

Charles McCabe

Himself

Conning Ourselves About Ford

HOW DEVOUTLY we wish our President to be a great and good man!

One would have thought this was some outgrowth of the democratic process. That is, we elected this guy of our free choice. We can agree with this even if we are members of the minority party. We elected him, and therefore he is an extension of the best part of ourselves. He has to be good. If he isn't, we arrange it, somewhere inside ourselves.

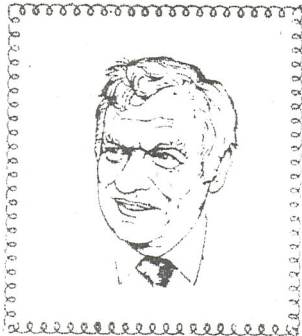
But the process works even if the man has not been elected, as in the case of the incumbent in Washington. We have a mediocrity (a mediocrity par excellence if there might be such a thing) in the White House, and we are so unwilling to admit it! I speak as one who has been guilty of this particular sin. I'm willing to go in for a bit of plea bargaining, as of the minute.

Soon or late this knowledge would have come on us. The precipitate and foolish pardon of Mr. Nixon just made it come sooner. This need to make our leaders great and good and Christian is as neurotic as it is real.

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THE BEST BOOK written about Mr. Nixon was "The Selling of the President, 1968" by Joe McGinniss. Joe totally understood what Mr. Nixon was about, which was television and the image it created. Mr. Nixon learned about television and pancake makeup when he got skunked in some television debates with John F. Kennedy in 1960. He is a man who never forgets a lesson which costs him votes.

Anyhow, Joe McGinniss was talking about Mr. Ford shortly after he took office. "And consider for a moment," Joe said, "his (Ford's) words: Honesty



is the best policy, practice the Golden Rule, God will provide.

"A month ago these were the harmless platitudes, greeted with snickers and yawns, of a decent but docile vice president. Now they are the moving, simple, eloquent, articulations of concepts so noble as to reduce brave columnists to tears."

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ONE OF THE reasons why we felt this way about Mr. Ford is that his predecessor was such an accomplished whiner. One of Mr. Nixon's greatest political gifts, which he practices especially well when in hospital, is his capacity for making people feel sorry for him. This applies almost more to his enemies than to his friends.

When Mr. Nixon finally left office I, for one, felt that I personally had a hand in the matter, although all logic and sensibility was against such a view. The man threw himself out of office through his own gross personal misconduct.

Yet he was able to persuade millions that they had personally wreaked on him some kind of personal and private injustice. Mr. Nixon is still working this gig, and will until the day he dies, unless I misjudge him.

This feeling, in addition to our homely need for heroes and hero-worship, brought about a national con job on Mr. Jerry Ford. All the available evidence told us that Mr. Ford was not only a political clod, but a political clod personally chosen by Mr. Nixon. This guaranteed us mediocrity, and maybe something less.

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BECAUSE he was like our friendly insurance agent, rather than our friendly used-car dealer, we embraced Jerry Ford like a wooly bear. We apotheosized the facts that he went to the john and walked out in the front lawn to pick up his daily newspaper. We broke up over his toasted English muffins. He swam every day, and it became something like Moses crossing the Dead Sea. He slept in the same bed as his wife, and this was somehow a miracle of marital fidelity.

Jerry Ford's literary portrait was skillfully limned in the early 1920s by Sinclair Lewis. He is George Babbitt, the Minnesota real estate booster who believed that what was good for George Babbitt was good for the country. But we don't want to believe this. By the Holy, we won't.