

# Winter of Discontent

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, April 14—Patrick Caddell, the public opinion analyst, rummaged through the papers mounded on his desk and read out some figures.

"It frightens me," he said. "We're in a country that has always been optimistic—endless frontiers, today better than yesterday, we can bend events to our will, all of that. But now it is different. Most people believe they have lived through the high point of the American journey."

That sober conclusion emerges from a historical series of attitude surveys, measuring people's feelings about the state of the country. Those surveyed are asked to indicate, on a scale of zero the worst to ten the best, what is good and bad for America. Then they are asked where they think the country stands now on that scale, where it was five years ago and where it will be in five years.

In 1959, when we were emerging from a recession, such a survey showed a mean figure of 6.5 for the past, 6.7 for the present, 7.4 for the future. People felt things had improved and would be better in the future. In 1964 the curve of optimism was even steeper: past 6.1, present 6.5, future 7.7.

By 1971 the results were different: past 6.2, present 5.6, future 6.2. Those surveyed seemed to see the country in a trough.

This year the figures are more striking still. According to Mr. Caddell, the latest put the past at 6.3, present 4.5, future 5.0. If they are representative, they mean that Americans now see their past as golden. That is indeed a profound change in a country's self-perception.

Why has it happened? Pat Caddell says there was a sharp break in feelings and expectations just a year ago, as the Watergate story broke open. But he thinks Watergate has had a significance beyond its own subject, triggering latent doubts and fears created by Vietnam and inflation and other problems. "Watergate has been the intensifier," he says.

When people are asked particular questions, their answers indicate a growing feeling of frustration, of discontent with leadership, of cynicism. These are some statements that have been read to Americans in surveys, with the percentages who agreed in different years:

"What you think doesn't count with people in power anymore."

|      |             |
|------|-------------|
| 1966 | 37 per cent |
| 1974 | 61 per cent |

"People running the country really

## ABROAD AT HOME



don't care what happens to people like you."

|      |             |
|------|-------------|
| 1966 | 22 per cent |
| 1974 | 55 per cent |

"The Government has consistently lied to the American people over the last ten years."

|      |             |
|------|-------------|
| 1971 | 55 per cent |
| 1974 | 68 per cent |

Mr. Caddell thinks the figures point to a crisis of confidence in institutions, and he therefore believes the Democrats would be quite wrong to view them smugly. He is amazed at the apparent belief of some Democratic

strategists that the shrewd course now is to preach happiness—tell people they have never had it so good.

The public is so angry, he fears, that unless it gets straight talk from politicians it will be game for demagogic villain-hunting. He notes that recent surveys show 65 per cent agreeing with the statement: "Things are too complicated for the average person to understand." In the past, agreement with that statement has correlated closely with support for George Wallace.

The question one naturally asks is to what extent the discontent focuses on President Nixon and Watergate. Mr. Caddell emphasizes that the underlying problems of economics and world relations would still be there. But he says: "If Richard Nixon left office tomorrow, Gerry Ford would come in with the greatest honeymoon in American history, because the country desperately wants to come together."

My guess is that there is a reservoir of good feelings about this country, of hope and belief, that would be released in a flood by Mr. Nixon's departure. A woman named Dolores Dolan put it well in a recent letter:

"I have had a fantasy about what I will do when the good news comes. I told my children that I plan to dance in the streets. They laughed, but why not? Why not express joy in a public way, proclaiming one's release from a public scourge? When Nixon goes, prices will not immediately go down, or honesty reappear in government—but at least Americans will know we can begin to hope.

"Some may ring bells, shout cheers, toast in champagne or silently be thankful. I, for one, will dance in the streets. Rain or shine."

## Call His Agent

By Marya Mannes

Give Sophocles the plot: the doomed royal house,  
The lying courtiers bared, the adder-tape  
Writhing its hissing way through files and courts,  
Charge and rebuttal. Let him cast old men,  
Fat faces set in power, small mouths shut;  
Young men long groomed for the heroic roles  
They dreamed of, worked for, failed. Oh Sophocles,  
What better tale of a curse that spread its stain  
Far, far across a land, seeping in minds  
Doubting or drifting or long since corrupt  
With private lusts! Great Gods, the plot is there,  
The crowds, the amphitheatre, the despairing cry  
For catharsis! On whatever terms,  
Sophocles—write!

Marya Mannes is an essayist, critic and novelist.