Connections

A Multitude of Tongues

Change and decay in all around we see. Even nostalgia isn't what it used to be. Still, some things linger pleasantly in the memory. I even have memories and ghosts of memories that hover invitingly over presidential campaigns of years past. Do you remember—or at least remember reading about—FDR's bravura performances on the campaign circuit? And Harry Truman's "give 'em hell" onslaught? And even the Kennedy-Nixon debates?

I recall things not only because they contrast with the relatively undramatic quality of the 1972 campaign, which is nearing its end as I write. (These lines will be committed to print before I commit my vote in the ballot booth.) I recall them because they themselves recall a time when people who held or aspired to the highest office in the land anticipated, even relished, strong opposition. "If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen," was Truman's encapsulation of his position.

And now? Well, President Nixon has presided over some very stormy episodes in our history. He has also maintained unpopular positions with remarkable consistency. But—to absolutely wallow in redundancy—unpopular means not popular, i.e., not "beloved or approved by the people" (Webster's Unabridged). He had every right therefore to expect vigorous opposition. But in mid-October, speaking to relatives of American prisoners of war, Mr. Nixon lashed out at "leaders of the media . . . presidents of our universities and the professors . . . and some of our top businessmen." The reason for his deep displeasure? These men in these important offices had sometimes expressed open disagreement with his policies, had failed "to understand the importance of great decisions and the necessity to stand by the President of the United States when he makes a terribly difficult, unpopular decision."

What a strange notion of our society lurks not far below the surface of that castigation! Should we pursue the logic of Mr. Nixon's judgment to the conclusion that the more difficult and more unpopular the decision he makes the more leaders of society should rally 'round, should follow his desires? And that when it's most unpopular they should give most support? But what if—as is in fact the case today—they disagree? Or does Mr. Nixon envision a society in which the leaders automatically think in lock-step with the President, all bien-pensants marching bravely against hordes of opposing and less-informed opinion?

The flaw in this approach is not, however, the sole possession of Mr. Nixon nor even of the Republican Administration. In President Johnson's term of office Dean Rusk more than once passionately advocated relatively unquestioning support of the President when he made hard decisions. Following this approach, political analysts and commentators still tell us to "put yourself in the President's place."

The rather flabby notion which supported that bit of advice is that the effort to imagine the burdens of the Presidency would arouse our sympathetic understanding and weaken our reservations. But if, following that advice, one responded by saying, "In his position I would decide otherwise," one would be told, "Aha, but you do not have access to information that may, unknown to you, be guiding his judgment." Precisely! One can sympathize with the President, one can regard with awe the burden of that high office, but few citizens can imagine themselves into his position. We must, each of us, speak from the corner where we are.

Our society is grounded on other principles than automatic support of, or silent reservations about, presidential judgment. There is no means or process which guarantees correct or admirable judgments, but that process which we have claimed as a nation was eloquently expressed by Learned Hand: "Right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues than through any kind of authoritative selection. To many, this is, and always will be, folly, but we have staked upon it our all."

Before the next presidential election there will be many times when the President will make difficult, unpopular decisions, involving, not least of all, our foreign policies. There is no reason to believe they will all be misguided, but there is no reason either to think they will be divinely inspired and free from error. And they are more likely to be sound, mature decisions if they first go through the purification rites of informed, vigorous public debate—and sometimes public disagreement. I pledge Worldview to be part of that debate.

James Finn