

CHOOSING OUR LEADERS

Next Time, We Must Pay More Attention to Character

By James David Barber

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NOW THAT Richard Nixon is gone and Gerald Ford is in the White House, the hosannas rise once more to the Constitution. Our political reverence, so mangled by more than a decade of misrule from the White House, gathers itself together and kneels before that sacred text. In the crunch, they cry, the Constitution saved us.

Now I am all for the Constitution, but I do not think it is all it is cracked up to be. It did not save us; we used it to save ourselves, at least for the time being. The larger lesson of Watergate is this: No "system"—constitutional or otherwise—can be relied upon for political rescue. The real rescuers were the men and women who were determined to hold the government to the law. Our future safety and progress depend on our success

in choosing leaders who have the character and talent to preserve the Constitution — a task done well, when it is done well, nearly despite the constitutional system.

The impeachment provisions of the Constitution, for example, were the same ones used in 1868 against Andrew Johnson, in a wildly partisan and irresponsible way. The constitutional power of congressional investigation was there for the Ervin Committee—but also for Sen. Joseph McCarthy. The First Amendment freedoms enabled courageous and indefatigable journalists to track down the ultimate Watergate culprit, but there is no shortage of examples to the contrary, beginning well before the early coverage of the Vietnam war. The same basic Constitution governed the Supreme Court's powers when it ordered Mr. Nixon to release the tapes as when it stonewalled the New Deal.

People, not a document, did those things. This is no time to forget the people who wielded the Constitution to its best purpose over the past two years—Sam Ervin and Ar-

chibald Cox, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, Leon Jaworski, Peter Rodino, Warren Burger and the rest. Indeed, Watergate seems to have maintained an odd average of political virtue: As the Nixon crew descended, their opposites rose to the occasion.

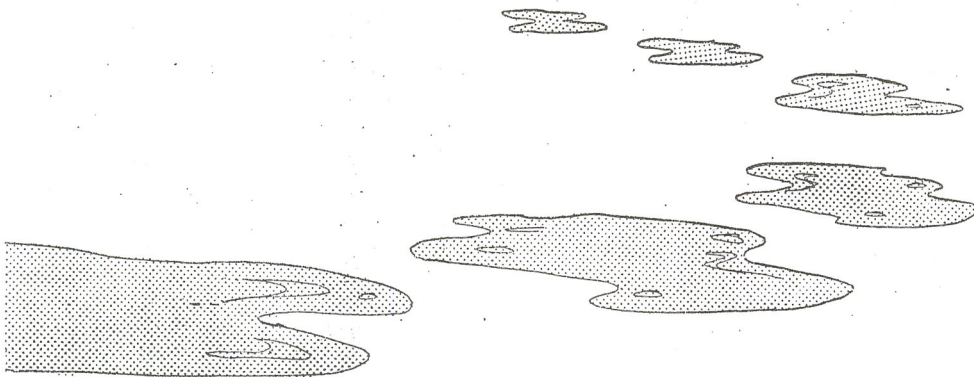
However good the constitutional medicine was for curing the Watergate disease once it festered into the open, the Constitution had no magic force to prevent more than a decade of presidential misrule. A child of 11 today has been asked all his life to look up to habitual liars in the White House. For the country, the tragedies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were not their downfalls but their uprisings. The Constitution did not—probably no Constitution could—cut these compulsive Presidents out of the herd of presidential contenders. Why not? And how could it be done in the future, despite constitutional inadequacies?

A Mad System

JOHNSON AND NIXON found their ways to the White House by the vice presidential route. The Founding Fathers' original system for choosing Vice Presidents (drafted over a weekend and passed without debate) was a constitutional absurdity: The runner-up in the presidential election became Vice President. Thus we could have gone from John Kennedy with Vice President Nixon, to Johnson with Barry Goldwater, to Nixon with Hubert Humphrey, to Nixon with George McGovern (who would be President today). Nutty as this system seems, it worked tolerably well up to 1800, because the candidates were the Founders themselves and they were determined to make it work. Then Aaron Burr (an outsider) tied with Thomas Jefferson, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, and Jefferson was elected on the 36th ballot, after a week of voting. The Twelfth Amendment, providing for separate ballots for the two offices, was meant to set all straight.

By John Twohey—The Washington Post

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Sanders in The Milwaukee Journal

"Because I have lost the support of the crew and can no longer guide this ship on the great course I have charted, I am resigning as your captain."

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Those who want to see the Founders and their Constitution as Moses and the Decalogue might ponder this little history.

Some means of nomination had to be developed and we got our present mad system for nominating Vice Presidents: Politicians at the national convention, in an advanced state of nervous exhaustion, pick someone from a powerful faction different from the presidential nominee's, the overriding consideration being how he will help win an election a couple of months hence. The concentration on short-term political advantage, as opposed to capacity to inherit the presidency, is overwhelming. When Richard Nixon was picked in this fashion, Dwight Eisenhower barely knew him. The Kennedys knew Lyndon Johnson well enough, but took him, warts and all, to win the election. Then Mr. Nixon chose Spiro Agnew, who nearly went to jail, and wanted to replace him with John Connally, who may yet do so. Fortunately, we hope, Mr. Ford was taken instead—but he is no test of the nominating system. Despite the most thoroughgoing investigation in vice presidential history, so little was

learned of Mr. Ford's presidential capacities that only now are the really hard questions being seriously asked and meaningful biographical information being generated.

More Than Machinery

OUR TYPICAL American response to such a problem is to revamp the system—say by requiring candidates for President and Vice President to run together through the primaries, or postponing the choice until after the convention. We are forever redesigning machinery in the hope that will reshape the product. Yet no matter what the "system" the real problem of vice presidential choice will remain: How do you find a person clearly qualified to be President but willing to spend at least four years as another man's political appendage? That is no more solvable by rejuvenging the procedures than the problem of choosing Presidents is.

The Founders' idea for President-choosing was nearly as unrealistic (they did not have much to go on). Voters in each state would choose leaders of judgment who would meet in their state capitols, ponder the nation's welfare, and pick a President to advance it.

As we all know, the Electoral College did not fulfill its promise, became instead a minor bit of patronage operating as automatically as a computer. The real choice shifted backward in time, to the national conventions, then to the primaries, and in modern times on back into the pre-primary grooming of candidates for a win in the public opinion polls.

Again the Constitution was inadequate. But the Founders' intention is, now as then, inescapable. For in spite of television, we still depend on responsible leaders to recommend candidates for President and Vice President (that process is under way in August, 1974, for an election in November, 1976). It would be interesting to replay the nominating speeches of the past, as eminences from Congress and the parties—who knew Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon better than the rest of us—made their endorsements. No *system* change will reform the typical puffery. What is needed instead is a stronger understanding of the criteria of choice, and the right information to make a judgment on.

If that sounds naive, and system changes realistic, I would only ask the reader to run over in his mind the history of structural reform in nominations. How have the reformer's hopes been fulfilled—in abandoning the two-thirds rule and the unit rule, in demographic quotas for delegates, in replacing conventions with primaries in the states, and so on? At least as often as not, the structural surgery has left the patient unaffected or with a surprising set of new pains. Fascinated with finding some new *machina ex deo*, we have too often neglected the good uses we can make of the machinery we've got.

Inspiration and Style

IF WE SUPPOSE that the time might be right for our leading recommenders to take their responsibility more seriously—considering what we have been through—what should they be looking for and how can they find it?

Right now honesty and personal decency are at the head of most lists. In the backwash of two incredible presidencies, that is natural enough, as it was for Eisenhower after the "Truman scandals." In the Nixon context, it was inevitable that the extensive

investigation of Mr. Ford last year focused strongly on insuring that he was not a crook. For a President is the only king we've got. He has to handle all the emotional and inspirational work the British can pass over to the monarchy. As king he is asked to exemplify, in his own person, the culture's idealized character — the best in all of us. In other times, potential Presidents will be called upon to meet different popular needs—the need for reassurance (Harding's normalcy), for a sense of forward action (Kennedy), for guidance in a chaotic world (Franklin Roosevelt).

Our typical mistake is to forget all but currently fashionable criterion. Richard Nixon came on in 1968 preaching reassurance: lowered voices, bringing us together, an end to crisis. This reassuring ploy worked with many to divert attention from the moral shabbiness of his behavior from 1946 on. Ike was

"No, no, no! If we can't learn by experience, what else have we got?"

—Guildenstern, in Tom Stoppard's play, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead."

seen as hounds-tooth clean, but not too many asked how this political amateur would lead Congress—or where. The result was yet another national nap, while the problems that would explode in the Sixties piled up around us.

Gerald Ford is thus the man for this disillusioned hour, but the time will come when we will readily sacrifice puritanism for political thrust. The least we can do in assessing any future candidate is to survey his past performance, to discern, as best we can, how he will do at each of these inspirational tasks we set (and always have set) for our President.

Beyond inspiration is fitness to exploit the positive possibilities of the presidency. Loose as the presidential role is, it does require that every President do at least some of three things: address the whole nation, negotiate close-up with other politicians, and do his presidential homework. What have been the candidate's habits—his style—in managing these tasks? In the romantic

flurry to elect Warren Harding no one seems to have been concerned that he didn't know a budget from a boutonniere. Lyndon Johnson's stylistic weakness was rhetoric; he presented himself as a hungover backwoods preacher with hives. Richard Nixon's style was from the first built around rhetoric, but he could no more sit down with half a dozen political leaders and get a good feel for the situation than he could play a creditable game of golf. He had none of the small talk which could establish a trusting relation with peers; at Sam Rayburn's "Board of Education," Mr. Nixon would have been a beached fish. Instead, his talk was petty and self-serving; he sought out little minds to share with.

The point is plain: Whether or not you buy this particular scheme of analysis, consider what the job of President entails and ask not what the candidate says he means to do, but what in analogous circumstances he has in fact done. (The analogous circumstance most worth noting is when, as a young man, our hero first emerged to establish a political style for himself, independent of his family.) See how other Presidents, with similar styles, have in fact performed.

Beliefs and Character

BYOND STYLE are the potential President's beliefs. Not whether or not he has opposed increases in social security benefits and the like, but his guiding assumptions. How does he see the way historical change happens? Harry Truman thought men made history by deciding what to do with it—by investing their energies in causes they believed in. Harding thought all was flux and chance, Calvin Coolidge that predestined fate rules history, Richard Nixon that timing for the magic moment would pay off.

Then, how does a possible President feel about human nature? That "Frankly, most people are physically and mentally lazy," as Nixon said? That "The chief ideal of the American people is idealism," as Coolidge put it? Or that "the people" are a rich mix of talents and possibilities, who share a desire for diverse self-fulfillment, as Franklin Roosevelt seemed to have believed?

Such questions are not in the least arcane or metaphysical. They turn out to bear much more significance in predicting how a President will act than the endless inquiries about a candidate's "positions" on pre-can-

ned "issues" defined for him before he stands in the presidential place.

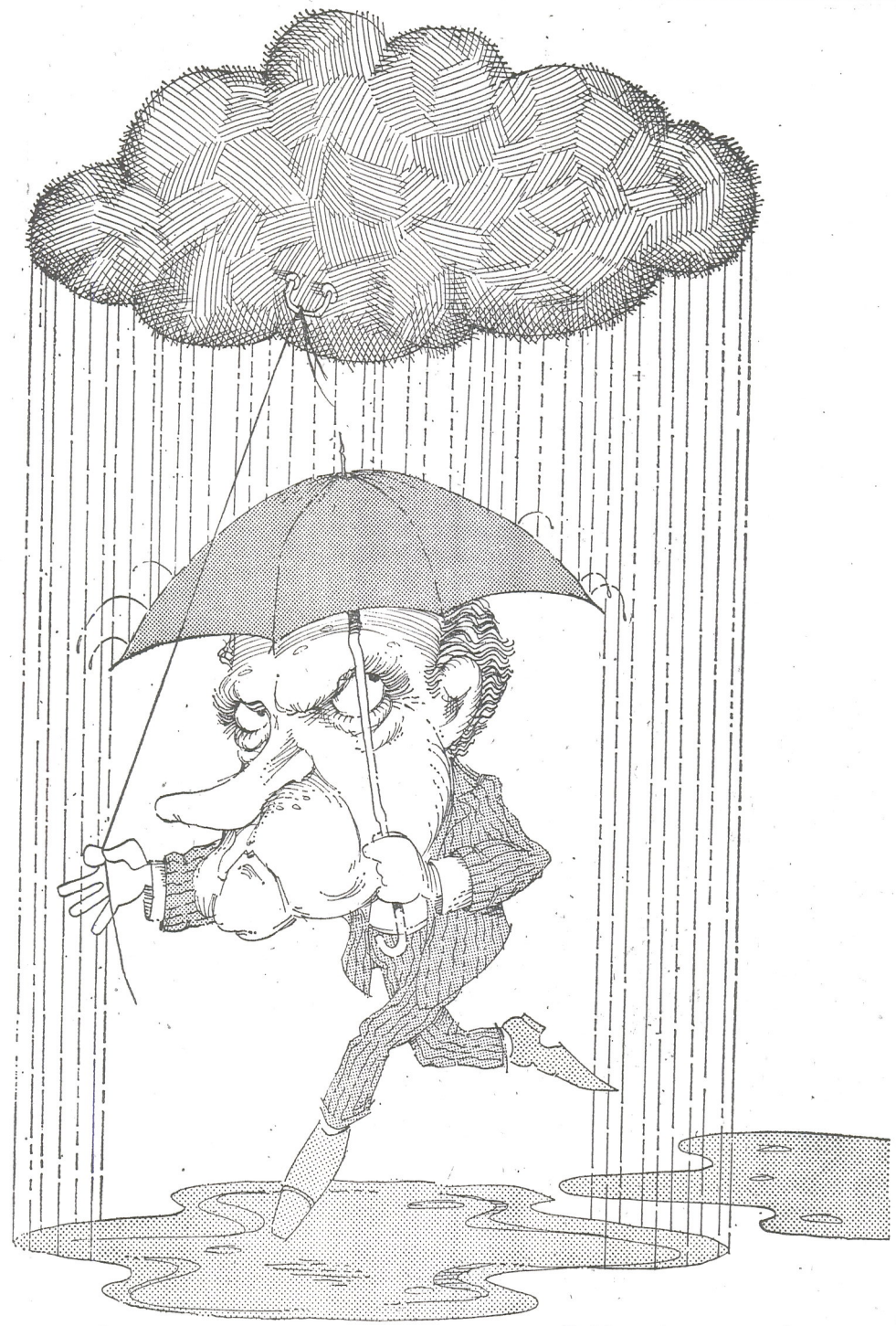
Then there is character: What fundamental meaning does politics have for our man, as part of his total life experience? At a minimum, we ought to have the beforehand perception to sort out those hard-driving, superambitious characters whose constant struggle for power is experienced as a painful, frustrating, endless quest. The pattern is not all that hard to discern: There is a perpetual self-concern; a focus of attention on power in politics; a constant, defensive self-justification; a dramatic view of one's moves as all-or-nothing, now-or-never. Such persons strongly resist defining themselves; they suffer as they work to rein in their aggressive feelings and resist the temptation to quit. They live in a dangerous, threatening world, a world made up of the weak and the grasping, a world seen now as a tight conspiracy, now as a chaotic morass. The most revealing characteristic is the pervasive sense that one *must* do whatever one is doing. Nor does success bring satisfaction—even winning the presidency simply escalates the demands of a perfectionistic conscience. And when such a person laughs, it is nearly always at someone else, not at himself.

The patterns of the other presidential types are equally interesting—the compliant ones, the men of principle who "rise" above mere politics as well as those politically creative leaders whose personal strengths enable them to see beyond themselves the possibilities of progress. The challenge is to discern the main outlines in advance.

Looking Ahead

AS EARLY AS Mr. Nixon's first year in office, it was possible to foresee that this apparently all-too-flexible man might well wind up rigid and defeated. For Mr. Nixon, like other Presidents of his type, was vulnerable to a freezing process. Trapped in a continuing crisis, one simultaneously threatening his self-righteousness and his powerfulness, Mr. Nixon was likely to turn stubborn—to transform a political problem into a highly personalized struggle for the highest stakes, a struggle he himself would arrange to lose.

Today it is clear that Mr. Nixon took on the Watergate cover-up from the start, that he spent two years in self-defeating denials



By John Twohey—The Washington Post

and diversions, and that he relinquished power only when he was sure to be thrown out. The pattern held.

Predictions of what kind of President Gerald Ford will make may come too late. Indeed the choice may already have been made for 1976, given the odds that incumbent President Ford will be drafted and win. But there are other candidates stirring, other lists being drawn and tried. Here, alas, the Constitution gives no guidance.

What is needed now is the same close study of each probable contender that perceptive journalists are now making of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Does this mean journalists should go around psychoanalyzing candidates? No need. Psychoanalysis is a therapy, a form of spiritual surgery for changing lives. To predict Presidents we need data of a different kind—on the overt habits of the man, his continuously expressed beliefs, his visible pattern of characteristic response—all considered in the light of his suitability for a specific office, the presidency. We need to move beyond recounting his curriculum vitae to exploring the meanings he has attached to his experience. The fact that Mr. Ford played football tells us virtually nothing; discovering what that meant to him might cast helpful light on his beliefs about sportsmanship in politics. The task is thus biographical and it requires the courage to point out the dull and obvious continuities as well as the dramatic reversals.

If that means journalists must make judgments about human responses—even psychological judgments—so be it. For the best are and long have been in that business. For better or worse, anyone who wants to make sense of once or future Presidents must look past the events of the day to the experiences of the life, and try to gauge the pattern and rhythm of it.

Too soon, 1976 will be upon us. The constitutional system will be there for us to work. All the old temptations will arise again—to suspend disbelief, to make the campaign time a magic holiday for boys on the buses and planes, to play bingo with the presidency, trusting that God or the system will take care of us anyway or that moving into the White House will transform some sow's ear politician into a silk purse leader. The alternative is to start now, with our good humor intact and our eyes open, to find the right person for the job.