



Lessons of an Election Year by Joseph Morris

Let us have a new majority, said Richard Nixon. Let us have decency, said George McGovern. These watchwords dominated the 1972 presidential campaign. It was remarkable that the two candidates should seem to address themselves so directly, and so distinctly, to the central problem of American government: How to sustain a government that is at once of the majority, and decent. Of the many factors which influence the decisions of the American electorate, language is among the most important. But alone it is not decisive. The voters tend somehow to look beyond the watchwords, to sense which of the candidates has the wherewithal to put his theoretical pronouncements into practice. This was the test, then, to which the President and the Senator were subjected.

For Mr. Nixon, the task was to translate his dream of a majority into a working alignment of political interests. Whether he has succeeded is not yet possible to tell (though there is increasing evidence for doubt), for there is more than one kind of majority, and it is altogether possible for minority opinions to control the institutions of government. It may be that the Nixon majority was a presidential, rather than a national one, as the evidence seems to indicate in the first weeks after the election. The events of history seem to focus, at least in our time, on the occupants of the White House. But historians may conclude many years hence that, in fact, Mr. Nixon succeeded only in having himself re-elected by a majority of votes, and that a basic rearrangement of the nation's political forces did not take shape.

Even so, the size of his vote reflected an underlying public confidence in the President's ability to guide the affairs of state. He had come to be respected, albeit grudgingly, by people who, four or twelve years before, could not bring themselves to smile on his name. The Nixon campaign was surprisingly understated, but its effect was to award the

President a mantle of dignity unknown to the holders of his office for almost a decade. Successive election-year scandals, which might have toppled regimes in other times, were dismissed resolutely by the public as unrelated to the President. Millions of people marched into the voting booths, closed the curtains, and pulled the Nixon lever, mumbling to themselves about how much Richard Nixon had improved over the last four years, and about how the Democratic party had been stolen from them. America judged Richard Nixon on the bases of his values, which were familiar and somehow rooted in the country's traditions, and of his accomplishments, which seemed dramatic, but reassuring. The country had felt impotent, but this unlikely president, Richard Nixon, was generating leadership.

George McGovern had worked tirelessly for more than four years, building a campaign machine of impressive competence and dedication. He battered his way through the year's primary season, earning the reluctant admiration of the Democratic party's professionals at the same time that he incurred their anger. But Senator McGovern essentially was a new figure in the public's eye, and he never managed to shake his early self-identification with one question, the Vietnam war. From the beginning, his base of support was not a broad cross-section of the population, but a strange coalition of those who, in one way or another, were fundamentally disaffected from the political order. Let it not be forgotten that the fall's appeal for decency was but a fresh translation of the spring's call for a New Politics. Moreover, the challenger, unlike the incumbent, had not a record upon which to stand. Who can recall, for example, any legislation — aside from a few end-the-war resolutions, which failed — that bore the name of George McGovern? The Senator was confronted with a dual task: to elaborate a theory of governmental purpose, and to persuade the

electorate not only to the theory's rightness, but also of his own ability to apply it.

Now, the Democratic party's platform is a venerable, and a significant, institution. It is ever the pride of the party's grass-roots adherents. More than once in the past had it altered forever the quality, temperament, and vocabulary of American political discourse. But even though George McGovern controlled the platform-making machinery, he erected no philosophical overview of American problems, nor did he set down a concrete program for their solution. Instead, in drafting the platform and in stumping the land, Senator McGovern strung together long lists of existing evils, and offered, as his alternative, "decency." In order to judge this man, who tended to avoid affirmative standpoints except on one issue, and who had no other record, the electorate was forced to judge him by his campaign.

The campaign began in Miami Beach. In the wake of the 1968 Chicago convention, many people urged extensive reform of party rules, and Senator McGovern himself was asked to chair the committee that would, and did, draft the new convention procedures for the Democrats. Expectations rose, therefore, that 1972 would bring a truly "open," verily "democratic," party convention.

Reformist zeal proved so strong, however, that great, puissant, and loyal party leaders, among them Mayor Daley and Governor Harriman, were barred from the meeting hall. Many people, and not just the Sixth Ward's sewer workers, found that less than decent. By enraging the professionals before the convention, the Senator had to cater to them afterward. He travelled up to Chicago and shook hands with Dick Daley, while the Mayor's boys smiled and winked at each other. Meanwhile, McGovern aides publicly began fighting among themselves to see who would have the biggest office in the White

House. Amid the prospect of spoils, what had happened to the New Politics?

The Eagleton affair soaked up fully half of the McGovern campaign. With each step he took in those days, Senator McGovern lost some of his "credibility," some of his fair claim to decency. His last attempt at graceful self-extrication from the morass may have been his greatest mistake. He attempted to lift the issue out of the gutter of mere electioneering, and to raise it to the level of institutional criticism. In a statement delivered before the television cameras, the Senator asked rhetorically how anyone receiving his party's presidential nomination one evening after midnight could be expected to make a creditable choice of a running-mate by mid-afternoon of the same day. The problem with that excuse, of course, was that no one believed that his midnight nomination was any surprise to George McGovern. People began to wonder if it were a McGovern habit to defer planning and decision-making until the last minute.

The fatal flaws, in the end, were in the Senator's treatment of the issues.

Incumbents often are easy targets, but it is difficult to assail some productivity, however inconstant, without suggesting alternatives. George McGovern spent too much time running against himself, living down his excesses of the happier spring. McGovern supporters admired him for his open-mindedness. The majority thought him a little silly, scurrying about after popular positions. Finally, in the week before the voting, the Senator huffed that, if he were to lose, he could not perform the loser's ritual call for national unity. Such a statement might well be honest, but, coming from George McGovern, it didn't sound decent.

Decency and majority are the necessary elements of good government. Mr. Nixon's orderly pursuit of executive business earned him re-election. Senator McGovern's decency evaporated.

The lesson of Election Year 1972 merits some reflection: a campaign, like a nation, must have an agenda, a set of objectives, and plans for their attainment. Without such provisions, the worth of the enterprise may be lost. ●

cessant struggle of men and groups for as large a share of sensate values—wealth...pleasure, comfort, sensory safety, security—as one can get. Since one can get them mainly at the cost of somebody else, their quest accentuates and intensifies the struggle of individuals and groups." (*The Crisis of Our Age*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1941, p. 174.)

When a person goes to a Chinese restaurant for dinner and decides to eat chow mein instead of fried rice, he is thereby exercising his natural freedom of self-determination. Reflection upon our common experience will yield many such instances in which we exercise our free judgment and free will by choosing between alternatives or goods. (Good in a neutral philosophical sense means any object of desire.) For example, a young mother must choose between having an abortion or giving birth to a retarded child. All the medical evidence indicates that the child born to her will be deformed, and she is tempted to have an abortion in order to save her and her husband from future emotional pain. Nevertheless, the young mother decides to have the child; and by so doing, she has both manifested and exercised the freedom of self-determination.

Now this second meaning is, I believe, of central importance. For if, as some (e.g. Skinner) allege, man is not self-determining, but rather is determined by processes beyond his control, then I am unable to see how one can legitimately maintain that man should be morally accountable for his deeds. (Traditionally in the West, motives behind a person's actions are part of the morality of the actions.) Among those who would negate man's dignity by denying that he has a natural power to make free judgments are the positivists and behaviorists.

The positivist claims that the only valid knowledge is that kind revealed by, and verifiable in terms of, the methods of laboratory science. Since the techniques of the laboratory are unable to reveal that man is free, i.e., self-determining, the positivist holds that man *therefore* is not free, that freedom and dignity are merely figments of our imaginations. The assertions of the positivist are untenable, however, for physical science, because of its own limitations and restrictions, can neither affirm nor negate the freedom of man. And if the fact of man's freedom cannot be ascertained through the methods of the laboratory, it is not because freedom and dignity do not exist, but rather because freedom and dignity exist beyond the laboratory. Besides, as Will Herberg has written, positivism has never been intellectually defensible, since: "it is notorious that positive science itself, its methods and results, depend upon metaphysical postulates and attitudes that cannot, in their nature, be established by way of science, but must be presupposed if the scientific enterprise is to get under way or mean anything at all." ("Modern Man in a Metaphysical Wasteland," *The Intercollegiate Review*, Winter, 1968-69.)

The positivist needs to remember

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Haven Bradford Gow:

In Defense of Freedom

In civilized discourse it is essential that proper distinctions be made. This, I find, is especially true in discussions regarding freedom lest, in attempting to explain it to others, we end up with merely explaining it away.

Dr. Mortimer Adler tells us in his two-volume work, *The Idea of Freedom*, that there are three basic senses of the term "freedom." First of all, there is the circumstantial freedom of self-realization which equates freedom with the absence of external impediments. It is a freedom that the individual possesses only under certain favorable circumstances.

There is also the natural freedom of self-determination—a freedom which is possessed by all men, by virtue of a power inherent in human nature, whereby man is able to transform his own character creatively by deciding for himself what he will become or do. In this sense man's choices are self-caused and are not determined by processes beyond his control. Circumstances may affect the way men exercise this inherent capacity, and so may moral and mental traits that they do or do not acquire. However, neither requirements nor circumstances of any sort are able to confer or deprive this freedom.

Lastly, there is the acquired freedom of self-perfection, which identifies freedom with the emancipation from moral sloth and from the slavery of certain mental habits and attitudes. It is a freedom which depends upon an individual's attainment of a certain excellence of mind and character, which, in turn, emanates from his capacity to live as he ought in accordance with the moral law or in an ideal befitting man. For

those who believe in this meaning of freedom, a person is not born free, but rather acquires freedom when he has become virtuous.

What I would like to do in this essay is (a) illustrate these senses of freedom by presenting both the views of philosopher and examples from common experience; and (b) focus attention on the second meaning of freedom, since the publication of B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* has revived such an avid interest in the question: Does man have the inherent ability to make free choices and judgments or are they determined by forces outside of his control?

A man is not free, Hobbes held, if he is either externally constrained or coerced. For example, were the state to compel every citizen to bow down before the president whenever he walked by, freedom in Hobbes' sense simply would not exist. And neither would it exist if the state, instead of indulging in coercion, constrained individuals from, say, building churches in which they could worship their God.

Now it is, I think, imperative that a distinction be made here between the freedom of self-realization and what Pitirim A. Sorokin terms "sensate liberty." Freedom in the former sense would still imply a recognition that there are, to be sure, legitimate rules and authorities, and that these rules and authorities are needed to keep us from conflicting with the rights of others. On the other hand, sensate liberty is a decadent form of self-realization, since it suggests that external restraint is both unnecessary and bad in itself. Moreover, it leads, as Sorokin rightly observes, to: "an in-