

THE NIXON VICTORY AND BEYOND

Michael Parenti and Catharine MacKinnon

THE QUESTION IS STILL with us: how did Richard Nixon, the man who enjoyed a lukewarm place in the hearts of forty-eight percent of all Americans in 1968, achieve such a smashing electoral victory in 1972? An election-eve Harris poll showed that substantial majorities of voters disapproved of Nixon's handling of inflation, unemployment, tax reform, environmental protection, crime, drugs and other domestic problems. Yet when choosing a President they apparently gave little consideration to these issues. One explanation might be that the voters had already made up their minds about what might be called the "pre-issues." These pre-issues defined the psychocultural context within which the behavior and views of the two candidates were evaluated—so much so that the campaign itself took on a certain irrelevancy. Consider the following:

During international crises the people rally around their leader

According to most opinion polls, Nixon's war leadership, along with his visits to Peking and Moscow, were among the few actions that won him popular support. While more than eighty percent of the electorate wanted the Vietnam war to end, an almost equal percentage approved of the President's handling of it, especially his mining of Haiphong harbor and his escalation of the bombing in response to the North Vietnamese spring offensive. The possibility of an election-eve cease fire brought no new support to Nixon and, according to surveys in Ohio and Connecticut, began turning undecided voters toward his opponent. As normalcy approaches, people are inclined to view the man in the White House with more detachment and vote their pocketbooks.

The war was never really George McGovern's issue. It was the President's pre-issue; that is, regardless of its merits it left the public predisposed to supporting him. International confrontations arouse that kind of anxiety which causes people to rally around their leader. Seeing in him the power that might determine their destiny and assure their survival, they place their faith in his judgments. In times of international crises, even if they go poorly, as John Kennedy found with the Bay of Pigs, people are inclined to draw close to their President.

At election time the people celebrate the national ego

The "greatest finest nation in the world" had little tolerance for the moral criticisms of a George McGovern. Perhaps one of the Senator's "mistakes" was suggesting to the voters that there might be something wrong with them if they could live with racism and poverty at home and genocide in Indochina. Not once did Nixon imply that the cause

of any national shortcoming might be found in the practices of the nation. While McGovern asked us to turn around and “come home,” or at least examine the direction we were taking, Nixon urged only that we “stay out in front.” “America is the number one nation,” he announced without specifying further. Did we want some equivocator to take office and reduce us to a “second-rate power?”

In associating himself with the patriotic impulses of his countrymen, Nixon had one unmatched resource at his command, the Presidency itself. “Re-elect the President” became the slogan for the man who presented himself as the institution. If Nixon was the President, and the President was the embodiment of America itself, then it was not long before the syllogism was closed: “It’s not a vote for Nixon but for America,” he reminded us during the campaign. “It’s not a victory for Nixon we want but a victory for America.”

The people want their leader to be macho-competent

The man who dropped the greatest tonnage of bombs in history received one of the greatest votes for the Presidency. Nor are these two manifestations of greatness coincidental. It was as Commander-in-Chief that Richard Nixon, the man who “when he was a kid was happy to get a briefcase for Christmas,” found his macho posture. “When you hit ’em you gotta hit ’em hard,” he would say with jutted jaw and clenched fist in justification of his bombing policy. This was the same Nixon who talked about the “restraint” we exercised in Vietnam and who once commented that he could “take out North Vietnam in a week.”

No matter if he was killing Vietnamese abroad or vetoing poverty bills at home Nixon conveyed an image of decisiveness and machismo that the reflective, low-key McGovern could never quite affect. A people raised on John Wayne and B-52’s equate toughness with competence, while the less violent and more compassionate approaches advocated by McGovern were taken as signs of weakness and inability. A man like McGovern, the voters suspected, would be too soft and too liberal to fight when fighting might be needed. Having once been typed as incompetent and weak, McGovern could do little to assuage popular anxieties. In contrast, the “seasoned” Mr. Nixon, treading the murky waters of the Watergate affair, the secret campaign fund, the ITT payments, the FHA scandal and the Dairy lobby pay-offs, seemingly could do little that was sufficiently wrong.

Comparing his relatively innocent mistakes to what he described as Nixon’s “massive crimes,” McGovern concluded in a post-election interview: “Those [Nixon’s actions] were not mistakes. Those were conniving, deceitful, underhanded deals. Any one of them should have been enough to have defeated this Administration but they weren’t.” They weren’t because they generated no anxiety among the voters. A

man who makes "mistakes," like McGovern, shows he cannot handle things. A man who commits sinister acts of cunning and deceit, like Nixon, demonstrates his ability to take care of himself—and us. Since politics itself is understood to be a dirty game, the man who plays dirty is demonstrating his competence, while his opponent who cries "foul" is merely admitting that he has been outdone.

Middle America fears change and dislikes the counterculture

The Harris poll found that for all their dissatisfactions the voters felt McGovern "wanted to change things too fast." Nixon's slower pace—imperceptible to some of us—was more reassuring. Better to suffer with what we have than to see things get even worse. This lesser-of-two-evils approach is the essence of two-party politics. Enjoying the legitimacy of four years in the White House, Nixon was the "safer" product, while McGovern was the unknown quantity. Worse still, McGovern seemed to be surrounded by representatives of the nether world: the hippies, the poor, the radicals, the gay militants and the militant Blacks who, as far as middle America could see, wanted to change *everything*. "McGovern," the irate father of one student exclaimed, "is the triple-A candidate: acid, abortion, and amnesty." In the face of all this, Nixon simply cast himself as the guardian of conventional virtues, a role much to his taste.

From August to November, Senator McGovern wanted to debate the real issues but these had very little to do with the election. No matter what he did, McGovern could not dispel the electorate's skepticism about him; he could not quite make himself *conceivable* as President.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN OBSERVERS FEARED that a second-term President would be a lame duck. Now the worry is that he will become an unleashed tiger. One can enumerate the many wrongs that will be suffered during the next four years: the erosion of our civil liberties will go on; the technologies of surveillance and violent repression at home and abroad will reach new perfection; fascist juntas will continue to fatten on our military largesse; the nation's domestic ills will fester under benign neglect while the endless appetites of giant corporations are generously served; and the life chances of many millions throughout the world will remain dim.

Yet there is nothing extraordinary about the Nixon re-election: it was no more a conservative victory than any previous election. In 1964 a New Deal conservative cold-warrior, Johnson, beat a right-wing conservative, Goldwater. In 1968, the choice was between another New Deal conservative cold-warrior, Humphrey, and Richard Nixon. In 1972 we saw the emergence into national electoral politics of the protest elements that have been gathering strength in the last decade. In a way, 1972 was the more promising of recent elections. It showed that while those who want fundamental changes in our society are still in

the minority, their numbers are no longer miniscule. Nor has their presence been permanently eradicated by McGovern's defeat.

Rebellious stirrings continue on ever higher levels of consciousness among women, Blacks, Chicanos and Native Americans. Within the U.S. Army the desertion rate has risen dramatically; overt expressions of opposition to the war, along with acts of insubordination and violence against superiors became commonplace enough to cause a serious breakdown of discipline in Vietnam, a situation that was resolved only with the withdrawal of ground troops. More lately, among enlisted ranks within the navy and air force, the signs of protest and resistance are becoming difficult to overlook. Prison riots, hardly a new phenomenon in our history, are manifesting a political content not previously known, as radical and militant prisoners find increasingly sympathetic audiences among their fellow inmates. A growing discontent and agitation among rank-and-file steelworkers, miners and other laboring people has increased the discomfiture of corporate managers and union leaders.

Among the younger members of the medical profession there is a new inclination to rise above the plundering entrepreneurial impulses that characterize so many doctors and move toward more socially dedicated uses of medicine, a development not without its political consequences—as witnessed by the dramatic decline of the once omnipotent AMA. Similar developments can be witnessed within the law profession with the emergence of radical law collectives, and the complaints voiced by law school students against the conservative property-oriented curricula imposed on them. Within the scholarly disciplines the orthodoxies of the 1950's are finally being challenged, as graduate students in political science, history, sociology, psychology and economics shift from a cold-war liberalism to more radical predispositions and more critical analyses.

The college campuses are hardly as quiescent as *Time* and *Newsweek* would have them. If students seem less active, they are not necessarily more conservative; if anything, radical consciousness has advanced. A few years ago most campus protestors thought of Vietnam as a "mistake"; today the war is understood by many to be a manifestation of corporate and military imperialism. Not long ago, pollution was considered "everybody's problem"; today ecologically-minded students and other citizens are realizing that our political and economic elites prefer to leave it that way. More people, on campus and off, are coming to see that America's problems result not from oversight and neglect but from the way power and property are organized, and that those who own the nation's wealth and control its institutions have little regard for its people.

These political changes have not left the bulk of middle Americans untouched. Opinion surveys last year noted the marked decline in "faith" that the public feels for its political and socio-economic institutions, a development troublesome enough to evoke alarmed comments from cor-

porate leaders and their servants in government. Public disillusionment is manifested in the percentage of non-voters, running as high as 55 to 60 percent in Congressional contests and 40 to 45 percent in Presidential ones—and increasing with each election. If this past November gave Nixon one of the highest winning percentages in history it also produced one of the largest percentages of stay-at-homes in a presidential election year. Non-voters number disproportionately among the economically and socially deprived, the cynical and the disaffected. They are won over neither by Nixon's superpatriotism nor McGovern's massive band-aid proposals, progressive as these might seem. Their failure to vote is itself a form of protest, an expression of deep-seated alienation from electoral politics rather than a show of contentment or apathy.

Nixon is wrong when he interprets his November victory to be an endorsement of his conservative economic policies or a mandate for more overseas interventions. The election demonstrates that the voters will huddle around the White House incumbent, succumbing to their gut patriotism and collective egoism, fearing exotic changes and scorning the appearance of weakness in a candidate like McGovern. But they did not give the President the majority he wanted in Congress; if anything, the new Congress has fewer old guard conservatives and more liberals and moderates than did the previous one. Nor are the voters as oblivious to their own wants as Nixon appears to be. They correctly suspect that they are being victimized as wage earners, tenants, homeowners, taxpayers, commuters, and consumers. There is a spirit of protest growing among them even as they feel uncomfortable about the more radical protestors. It seems plausible to expect that those grievances blurred over by the pre-issues of the campaign will emerge in the next four years—assuming that the President does not distract us with another crisis in Vietnam or elsewhere. (But even in foreign affairs, Nixon's opportunities for popular support may prove more limited than in the past as his actions continue to belie his words. Thus the massive resumption of bombing after Kissinger's pre-election "peace at hand" announcement, had a souring effect even on many Nixon supporters.)

Richard Nixon has reached the zenith of his career. But we might recall that Lyndon Johnson won an overwhelming mandate in 1964 only to be practically run out of office before 1968. So today, as the Nixon Administration continues to announce the arrival of fair weather and the people continue to feel left out in the cold, they might well turn on the man who is dedicated, after all, not to those who gave him his election but to those who funded it.

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American Labor: Progress and Regress

1. UMW: Historic Breakthrough for Union Democracy

Don Stillman

THE UNITED MINE WORKERS BUILDING sits like a fortress on the southwest corner of McPherson Square in downtown Washington, D.C. With its fireplaces, marble stairs and polished wood paneling, one gets the impression of being in a fine men's club, which is exactly what the building housed before John L. Lewis bought it in 1936.

Sitting in one of the comfortable leather chairs and looking out across a room the size of a basketball court, it's easy to see how the inheritors of the Lewis legacy feel so far out of touch with the men they were paid to serve. Somehow, chewing tobacco and coal dust and pick-up trucks seem very foreign to that environment in which the only health hazard seemed to be an over-active air conditioner on one of the Cadillac limousines.

Today, the limousines are gone. The new UMW officers put them in storage until they could be sold by sealed bid open only to coal miners. They called it an "end-of-an-era clearance sale" with the goal of seeing that, after years of being ignored, the rank-and-file was finally back in the UMW driver's seat. The Cadillac auction followed other symbolic actions aimed at narrowing the gap between the membership and the leadership.

Arnold Miller, the new UMW president, cut his salary from \$50,000 to \$35,000 and Mike Trbovich and Harry Patrick, vice president and secretary-treasurer, dropped theirs from \$40,000 to \$30,000. New staff members took cuts of 20 to 40 per cent and did away with the automatic \$8-a-day per diem of the Boyle era. With the \$400,000 saved by the salary and expense cuts, Miller said he hoped to expand the UMW's safety division, which had consisted of only three men under Boyle.

Miller, the 49-year-old coal miner who toppled the dynasty of Tony Boyle, wasn't given much of a chance last May when a convention of 450 miners from across the coalfields chose him as the Miners for Democracy candidate in the court-ordered re-run of the Yablonski-Boyle 1969 election. Boyle, although battered and bruised by exposé after exposé, fought on with all the tremendous resources of the incumbency.

For years, he had exercised autocratic control through a system of district trusteeships set up by John L. Lewis. In 19 of the UMW's 24 districts, Boyle appointed all the district officials and they served at his will. Although Miners for Democracy attorneys were successful in having