

Books

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The Nation Was the Stage, Nixon the Scriptwriter

THE TIME OF ILLUSION. By Jonathan Schell. Knopf, 392 pp., \$10.

Reviewed by
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THIS book by Jonathan Schell of the New Yorker is the first in-depth postmortem of the Vietnam war, focusing on the role of Richard Nixon, who began to end the war and reunite the people and wound up by fighting it for five more years and dividing the nation as never before since the Civil War.

Schell has used all the documents and tapes made public and weaves them all into an even-tempered sequential narrative with the objectivity of a historian dissecting a squalid episode played out in the highest echelons of government. The various chronicles of the Watergate personalities are integrated into a single story illumined by Schell's insights and interpretations.

Read in this light the tragedy of Richard Nixon and his overweening hubris would take on Shakespearean proportions were it not so sordid. As Schell sees it, Nixon and his staff

had persuaded themselves that they could manipulate public opinion any way they wished, could destroy political opponents by "dirty tricks" any time they desired. When it suited Nixon to proclaim himself a "uniter" of the people, he did so. But during the 1972 election a carefully coordinated battle plan was used (and you have to read Schell to grasp how crafty it was) to create internal dissension among the Democrats.

"More and more the President acted as he saw fit, often clandestinely," notes Schell. "The President acted, his critics reacted." But one man who would not bow to Nixon was J. Edgar Hoover, and you'll be surprised at the efforts made by the Nixon assault troops to discredit him.

ACTON'S famous dictum that power corrupts and that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely comes repeatedly to mind as you read this book. "By the spring of 1972 Richard Nixon was setting himself up as the scriptwriter of the whole of American life. He looked on America . . . as a great theater, for



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sweeping dramatic productions in which a real nation was used as a stage, real public figures were used as unwilling actors, and the history of the nation was used as a plot."

In the end it all collapsed around him. He and his collaborators have paid the price for their misdeeds, but the thought that haunts Schell is not so much the evil that a President wrought as the potential threat to the human race that now lies within the grasp of a President. "The advent of nuclear weapons has done nothing less than place the President in a radically new relation to the whole of human reality," he asserts. "He or his Soviet counterpart can snuff out (life) as one might blow out a candle."

The burden of nuclear weapons is one with which mankind has lived for a generation. No President has been tempted to use it. Schell's nuclear note of doom in his closing pages does not detract from his scathing, merciless exposure of the Nixon nightmare. This dispassionate, unsparing fiasco is a foretaste of what is to come as the Nixon Presidency recedes into history.