

THE TIME OF ILLUSION. By Jonathan Schell. Knopf. 404 pp. \$10

By HAYNES JOHNSON

NOT LONG BEFORE Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968 some of the most respected political observers were in agreement about the prospects for his administration. "I believe that there really is a 'new Nixon,' a maturer and mellow man who is no longer clawing his way to the top," Walter Lippmann wrote. Lippmann's recommendation to the electorate was echoed by Joseph Kraft: "It makes sense to vote for Richard Nixon and the Republicans."

The wise men of the press were not alone in expressing their hopes. Mike Mansfield, who would continue to lead the Democratic majority during the Nixon years, looked forward to a stronger role for the Senate in foreign affairs. Blacks, who met with Nixon and heard him promise to "do more for the Negro people than any President has ever done," were impressed. And Americans generally accepted Nixon at face value: the stated goal of his administration was to be open to new ideas and to value his critics equally with his supporters. As Herbert G.

Klein said in pronouncing the Nixon theme: "Truth will become the hallmark of the Nixon administration."

We all know what happened. Ancient history. On to the next act.

It is perhaps naive of Jonathan Schell to assume that, after all we have been through, we will want to endure another recounting of so oft told a tale. When the articles that form the basis for this book began appearing in *The New Yorker* last year, I confess my immediate reaction was all too typical: "Not another analysis of Richard Nixon and Our Times." Yet Schell has performed a brilliant service. He gives coherence to events that seem, in retrospect, to have been almost incomprehensible. Here, happily, is no polemic, no political proselytizing, no writer's tricks, no angry epithets, no appeals to emotion, no posturing, no lecturing and no — or blessedly little — moralizing. He is lucid, and convincing.

Schell's thesis is simple — so obvious, indeed, that it is often overlooked. Our involvement in Indochina led, step by step, year by year, into the most protracted internal political crisis in American history, one that threatened a breakdown of our constitutional system. The Nixon years were thus merely the climax to a crisis long in the making. As he writes:

Each phase of the crisis — the war abroad, the strife at home, and the systematic convulsion at the end — grew out of the preceding one, and all were episodes in a single story: a story

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that encompassed some ten years of American history. Today, looking back over events that no one foresaw, that no one fully grasped when they occurred, and that many would now like to forget, Americans are left still wondering where the trouble came from, what it did to the nation, and what, if anything, it was all for.

His hope, he says modestly, is merely to "reconnect some of the fragments that are to be found in the various records of the Nixon administration, in order — as a first step toward understanding what has happened — to make the experience whole." And he offers "some thoughts on the deeper and more enduring American political crisis, of which the Nixon administration was only a part."

So much has been made of the familiar events of Watergate and the eventual impeachment process that the steps along the way are often forgotten. Schell brings them together with chilling clarity. The lies, the hypocrisy, the manipulation, the assaults on individuals and institutions — all were present, almost from the beginning. Like the administrations that immediately preceded it, the Nixon group operated on two levels, in public and in private. The secret, and darker, side of the Nixon years carried lawlessness to an unprecedented degree. In the end, the Nixon men went too far. They set in motion the forces that destroyed them, but only reluctantly and belatedly was that final battle joined.

Perhaps Schell's major contribution is not in the retelling of those events, but in reminding us that a greater problem remains. For a generation now the American government has been living with one great reality: how to guarantee survival in the nuclear age. American policy-makers have proceeded on the belief that they must preserve our "credibility" in the world by fostering the belief that America will use its vast power to ensure its, and the world's, survival from a nuclear holocaust. To achieve that aim they took all necessary steps, including illegal ones. Vietnam was central to that struggle. The longer the war continued, the more illegal actions were undertaken in the name of winning it. As time passed, victory in combat became incidental to winning the critical battle — for public opinion at home. When that struggle began to be lost, the illegal operations were intensified in number and degree. The will of the people increasingly came into conflict with the will of the state.

That democratic dilemma is an old one. Lincoln posed it best more than a century ago: "Must a government of necessity be too strong for the liberties of its people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?"

Schell suggests that the crushing burden of nuclear weapons has raised even greater questions about national freedom, sanity and salvation. And they are questions that transcend the Nixon era.

"They are questions," he says, "on which the framers of the Constitution and all other counsellors from other centuries are silent. The questions are unprecedented, they are boundless, they are unanswered, and they are wholly and lastingly ours." □