

Learning to live with Nixon

Editor's Note: With this issue the Emerald introduces political columnist Gary Wills. Best known for his best-selling *Nixon Agonistes*, Wills is generally considered the fastest rising political commentator in the country.

He will replace Nicholas Von Hoffman on the Emerald editorial page, and will appear regularly with William F. Buckley, Jr.

Wills, 38, was recently cited by *Time* magazine for his perceptive coverage of the November general election. He holds a number of educational degrees, including a doctorate from Yale University. His field of interest, is classic literature, an area he incredibly incorporates into contemporary political commentary.

The following article is the first of a two part article reprinted from the *New Yorker*. It is considerably longer than Wills' usual column, but will serve to introduce his engagingly perceptive style. Part II will appear in Tuesday's Emerald.

By Gary Wills

"Four more years." Of what? Germaine Greer claims Arthur Miller gave her the answer in Miami: "If this man wins another term, the Supreme Court will be castrated, and the *New York Times* will be a single mimeographed page." Almost, this Miller makes me a hardhat. He would no doubt have said the same kind of thing before the 1968 election; yet here is the same old *Times*, still very fat, like the rest of us. The apocalypse has better taste than to associate itself with American elections. Our party processes mash the candidates in toward the middle — a law best proved by those who try to defy it, like Senator McGovern. After denouncing the "regulars" in primaries and the convention, he was reduced to shameless capitulation by the end of his campaign; and even then he has been ineffectual. He started too far out from the perceived middle of things.

Pressures don't apply

But, we are warned, electoral pressures no longer apply when a President is entering his final term. To reelect Nixon is, in Sargent Shriver's lurid phrase, to "unleash" him. No longer controlled by the prospect of defeat at the polls, he can at last go bonkers for real. Another "unleashing" theory, which Daniel Patrick Moynihan applies to Nixon sycophantically, is that the President — quit of the task (and, for him, the temptation) of running for the office one more time — can look now to the history books. His deferred aspirations, held in abeyance during all

those years of scrounging for votes, can at last be realized.

Both these approaches assume there is a "real" Nixon — an ogre barely restrained, or a closet egghead — kept under wraps for years because the sight of him would scare off voters. A third view exists: that there is no "real" Nixon, just a campaigner, trimming his sails and steering toward the next election date; and such a man will not know what to do when there is no campaign left for him. Each of these theories is based on a deeper assumption — that to go for reelection and to go for the history books are two different things. But a President who cannot carry the electorate with his program is going to be in trouble with the historians.

The weavers of American mythology have been as nice as can be to Woodrow Wilson; but he failed, even though he was too ill to run for a third term (still legal in his day), when he could not get the people to "buy" his League of Nations. A President's public claim, and the source of his working power, is that he represents the people. Whatever his aspirations to leadership, he can only be called a leader if people follow. And the test of having a following is, in our system, the vote. It does not matter that judgement is rendered vicariously in the case of a President who cannot run again. Most votes are retrospective sanctionings anyway; we know more about what has been done to us than what is being promised us. That is why we tend to vote the rascals out, to vote against; and no President wants to be the rascal, even at one remove.

So the pressure is never entirely off the President. He performs to win acceptance, not only election by election, but day by day. The idea of a free hand in the second term is most often used by Presidents to justify failures of performance during their first term — Kennedy got great mileage out of this. And when Lyndon Johnson tried to unleash himself as a peacemaker by declaring himself a lame duck, it did not do him much good, at home or abroad.

Won't he revert?

But the hopes or fears of an "unfettered" second term acquire special force in Nixon's case. He is widely believed to have "sold out" on his former convictions — his hawkishness, his crusading anticommunism, his free-enterprise fundamentalism and opposition to guaranteed income — out of the desire for reelection. And now, with no further need to sell out, won't he revert?

That whole question has been badly posed. There is a sense in which Nixon "sold out" on taking office — most Presidents do. One of the self-balancing aspects of our system is that candidates not only try to "out-middle" each other, but also engage in compensatory blandishments toward those who have least reason to trust them. Thus the dovish side will peddle superhawkish wares — as Kennedy did, in his debates with Nixon, deploring the missile gap, the loss of Cuba, the lack of interventionist vigor in the Eisenhower years. By the end of this year's campaign, McGovern could rhetorically outpoliceman Nixon at home and out-rabbi him abroad. That's



part of the game. Indeed, McGovern's first backers have tried to assure each other that he was just foolin'. Once elected, he would "come home" to his friends on the Left. Forget the regrettable interim, said Gloria Steinem, and get him into the Oval Office; then he'll take good care of us. It is a variant of the "unleashing" theory.

But that's not the way it works, Ms. Steinem. All the sell-outable space is on the other side. The one group a President has least chance of pleasing is his primary constituency. Lyndon Johnson, trotted out to please the South in 1960, could not ever take a soft stand on civil rights. John F. Kennedy took the hardest position against aid to parochial schools of any recent President or candidate. Franklin Roosevelt was withering in his comments on the patrician class he came from. There is, thus, some reason to take the cynical view that a vote for your political enemy is the wisest course — he has no one to sell out to but you. Eugene Rostow, in his long *New Yorker* interviews, argued that Kennedy's tough stands were aimed more at domestic placation than foreign intimidation. Elected a liberal Democrat, he was suspected of weakness toward "the Communist menace" and had to keep displaying his strength. The Left, in other words, gave a hostage to the Right by voting in its own man. By the dynamics of this process, a President McGovern would be automatically belligerent with regard to Israel's safety. Any weakening there would undercut a basic part of his support.

Room to maneuver

These pressures allow a President to achieve important things in the sell-outable territory. Only a Southerner like Lyndon Johnson could have passed the most extensive civil rights laws in our history. Only a Republican patriot of Ike's unquestionable standing could bring an end to McCarthyism (whose energies went far beyond its eponym). Humphrey, if elected in 1968, could not have gone to Peking or Moscow. Because a President has more room to maneuver near what seem to be his opponents, he is impelled to use that maneuverability; it allows him to achieve something, at least — an important consideration to any politician making a record. The effective President will be the one who moves into that open space on the other side.

Roosevelt reversed his campaign promises to balance the budget and cut back on Hoover's spending, and did it with spectacular speed and efficiency. Ike would sell you out in a flash — something Richard Nixon learned over and over. In a way, Eisenhower kept people like Nixon and Dulles around to have somebody to sell out as occasion warranted.

Sellout not real

Usually, of course, the sellout is more apparent than real. Johnson, though a Southerner, had arrived at a sincere concern for black Americans by the time he became President. Eisenhower, though a General of the Army, sincerely detested the McCarthyites. And it is just on this question of sincerity that Nixon's critics have misgivings. If Nixon was sincere about anything, they feel, it was

his early "hard-line" anticommunism, a trait kept alive in his unyielding attitude toward the Vietnam war, despite any chumminess at Peking or Moscow.

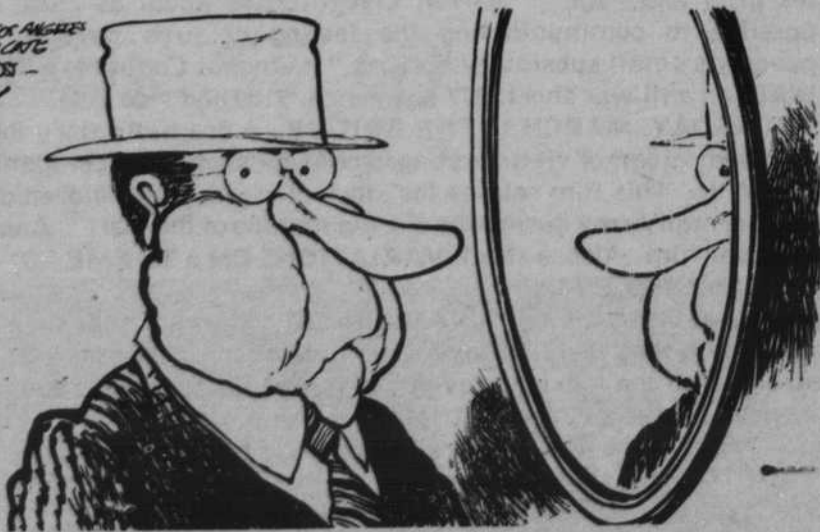
But his original connection with the Right was in large measure tactical. He was given the opportunity to achieve something in the Hiss case, and his subsequent reputation was used by Eisenhower to placate the Taft wing of the party while restraining its McCarthyites. He was programmed to be Ike's concession to the Right — a role Agnew now plays. Nixon played the role well, in part from ambition, but also because he believes in such negotiatory balance over a broad spectrum. But all the time he was assigned to do the party's domestic dirty work, he yearned toward the larger opportunities of building a world order. The Dewey Establishment that put forward Eisenhower's candidacy thought in crude terms of "internationalists" (the good guys) being pestered by "isolationists" like Taft. Nixon was to drag isolationists into the world by tickling their anticommunism. It was thought that the country would only indulge a foreign policy if it offered the chance of beating up on commies somewhere along the line. The Establishment, both Democratic and Republican, put itself in the post war position of inciting anti-Communist passions and then trying to check them — with strange results in a man like Acheson. Nixon's record of "toughness has to be understood in this context.

Hero was Wilson

But his hero from childhood was Woodrow Wilson. Nixon transcended his original constituency, and said so; but no one believed him. (The same thing may prove true, in time, of Agnew.) Men did not take Nixon seriously enough in his longstanding reverence for Wilson as the President of peace — a devotion bequeathed Nixon, he says, by his Quaker mother. Even as Vice President, he rescued Wilson's desk from White House attic status, and made a cult of it. The same desk, now installed in the Oval Office, is the omphalos of American power — Nixon touched it reverentially, and told the nation he was working in Wilson's spirit, during a 1969 broadcast on Vietnam. He ordered Wilson's portrait hung in the Cabinet Room — the only Democratic icon on those walls. Wilson is Nixon's favorite superstition, a talisman of his own destiny as he perceived it all along.

This superstition is backed, as one would expect, by personal needs and deficiencies. Not a person of great charm, dispatched to personal confrontations where a mean response was desired, he liked the facelessness of large impersonal diplomacy, where statesmen rise above the pettier tricks of the politician. It has surprised some that he lets Henry Kissinger take so much credit for the face-to-face day-to-day negotiation of his very own grand alliance. People thus surprised forget (as he does not) what Nixon's face looks like in purely political terms. He has always had the brains to overcome his face; and now he has the chance to prove it. (McGovern aides, in their desperation, thought Nixon was salivating to rush out and lose votes by some ogre act in public — so little did they understand their foe.)

©1978 THE NEW YORKER MAGAZINE
TIMES SQUARE
THE DINNER POST



"WHY CAN'T I EVER HEAR THE CROWD SCREAMING. 'GIVE 'EM HELL, DICKIE!'"