Connections

The 1972 Election—A National Raspberry

January is traditionally a time for taking moral stock of ourselves, for making pledges of self-reformation. It is also the month in which, every four years, presidents are inaugurated. This year there is a necessary connection between the two. Richard Nixon's second term holds out only the promise of frustration and neglect, sanctimonious rhetoric and profane policy. We are entering a long winter of American political discontent.

For the results of the election of 1972 testify. Probably there has never been a more frustrating election for the American voters. They proved it by splitting their ticket or by staying home: in general, they gave both political parties the equivalent of a national raspberry. On both of the party lines the vast majority of voters had a choice only between a candidate they did not like much and a candidate they distrusted or detested. American democracy, in the presidential elections of 1972, was a colossal flop.

I know, of course, that it is the fashion among McGovernites to mourn the failure of the electorate to rise to the moral height allegedly set by the Democratic candidate. Less enthusiastic analysts are inclined to replay endlessly the practical decisions in the campaign, wondering if this or that "game plan" would not perhaps have been more successful. I want to suggest that neither of these approaches is much to the point, that instead we would do better to examine the flaws in our whole attitude toward politics, the "issues" and public morality generally.

In the first place, the attitude of liberal-left America is dangerously intellectualistic. It sees the "issues" as words written on paper but spoken in public forum. Politics is more than words: it is critically involved with allegiance, devotion and trust. One does not trust a candidate for what he says; it is important to know what he means. And what he means involves feeling, sentiment and deeply rooted beliefs. It is not enough that a candidate is "for" me and mine in some abstract sense; I may want him to understand me or even be with me, and that is not a matter of words alone.

Now, it is obvious that none of the major Democratic candidates—Humphrey, Muskie or McGovern—was capable of articulating the sentiment and feelings of the electorate. None managed to express the anger, the frustration and resentment of Americans at large. I suspect that this will always be a problem for liberals who generally—from gentleness or from fear of the consequences—spend a great deal of their time repressing or controlling anger. But while Wallace or Agnew could voice anger, their expressions were phony or incomplete: they could not and did not address the very genuine feeling of compassion, hope and the yearning for community that also characterize the majority of Americans.

The liberal failure in 1972 was not, however, merely a question of "style" or "image." It was also the result of the reflection of a deep contempt for the electorate at large, one which the voters perceived only too well.

The problem of the approach to "welfare," for example, neglected the fact that there are solid reasons for disliking welfare and that it is hard to approach American workers—with whom the fear of being "on welfare" is a major anxiety—if one treats that dislike as somehow an atavistic survival of a nineteenth-century "work ethic." Make welfare affluent, make it right; it still leaves the individual dependent, without a sense of his contribution, worth or dignity.

Or Vietnam: McGovern and his followers laid great stress on being "right from the start." They demanded that Americans confess that the war was a mark of sin—evitable and not Original Sin. It was not enough to be converted to the cause. It was not enough to be willing to "forgive and forget"—on both sides—in relation to deserters and draft evaders. It was not enough to be willing to make almost any concession for peace except going on our "knees to Hanoi." What was demanded was a concession that the war was totally wrong; that there was little or no excuse for thinking otherwise at any time; that those who opposed the war were righteous in the use of almost any means.

Now it is possible that a majority of Americans might have bought even this position. But McGovern showed chinks in his armor of righteousness. That in relation to Eagleton he lied and then demonstrated personal disloyalty based on expediency; that he vacillated and compromised his position in pursuit of the main chance—all this confirmed what a great many American voters guessed already—that the self-righteous merely combine self-seeking with self-deception.

If there is a New Year's resolution for liberal-leftists, it might be the pledge to bring democracy into their hearts as well as their doctrines and to learn the lesson of moral humility which may be the truest product of human wisdom.