

Choice for the Presidency

The political center is the battlefield of American presidential politics. Each major party has its partisans who stick with it through thick and thin, but presidential elections swing on the candidates' success in reaching the voter of the center. This is the voter who asks, "Taking all in all, to which man should I be more willing to entrust the Presidency for the next four years?"

We believe the presidential candidate of 1972 who fits that description for the voter of the center is Richard M. Nixon.

The President has in his first four years made a particularly strong record in foreign affairs.

Vietnam stands out as an exception. American disengagement has been much too slow, and the President's intentions have not been always clear. But at least the direction of American involvement is not in but out.

The sooner the President can complete the withdrawal, the more surely will he be able to press forward with the new and immensely important moves he has begun in that great part of the world that is not Southeast Asia.

It is here that he has his most persuasive claim to be given the continued confidence of the American people. In his management of foreign policy, above all in his arrangements with the Soviet Union, he has sought to adjust the balance of world power to the realities of world power. This means a less interventionist but still active United States on the world scene.

China Out of Shadows

His dramatic approach to China has begun to bring that country into the world community.

Long months of careful negotiations with the Soviet Union culminated in the first stage of the arms limitation agreement, probably the most important single achievement of the Nixon Administration. There followed the Soviet-American trade agreements. These, like the SALT talks, are only beginnings but, like SALT, they are necessary and long-sought first steps toward bringing the two superpowers into closer cooperation.

The foreign aspects of the now-famous "Nixon shock" of Aug. 15, 1971, disconcerted this nation's allies and trading partners at first but now, thanks largely to second thoughts on the part of the Administration itself, a new attempt is being made to rearrange the world monetary system, and the "Nixon shock" largely achieved its purpose—to make world trade and monetary arrangements less disadvantageous to the United States.

As the President and Henry Kissinger have carefully explained, the purpose of these uses of American power is to bring about world stability, for in stability lies the best hope of world peace. It has been no mean achievement by the President, all the more remarkable because to do it he jettisoned several of his own long-held opinions in order to deal in a practical way with the requirements of new realities.

Greatest Domestic Success

In domestic affairs, the President's greatest success was his handling of the 1971 economic crisis.

His decision to impose wage and price controls restored confidence, helped get the economy going and began to bring inflation under control. Here again the President showed himself sensibly flexible under the pressure of events; in the national interest he was willing to do what he had said so often he would not do.

It was unfortunate that Mr. Nixon pulled back from his one truly imaginative social program, the family assistance plan, after intense opposition from conservatives, and some liberals, of both parties. We hope, though, that in a second term the President would be willing to press again for this and for some of the other innovative ideas for social programs in education, in welfare, in housing that have been talked about in his Administration.

We hope, too, very much, that in a second term the President would turn about on the question of race, on which he has let the country down. No public opinion poll on busing can obscure the fact that race is a central problem in American life. While the President's own Administration has been moving toward integration in the South, the President has lent the authority of his office to those who would say, to North and South, stop.

In other ways, too, the President in his first term let the expediency of narrow political advantage

force him to play to the right wing of his party. His Administration's concept of civil liberties is narrow. He cannot wholly disclaim responsibility for the Watergate affair, for he is after all the head of his party.

Mr. Nixon's potentially most serious mistake, as we have said before, was his choice of Spiro T. Agnew as his running mate for a second term as Vice President. It was an avoidable mistake, and it may some day haunt the Republican Party.

Nevertheless, the choice in November is not between the unacceptable Agnew and the unimpressive Sargent Shriver but between Mr. Nixon and Sen. George S. McGovern.

McGovern's strongest point is his obvious personal decency. That decency was outraged by the war in Vietnam when most Americans were still supporting it. It is to his credit that he saw sooner than most, and argued more strongly than most, that the course was not in the national interest.

But McGovern has been unable to translate the moral outrage of a senator from South Dakota into a convincing case that he has the experience and the judgment to be President.

He has raised a number of domestic issues that need talking about—tax reform, allocation of resources, welfare, spending for defense—but his changing prescriptions for problems have largely ranged from the extreme to the vague. Taken as a whole, they suggest that he does not understand the intricate economic machine that produces the nation's wealth. Seeking to refute the charge of radicalism, he has taken refuge in proposing the extension of old social programs, without regard to the growing realization, by liberal Democrats as well as Republicans, that many of the expensive old programs did not produce the expected results.

His views of civil liberties are, we think, more in accord with the American tradition than are Mr. Nixon's. On the future of American blacks, he has been more positive in tone than has Mr. Nixon, but no more positive in program.

Weakest and Strongest

McGovern is weakest where Mr. Nixon is strongest—in the perception of the nation's place in the world.

The defense budget is big. It always needs close scrutiny. It may very well need cutting. But McGovern's proposal for drastic cuts indicates to us that he does not understand the intimate relationship between a strong defense and a strong foreign policy. It is becoming an unfashionable cliché to say that world peace depends upon American power, but it is true. McGovern's defense cuts would, if put into effect, send to the nations of the world, especially to the Soviet Union, the message, unmistakable and clear, that the United States was pulling back from the world as well as Vietnam. Such a signal could have the most dangerous consequences.

It is this kind of disregard for consequences that we find most disquieting about McGovern. His proposals for withdrawing troops from Europe convey the clear impression that he thinks more is to be gained from goodwill than from power, more from unilateral action than from careful step-by-step negotiation with an adversary. McGovern protests that he is not an isolationist. No, he isn't, in the narrow sense of the word, but he can fairly be described as a man whose interests are chiefly domestic and whose tendencies are clearly in the isolationist tradition. When he says "Come Home America," you have to take him at his word.

Question of Leadership

There is, at the end, the intangible but important question of leadership. Since his nomination, McGovern has shown himself to be uncertain about his own ideas and indecisive and clumsy in the handling of his campaign.

Mr. Nixon, on the contrary, in the Presidency has shown a capacity for growth and a willingness to change when conditions demand a change. The SALT agreement is a monument to his first term in office. His approaches to the Soviet Union and China in the name of peace are already bearing fruit. He was bold and decisive when the condition of the domestic economy demanded boldness and decisiveness.

For the voter who seeks reasonable answers to present problems, the choice in 1972 is clear. The Times recommends the reelection of President Nixon.