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Shabbiness Raised to Tragedy

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

The true purpose of Jonathan Schell's marvelously cool and lucid book, "The Time of Illusion," unfolds itself only gradually. At first it appears that this history of the Nixon Administration, most of which appeared earlier as six installments in The New Yorker magazine, is simply trying to set the record straight. To this day it remains difficult to recall the years from 1968 to 1974 with any sort of retrospective clarity. We saw the public record unfolding all along, but the secret side of it did not begin to come out until the spring of 1973, and when it did, as Mr. Schell scarcely need remind us, "... the history of half a decade [came] pouring out all at once, [and] the papers were stuffed with more news than even the most diligent reader could absorb."

So it appears at first that Mr. Schell is simply reviewing reality by knitting public and secret events together—for instance, the speech that President Nixon delivered from the Moscow summit on the evening of May 28, 1972, calling for "a more peaceful world," and the intensified bombing of North Vietnam and the break-in at the Watergate complex, all of which were occurring at precisely the same time. And it seems that he merely wants us to see the shape and the stages of the Nixon years more coherently. Which he unquestionably makes us do.

Some Ironic Observations

Then gradually it begins to look as if Mr. Schell has come up with a more eloquent way of indicting the Nixon Administration than mere polemic would permit. For by juxtaposing events both public and secret, he is able to demonstrate persuasively how President Nixon almost always did just the opposite of what he said he was doing, whether it was waging war on foreign and domestic enemies while calling for "a more peaceful world," or stirring the country up while calling for Americans to calm down, or further centralizing the Federal bureaucracy while advocating its decentralization.

And by reconstructing the full story of the nightmare, Mr. Schell can toss off such drily ironic observations as the following: (Of Mr. Nixon's claim that he wanted to protect the secrecy of the Pentagon Papers in order to speed the end of the Vietnam war) "The situation was a historical novelty. The nation had had Presidents who took emergency actions in the name of winning the war, but it had never before had one who took emergency action in the name of leaving a war." (Of the decision to "tilt in favor" of Pakistan during the Indian-Pakistani conflict) "Plainly someone had put India on the enemies

list, and it seemed to have been the President. . . . What was new was that the target for retribution in this case was not Joe Namath or Barbra Streisand but a nation of five hundred million people." (Of Mr. Nixon's characterizing his domestic opposition as a threat to the "structure of peace") "None of this is to say that President Nixon had made a decision to subordinate the cause of human survival to the cause of his personal political survival. Rather, he appeared to have decided that the two causes were one."

But at last, after reconstructing the Nixon years, Mr. Schell sets forth an explanatory thesis that, one sees in retrospect, he has been driving at all along. It was not shallow perversity that caused Mr. Nixon to attack the American rule of law and to assume "near dictatorial powers." It was because he was trapped by a dilemma that had evolved when nuclear strategists (in particular Maxwell Taylor and Henry Kissinger) had tried to substitute more flexible military postures for John Foster Dulles's doctrine of massive retaliation.

Way to Establish Credibility

Nuclear power was an all-or-nothing proposition and therefore paralyzing to anyone wielding it, the Taylor-Kissinger theory went. What was needed was a way to establish the image of nuclear credibility without having to go to Dulles's brink. By and by, in the 1960's Vietnam was perceived as the means to establish that image of American credibility. John F. Kennedy discovered it; Lyndon B. Johnson embraced it, but finally drew back from sacrificing domestic peace to it; Mr. Nixon not only embraced it but also identified himself with it. Hence everything—the Presidency, the law, the American polity, even world order—became subordinated to it in his mind. L'image, c'était Nixon.

It is a gloomy thesis, not so much because it posits a malevolence greater than the perversity of a single man as because, as Mr. Schell concludes, despite the end of "this particular episode in the story of the nuclear dilemma," the "nuclear dilemma itself" has not been resolved. (Indeed the only shaft of light that peers through is one not commented upon by Mr. Schell: namely, that if Vietnam proved too substantial to lend itself to American imagery, perhaps the same will prove true of other "images" appropriated by the nuclear superpowers.) Still, by persuasively connecting the Nixon years to the larger dilemmas of our time, Mr. Schell has elevated a shabby political story to the level of tragedy. And one closes his deeply intelligent book not with feelings of vindication or outrage, but with a sense of understanding and equanimity that only tragedy can evoke.