

The Presidential Issue

The office of the Presidency occupies a central place in American life. A President conducts foreign policy and is supremely responsible in issues of war and peace. He is head of a huge administrative machine and shares with Congress in the preparation and evolution of legislation.

The ways in which a President performs these functions go far toward defining the issues before the country and, indeed, the country's own sense of itself. His performance and his example help give the nation's traditional ideals their contemporary resonance. In short, a vast society of many clashing interests and diverse practices looks to its President to be a unifying and inspirational force as well as a manager of public policy.

When he took office, President Nixon had an unusually good opportunity to be a healer as well as a doer in the White House, and in his victory statement four years ago, he seemed to recognize clearly the scope and nature of his opportunity:

"That will be the great objective of this Administration at the outset, to bring the American people together. This will be an open Administration, open to new ideas, open to men and women of both parties, open to the critics as well as those who support us. We want to bridge the generation gap. We want to bridge the gap between the races. We want to bring America together."

President Nixon has sadly and spectacularly failed. For four years the war has continued, the most divisive force in the nation's life. Instead of bridging the racial gap, he has widened it by repeated demagogic appeals to white racial feeling on the welfare and busing issues. Though the campuses are now silent, Mr. Nixon has widened—not narrowed—the generation gap by such unfeeling responses to youthful protest as he gave, for example, at the time of the Cambodian invasion. So far as this being an "open Administration," it is undoubtedly the most closed Administration—the most secretive, the most removed and remote from the public, the most hostile to criticism—of any American Administration in modern times.

To distract attention from Mr. Nixon's failure to inspire or unify the nation, his defenders try to focus attention on the pragmatic, managerial side of a President's task. They are promoting the curious notion that he is a "professional President"—low-keyed, competent, practical.

This concept hardly squares with Mr. Nixon's indifference to most domestic problems and to the day-to-day details of governing. Budget deficits have soared out of control; the departmental bureaucracies lack firm direction; Mr. Nixon is remote and unreachable even to members of his own Cabinet. The Soviet wheat deal, in which the Russians outbargained, outmaneuvered and outwitted the American representatives, is only the most recent and most spectacular example of this Administration's administrative ineptitude.

Scandals have multiplied. Anti-trust settlements, milk prices, tax favors—the whole top echelon of the Nixon Administration openly acts on the assumption that the rich and powerful can bend the decisions of government to their own interests if they know the right people and are prepared to reciprocate with financial and political support for the Administration. The pervasive atmosphere is brazenly plutocratic. It is not the familiar corruption of personal bribery but corruption in the more corrosive and destructive sense of deforming the processes of Government for political ends.

Still more ominous, the President and his men have injected into national life a new and unwelcome element—fear of government repression, a fear reminiscent of that bred by the McCarthyism of twenty years ago. The freedom of the press including the electronic media, the right to privacy, the right to petition and dissent, the right of law-abiding citizens to be free of surveillance, investigation and harassment—these and other liberties of the individual are visibly less secure in America today than they were four years ago.

It is on all these grounds that we do not feel it can be justly claimed that Mr. Nixon has succeeded as Chief Executive. And it is in the incumbent's very deficiencies of spirit, of vision, of purpose and of principle that in our judgment Mr. McGovern stands in most striking and favorable contrast. He would bring to the White House an ingrained sense of values and a practical humanitarianism applied to both foreign and domestic policy—qualities that would restore to this country and to the Presidential office a moral purpose and an integrity of goals that have been largely dissipated these past four years—as American democracy has sunk steadily deeper into a mire of economic selfishness, military arrogance, social unconcern and political cynicism.