

Reflections on Mr. Nixon

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Before returning to Harvard, Daniel Patrick Moynihan greeted his White House colleagues in the East Room and bid them adieu wherein he reviewed in a thoughtful address Mr. Nixon's first two years in office. As Mr. Moynihan has acquired a singular perspective by serving two very dissimilar presidents, (President Nixon and President Kennedy), and as he is one of the most eloquent men to be recently exposed to the humiliations of public life, we think his evaluation of Mr. Nixon's White House is piquant. Hence, we publish it below in its entirety.

Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, Members of the Cabinet:

I feel, sir, not unlike a character in one of the Disraeli novels of whom it was said he was a man distinguished for ignorance, as he had but one idea, and that was wrong. It was my presumption that after Secretary Rogers and Dr. Shultz had spoken there might be still something of very great import that I might say.

If that is not the case, I think it may be just as interesting to find how very consummate are the things which the three of us have chosen to say on this occasion, suggesting that there is some reality to which we are responding.

As the President has said, we are now in the middle of the journey. Where it will end we do not know. It is no longer even clear where it began, our senses having long since been dulled by the relentless excess of stimulus which is the lot of any who involve themselves in American government.

It may be of some use, then, to try to reconstruct the circumstances in which the President was elected, and formed his Administration, just two years ago.

It seemed the worst of times. It was the habit then to speak of the nation as divided, and to assert that the situation was grave beyond anything since the Civil War itself. This was misleading. The country was not so much divided as fragmented; it was coming apart. The war in Asia, undeclared and unwanted, misunderstood or not understood at all, pursued by decent men for decent purposes but by means, and with consequences, that could only in the end be heartbreaking, had brought on an agony of the spirit that had had no counterpart in our national experience.

The agony was elemental, irresolvable, and nigh to universal. No matter what one's view of the nation might be, events in Vietnam contradicted that view. Not long before the war in Asia began, a French Dominican priest wrote that "Either America is the hope of the world, or it is nothing." An astonishingly large cohort of Americans concluded, in the course of the 1960's, that it was nothing.

The agony of war was compounded by and interacted with the great travail of race which, once again, not so much divided as fractured the society. Racial bondage and oppression had been the one huge wrong of American history, and when at last the nation moved to right that wrong the damage that had been done proved greater than anyone had grasped.

An ominous new racial division made its appearance, and with it also a new sectional division, unattended and underappreciated, but not less threatening.

The economic vitality of the nation was imperiled. The war disrupted the economy and then dictated that the onset of peace would do so as well.

In such circumstances confidence in American government eroded. Government was not to be believed, nor was much to be expected of it. Save fear. Government had begun to do utterly unacceptable things, such as sending spies to the party conventions in 1968.

It all comes together in the story of the man who says, "They told me if I voted for Goldwater there would be half a million troops in Vietnam within the year. I voted for him, and by God they were right."

How then could it have been otherwise than that the election of 1968 would begin in violence and end in ambiguity? It was clear enough who had won, albeit barely, but not at all certain what had won.

Then came the President's inaugural address with its great theme of reconciliation, and restraint, and -- in the face of so much about which we comprehend so little -- reserve. "Few ideas are correct ones," wrote Disraeli, "and what are correct no one can ascertain; but with words we govern men."

Those words of January 20, 1969, were and remain the most commanding call to governance that the nation has heard in the long travail that is not yet ended.

A Critique of Government

How, by that standard, would one measure the two years now past? Not, I think, unkindly. To the contrary, the achievement has been considerable, even remarkable.

In foreign affairs the nation has asserted the limits of its power and its purpose. We have begun to dismantle the elaborate construct of myth and reality associated with the Cold War. The war in Asia has receded, the prospect of arms limitation has gradually impressed itself on our consciousness, the possibility of containing the endless ethnic, racial, and religious conflicts that may now become the major threat to world order has become more believable as here and there things have got better, not worse. The prospect of a generation of peace has convincingly emerged.

In domestic matters events have been similarly reassuring. Far from seeking a

restoration of outmoded principles and practices with respect to issues of social justice and social order, the President, on taking office, moved swiftly to endorse the profoundly important but fundamentally unfulfilled commitments, especially to the poor and oppressed, which the nation had made in the 1960's. He then moved on to new commitments to groups and to purposes that had been too much ignored during that period, and beyond that to offer a critique of government the like of which has not been heard in Washington since Woodrow Wilson.

In one message after another to the Congress, the fundamentals of governmental reform were set forth. More was required of government, the President said, than simply to make promises. It had to fulfill them. It was on this bedrock of reality that trust in government must rest. The restoration of trust would depend on this.

Since that time, mass urban violence has

Great American Series

It is not the function of the government to relieve individuals of their responsibilities to their neighbors, or to relieve private institutions of their responsibilities to the public.

Herbert Hoover

all but disappeared. Civil disobedience and protest have receded. Racial rhetoric has calmed. The great symbol of racial subjugation, the dual school system of the South, virtually intact two years ago, has quietly and finally been dismantled.

All in all, a record of some good fortune and much genuine achievement.

Life is not fair

And yet how little the Administration seems to be credited with what it has achieved. To the contrary, it is as if the disquiet and distrust in the nation as a whole has been eased by being focused on the government in Washington. One thinks of President Kennedy's summation: life is not fair. But there is something more at work than the mere perversity of things.

In a curious, persistent way our problem as a nation arises from a surplus of moral energy. Few peoples have displayed so intense a determination to define the most mundane affairs in terms of the most exalted principles, to see in any difficulty an ethical failing, to deem any success a form of temptation, and as if to ensure the perpetuation of the impulse, to take a painful pleasure in it all.

Our great weakness is the habit of reducing the most complex issues to the most simplistic moralisms. About Communism. About Capitalism. About Crime. About Corruption. About Likker. About Pot. About Race Horses. About the SST. Name it.

This is hardly a new condition. Tocqueville noted it a century and a half ago. "No men are fonder of their own condition. Life would have no relish for them if they were delivered from the anxieties which harass them, and they show more attachment to their cares than aristocratic nations to their pleasures."

Moralism drives out thought

But in the interval this old disposition has had new consequences. What was once primarily a disdain for government has developed into a genuine distrust. It has made it difficult for Americans to think honestly and to some purpose about themselves and their problems. Moralism drives out thought.

The result has been a set of myths and counter myths about ourselves and the world that create expectations which cannot be satisfied, and which lead to a rhetoric of crisis and conflict that constantly, in effect, declares the government in power disqualified for the serious tasks at hand.

The style which the British call "muddling through" is not for us. It concedes too much to the probity of those who are trying to cope, and the probable intransigency of the problems they are trying to cope with. In any event, in so intensely private a society it is hard to get attention to one's own concern save through a rhetoric of crisis.

As a result, we have acquired bad habits of speech and worse patterns of behavior, lurching from crisis to crisis with the attention span of a five-year old. We have never learned to be sufficiently thoughtful about the tasks of running a complex society.

Elections are rarely our finest hour

The political process reinforces, and to a degree rewards, the moralistic style. Elections are rarely our finest hours. This when we tend to be most hysterical, most abusive, least thoughtful about problems, and least respectful of complexity.

Of late these qualities have begun to tell on the institution of the Presidency itself. A very little time is allowed the President during which he can speak for all the nation, and address himself to realities in terms of the possible. Too soon the struggle recommences.

This has now happened for us. We might have had a bit more time, but no matter. The issue is how henceforth to conduct ourselves.

As I am now leaving, it may seem to come with little grace to prescribe for those who must stand and fight. I would plead only that I have been sparing of such counsel in the past. Therefore, three exhortations, and the rest will be silence.

A company of honorable men

The first is to be of good cheer and good conscience. Depressing, even frightening things are being said about the Administration. They are not true. This has been a company of honorable and able men, led by a President of singular courage and compassion in the face of a sometimes awful knowledge of the

problems and the probabilities that confront him.

The second thing is to resist the temptation to respond in kind to the untruths and half truths that begin to fill the air. A century ago the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt foresaw that ours would be the age of "the great simplifiers," and that the essence of tyranny was the denial of complexity. He was right. This is the single great temptation of the time. It is the great corruptor, and must be resisted with purpose and with energy.

What we need are great complexifiers, men who will not only seek to understand what it is they are about, but who will also dare to share that understanding with those for whom they act.

And, lastly, I would propose that if either of the foregoing is to be possible, it is necessary for members of the Administration, the men in this room, to be far more attentive to what it is the President has said, and proposed. Time and again, the President has said things of startling insight, taken positions of great political courage and intellectual daring, only to be greeted with silence or incomprehension.

The prime consequence of all this is that the people in the nation who take these matters seriously have never been required to take us seriously. It was hardly in their interest to do so. Time and again the President would put forth an oftentimes devastating critique precisely of their performance. But his initial thrusts were rarely followed up with a sustained, reasoned, reliable second and third order of advocacy.

Deliberately or no, the impression was allowed to arise with respect to the widest range of Presidential initiatives that the President wasn't really behind them. It was a devastating critique.

A Bohemian Tory Reconsidered

Russell Kirk Of Piety Hill

W. Wesley McDonald

After the deaths of Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt, the themes of reflective, philosophical conservative thought would not be heard again until after the end of the New Deal era. Not that conservatism had become inarticulate and incomprehensible during the Roosevelt years, rather as Bernard L. Kronick wrote in 1947, "it had been drowned out by the clatter and confusion attendant upon the building of the 'Brave New World.' It was only when the resulting edifice demonstrated some alarming deficiencies that older themes were heard again."

Hard on the heels of the New Deal, during the late forties and early fifties, a great number of articles and books were published resounding the "older themes". Names such as Richard Weaver, Peter Viereck, Clinton Rossiter, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Russell Kirk became associated with a renaissance of conservative thinking. Yet, of all the books attempting to develop a conservative philosophy during this period, Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (H.

The thrust of the President's program was turned against -- him! For how else to interpret an attempt to deal with such serious matters in so innovative a way, if in fact the effort was not serious?

It comes to this. The Presidency requires much of those who will serve it, and first of all it requires comprehension. A large vision of America has been put forth. It can only be furthered by men who share it.

It is not enough to know one subject, one department. The President's men must know them all, must understand how one thing relates to another, must find in the words the spirit that animates them, must divine in the blade of grass the whole of life that is indeed contained there, for so much is at issue.

Serve...Pray...Understand

I am of those who believe that America is the hope of the world, and that for that time given him the President is the hope of America. Serve him well. Pray for his success. Understand how much depends on you. Try to understand what he has given of himself.

This is something those of us who have worked in this building with him know in a way that perhaps only that experience can teach. To have seen him late into the night and through the night and into the morning, struggling with the most awful complexities, the most demanding and irresolvable conflicts, doing so because he cared, trying to comprehend what is right, and trying to make other men see it, above all, caring, working, hoping for this country that he has made greater already and which he will make greater still.

Serve him well. Pray for his success. Understand how much depends on you.

And now, goodbye, it really has been good to know you. □

Regnery Co. Chicago, 1953) would enjoy the most widespread and enduring impact upon the character and direction of conservative thinking for the next two decades.

Dr. Kirk's thick book (478 pages in the Regnery hardback edition) was largely responsible for the revival of interest in the Eighteenth-century Whig, Edmund Burke. Before Kirk revived Burke's philosophical arguments this opponent of the fin-de-siecle French Jacobins was of interest only to the occasional scholar of the Eighteenth Century of the few men of humane letters moved by Burke's "moral imagination." At the turn of the Twentieth Century, Paul Elmer More could only shake his head sadly when a radical sociologist responded phlegmatically to the mention of Burke. "Ah, Burke! he's dead, is he not?"

Not only was Burke dead, but More feared that his political thought was about to be interred with him. A scant fifteen years ago, Peter J. Stanlis, author of *Burke and Natural Law* (University of