

# Nixon's Last Election

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 6—It was more a ritual cleansing than an election: a way for voters who were taken in by a con artist to express their shame and their resentment. They washed their hands of Richard Nixon by voting against Charles Sandman, Joseph Maraziti, David Dennis, Wiley Mayne, Earl Landgrebe and Watergate.

Nixon's Last Election: That is what it was. Even after his resignation, doubt remained that we were really finished with that strange and baleful figure. Now at last our political process should be free of his distorting effect.

All that ought to make the 1974 election an occasion for hope, but somehow it does not arouse feelings of great optimism or enthusiasm. That must be because the campaign was so utterly remote from the real issues facing this country and the world.

On Election Day, Henry Kissinger was warning the World Food Conference in Rome of "disaster" ahead if nations did not have the will to act together against starvation. What relevance did the 1974 campaign have to that life-and-death issue, or to the oil problem, or to the looming international financial crisis?

During our campaign the President of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, told his people that the curves of population, resources, energy, food and finance were all "leading us to disaster." He said he thought French citizens were entitled to "see the situation as it is."

The President of the United States, meanwhile, was telling his people that the extraordinary inflation raging in this country and abroad could be beaten if we held down the Federal budget. And wore a button.

Americans voted on no issues, then, except the political process itself. They voted against corruption and deceit in politics. That is a good thing, but negative. The 1974 election gave us very little by way of affirmation—very few signposts of belief or policy for a troubled time.

Similarly in the new Congress, negative action will be easier than affirmative. The huge new Democratic majority in the House may well force changes in some long-standing Nixon-Ford policies, for example the obsessive demand for ever more aid to South Vietnam. Congress will doubtless block any further attempt by the Ford White House to bury the Nixon tapes and documents, by completing action on Senator Gaylord Nelson's bill for their preservation and disclosure.

But it would be unusual, to say the least, to expect affirmative leadership

from a legislature. A body of 535 men and women cannot ordinarily govern a country—cannot conduct diplomacy or negotiate world policies on food or energy.

Congressional government is a creature long thought to be extinct, if not indeed mythical—a figment of political scientists' imagination. But we may have no alternative except to place our hopes on it now. For it would be an overwhelming piece of optimism to place any reliance on President Ford for leadership.

With all the concern about the imperial Presidency in recent years, there has been some talk of dividing the office—with a ceremonial figure as head of state and a prime ministerial one as head of government. In Gerald Ford we may have achieved the first without the second.

Watching this President when he speaks or answers questions, I have found myself focusing more on his

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## ABROAD AT HOME

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character than his words. He is a decent human being, and that is a marvelous change. But sooner or later we are bound to ask more of a President, and to look desperately elsewhere for leadership if he does not provide it.

After these last years, no sensible person wants or expects an overwhelming Presidency. But there is very little sign that Gerald Ford has any idea of the seriousness of the times, or a clue to any way out of our difficulties. He has not even had the sense or the courage to clear many Nixon holdovers out of his Government. He still has William Saxbe advising him on the law and Earl Butz on food.

As inflation and unemployment mount—and they will—the public will look to Congress for remedies. In the House of Representatives especially, the problems will be severe. The Democrats are already restless under their present leadership, and the incoming members may make change inevitable when the new Congress meets in January.

The reckoning will begin then. Like it or not, we may be in for a trial of, if not Congressional government, then Congressional responsibility.