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It Didn't Work

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By Russell Baker

So many people have announced that "the system worked" in the recent Presidential affair that we are in danger of believing it.

Survivors' euphoria probably accounts for the rosy judgments, but when the giddiness has subsided it will probably be seen that the system, in fact, failed almost completely from beginning to end. If things have ended happily, which is by no means certain, we can thank fate for a felicitous whim, for the system constantly nudged us toward increasingly grotesque outcomes from which we were saved by sheerest luck.

Even with the luck, the outcome produced by the system is a political absurdity in a nation boastful of its democracy. What do we have as the logical, legal product of the system's working? A President who has never run for national office and who, when his party last worried about going to the people, was not even considered a useful candidate for the dim office of Vice President.

The system left the choosing of this

new President to his predecessor, a man driven from office by bipartisan suspicion of felonious conduct, a man whose previous selection at the Vice President shop had earlier been driven from office for taking cash under the desk and cheating on his income tax.

If, despite all, this President is a happy choice, we have only luck to thank. Certainly not the system. We are told that Mr. Ford was not President Nixon's first choice for the job after Spiro Agnew had been cashiered. His first choice is said to have been John Connally.

One hesitates to say for a certainty that Mr. Connally would have been approved by Congress, for the nomination would have produced political resentment in both parties. Yet Congress also believes in the system, and the odds were that it would have accepted Mr. Connally had Mr. Nixon made the fight.

If so, the system would have produced its ultimate piece of Grand Guignol, the spectacle of Vice President Connally pleading innocent to charges of taking a bribe as Secretary of the Treasury while, simultaneously,

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President Nixon was resigning from the White House to avoid impeachment.

Melvin Laird is said to have dissuaded Mr. Nixon from making the Connally appointment by using the argument that it would create more political tensions than the President needed just then. Thus, Mr. Laird becomes one of the lucky accidents that saved us from the full catastrophe that was being blandly cooked up by the system.

An now, of course, we have the

system about to give us yet another Vice President not subject to voter approval, a Vice President selected by a man who wasn't, himself, elected by anybody. In the world's greatest democracy, as we fondly call it, the system gives us government by appointment only.

The system's failures do not begin and end with the exotic transition. If they did, solution would be easy. We could provide for interim national elections on occasions such as this and give democratic legitimacy to governments like Mr. Ford's.

But the system doesn't work much better in elections either. It creaked dismally in 1972. The system made it possible for the White House to manipulate the democratic choice of Presidential candidate, and then, thanks to the system's way of conducting elections, gave us a stacked-deck choice between Mr. Nixon and the man he most wanted to run against.

The system's informational machinery failed to communicate any idea of Nixon the man. How else explain the fact that after a quarter-

century of full exposure to the American public, he was the nation's overwhelming favorite in 1972, yet had a popular majority willing to see him impeached less than two years later? Something somewhere didn't get itself communicated.

Courts and Congress worked beautifully, we are told. This is arguable, too. What really worked beautifully were the White House tape recorders. No one believes that without the tapes Congress or courts would have had any systemic machinery for demonstrating the President and the tapes were most definitely not a part of the system. Everything about them was pure luck.

Under the system we have been cheated in a Presidential election, submitted to nearly two years of government by men of criminal proclivity, and encouraged to feel delighted with the prospect of two more years of government by men we have not elected.

If your car worked as well as the system, you would have had it in the shop ages ago, if not on the used-car lot.