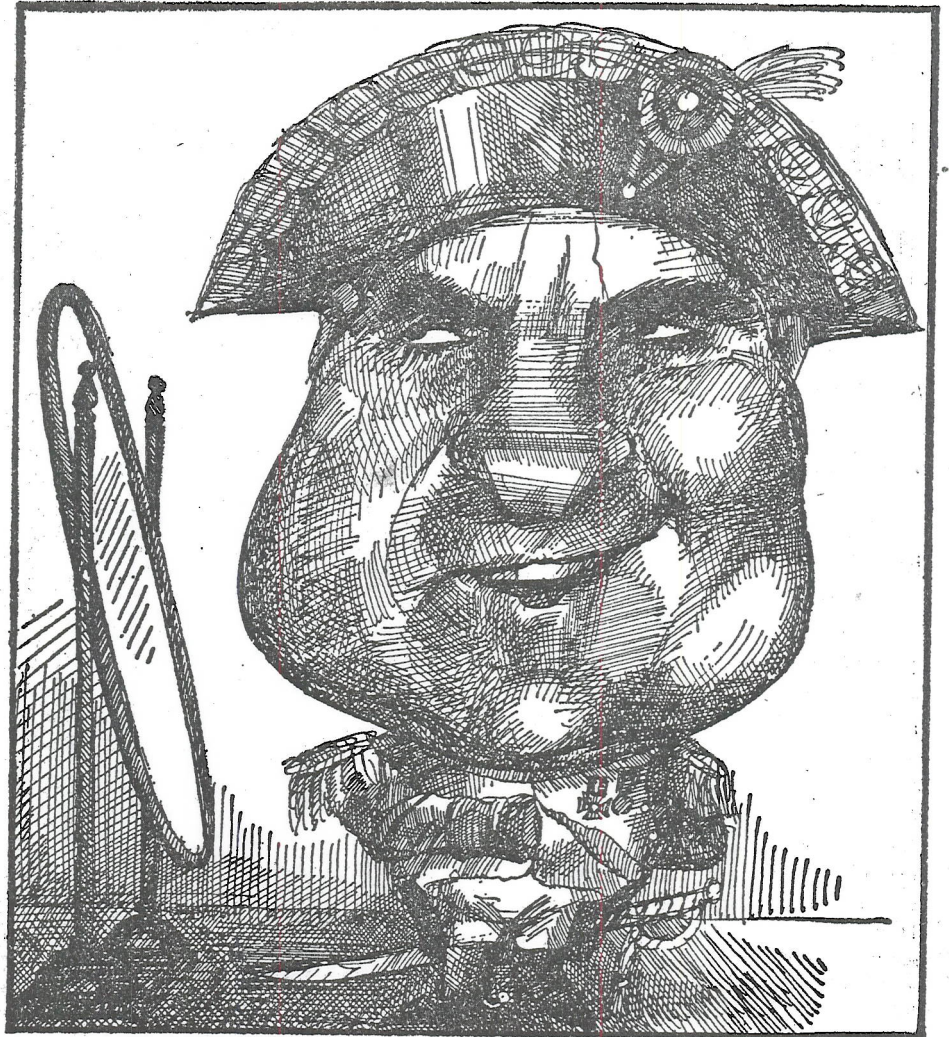
THE BURDEN of Samuel Lubell's latest book is neither new nor astounding—that steps taken by modern American presidents to perpetuate themselves and their ideas can and often do far outlast their own incumbencies. And the more a president consolidates and extends his power to manage the social, economic and political forces in the society, the more this is so. Thus, an examination of the Nixon strategy and performance in the 1972 landslide is a look at the shaping of the future in the present.

Far more pointed in this small book is Lubell's isolation, stripped down, of that Nixon strategy as a brutally self-serving encouragement of personal and corporate greed. By putting Americans to war against each other over a spectrum of issues—race, welfare, jobs, peace and war, youth and age—and by coming down clearly on the side of political strength in each case, Lubell says, Mr. Nixon fashioned his victory, and his power to shape the future now.

While considerable argument can be made that Watergate has eroded much of the power generated in the Nixon landslide—Lubell takes note of Watergate but doesn't dwell on it—the author's description of Mr. Nixon's issue-mobilization for victory is on the mark. He calls it "total election"—as in "total war"—and he observes rightly that while others, notably FDR, have used the White House to win reelection, "the process has never been carried through with such skill and absence of restraint as under Nixon."

Mr. Nixon organized the presidency for "political overkill," Lubell says, and urged total election on every front. He wooed labor leaders; he dangled textile import quotas before the South; he backed off the Philadelphia plan, for the construction unions; he eased the draft to buy off antiwar youth. He did all this and more in a similar vein, Lubell notes, as an individual rather than as a Republican partisan, and his victory accordingly was an individual one, leaving his party on the outside looking in.

In the process, Lubell says, the election became no more than a "ratification by the manipulated," by a president-manager who knew what strings to pull and pulled them. "With continued inflation, mounting taxes



and an uneven economic recovery," he writes, "it proved easier to encourage each voter to scramble for his own selfish interest than to devise a program for sharing the burdens equitably . . . a modern version of William McKinley's selfish individualism as the dominant domestic creed."

Although Mr. Nixon was the government, and was always reaching for more power, Lubell notes, he managed to run against "government," tapping the national discontent over its costs and its efforts to distribute the burden of social responsibility.

Lubell also has some interesting observations about how American

opposition to welfare easier on the conscience.

In all of this, Lubell buffers his points with quotations from 1972 voter interviews—which are too many, too repetitious and predictable. But they provide the underpinning for his themes—in place of the hard statistical framework he lacks—by virtue of his survey methodology, which is qualitative rather than quantitative. He seems to champ at the acclaim afforded the statistical, quantitative kingpins like Gallup and Harris, reminding the reader how right he has been with his in-depth precinct sample system, as opposed to their national random sam-

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youth fit, or didn't fit, into the Nixon equation of power through the encouragement of self-interest. He talks of "the shape-up coalition"—the Nixon "new majority" of those willing to fit into the economy as Mr. Nixon saw it—pursuit of the ever-growing GNP, regardless of social or ecological impact. The youth that refused to shape up by cutting their hair, or wearing a tie, or doing defense work rather than social work, was expendable, he says.

Race continued to be the great divider of Americans, the author says, with "welfare" replacing "law and order" as the code word for racism. To maximize the political mileage in it, Lubell notes, Mr. Nixon trotted out "the work ethic" to ennoble and rationalize voter selfishness, and to make

ple approach. His objective, he says, is to measure change, how much and why, rather than simply to predict outcome.

Harris and Gallup, of course, insist that neither are they in the predicting business, being statistical reporters of what America thinks at the moment it is asked. Both approaches are helpful tools in trying to look into the minds of the electorate. Lubell's book is a useful synthesis of 1972 voter attitudes in the context of the politically ruthless force that helped shape them. For those who may think all the heavy-handedness of 1972 occurred in the burglary and dirty tricks departments, this analysis of the Nixon mobilization of issues and the incumbent's power to shape them, for now and the future, is instructive.