A Swing to the Right?

I live in a district of middle-class professionals that elected a liberal, William F. Ryan, to Congress; and, while I know no one personally who has lost a son in the war, I do have five neighbors who have recently been mugged and beaten, or their apartments have been burglarized. They are all angry as hell. Their experience, shared by many, has had a deep emotional effect on their families and friends as well. While they read about Vietnam, even see the war in color on television, student Stoning and assaults are part of their own personal experience. Columbia University is just two blocks away. "The University should give each of us a camera with infrared lenses, to take pictures of these bastards at night," said a professor of engineering, adding, "As far as I am concerned, they could put the lenses at the top of a gun." Shooting persons who loot shops in ghetto riots, a Richard Daley prescription, is a treatment many in mid-Manhattan would approve of. If this is where many members of the middle-class, professional, educated, hereto liberal groups are, isn't it indeed true that the city and the nation are endorsing a conservative stand and its promise that law and order shall be maintained?

"Everyone agrees that the country is swinging right; that the American people are more conservative in 1968 than they were in 1964 and that they will be more conservative still in 1972," replies Archibald MacLeish, the poet, expressing the heart of what passes for the collective wisdom on the condition and direction of American politics. He appears also to speak for the consensus of commentators. The press, in its survey of the sixties, takes historical note of the combined conservative vote in the 1968 presidential election was 57 percent (defined somewhat carelessly as all votes for Richard M. Nixon and George C. Wallace), that conservative candidates in New York City garnered 58 percent of the total vote and that mayoral offices in Los Angeles and Minneapolis were filled by law-and-order candidates. Clearly, one may conclude, a formidable trend is gathering momentum. Furthermore, the press tells us that Nixon's "southern strategy," applied at the expense of the minorities to the country's most conservative element—the backflashing whites—has been successful. And so the press describes a vast, ghastly image hovering conservatively over the American landscape, an image President Nixon conjured up in late 1969: the Silent Majority. Even as perceptive and usually cautious an observer as Richard H. Rovere writes bluntly that "the Silent Majority has been heard from, and it favors the Nixon Way," Haynes Johnson, writing for the Washington Post, suspects that "the Age of Agnew may be nearing."

To the Right, March

To explain the massive turn to the Right, a seemingly plausible sociopolitical theory is repeatedly applied: the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, it is said, were preoccupied on the domestic front with the needs of the blacks and the poor, neglecting problems of the white middle- and working-class majority, who now demand attention. The erosion of traditional foundations—the dollar, respect for authority, laws and morality—frightens these mainstream Americans. Many in the cities feel directly challenged in competition for jobs, housing and attention given to public schools. Even where crime is infrequent, as in the streets of Helena, Montana, or where minorities are few, as in Lincoln, Nebraska, members of this majority are still gripped by fear. If "those others" get away with rioting and promiscuity and the general order breaks down, the theory says, the conservative personality is afraid the superego will not be strong enough to contain the turmoil and violence within the self: restraining the kids, the blacks, the poor keeps the lid on one's own instincts. Therefore, candidates for public office who favor stability over change will, it is argued, continue to receive the most support.

While there are obviously some grains of truth in these straws of analysis, I am of the opinion that the conclusion is nothing to make national election bets on. But there is no reason to wait for another national election to learn whether or not the country is careening to the Right. Public opinion polls taken over the past few years, comparisons of these polls with older ones, interviews with members of the middle classes and reexamination of local election results all suggest that:

- the United States has never had a liberal majority—not, at least, since polling was begun some 40-odd years ago;
- the recent shift to the Right is rather moderate in proportions;
- this shift is unlikely to extend itself significantly—a reversal of the trend may well set in within three to five years;
- even before any reversal takes place, the "Silent Majority" is not at this moment a conservative monolith but a conglomerate of various publics, quite divergent, the majority of which—we shall demonstrate—favor most liberal programs, from the extension of Social Security to the expansion of Medicare, from increased help to the unemployed to reduction of defense expenditures.

In short, the swing to the Right, we shall see, is rather limited in scope; only about 6 percent of the public seem to have changed sides. And the tide is rather shallow: many people who have cast votes for conservative candidates in recent elections are committed to a liberal viewpoint on a number of key issues that happen to be temporarily dormant.

Rhetoric Versus Deeds

One major reason the country appears to have turned sharply to the Right is that there has been a surprisingly swift change in the political tenor of the national leadership. In the early sixties, the orthodoxy of social justice issued from all lips. In 1970 we find that with the Nixon administration the tone has altered drastically. Law and order is the keynote; the administration's primary targets, after inflation, are crime and pornography—not racism and poverty. Attorney General John Mitchell provides the keynote: Robert Kennedy or Ramsey Clark once gave; where until recently former Adlai Hubert Humphrey was heard, Spiro Agnew now speaks.

In the tradition of American politics, each side tries, when it is helpful, to make the other side accountable for its statements, as if words reflected deeds. Actually, we must realize that while the rhetoric of the two previous administrations was much more emphatic in re-

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spects to social justice, little was achieved in terms of school desegregation, opening up of the building trade, low-cost housing or of practically any other concrete social program you carefully examine. Lots of laws were passed, but few were effectively applied. The Kerner Commission’s rhetoric was resounding, but it did not provide a concrete plan for action. Despite the significantly altered tenor of the current administration, federally instituted domestic programs—thus far, anyway—have been changed rather little. There still is an Office of Economic Opportunity (oeo). Social Security benefits are being increased sharply (Congress boosted the benefits 15 percent; the administration itself asked for a 10 percent increase; Humphrey, if elected president, would, in all likelihood, not have asked for more). Nixon has requested a more expensive, federally funded welfare program based on what heretofore was considered a Left-liberal idea—negative income tax. Medicare expenditures are rising sharply, and federal aid to education is expected to expand despite the recent veto (the veto itself seems to be a gesture, part of the rhetoric, not the reality).

Very few of the numerous recommendations of either the antiviolence or the anticrime commissions are actually being implemented. While Congress and the public were very angry with the rioting students, none of the numerous bills requiring colleges to certify that they would penalize their rioters or lost federal support were ever enacted. (The Nixon administration, which first favored such a bill, soon came to oppose it!) And no enforcement mechanisms have been set up at this point for those riot penalty clauses attached to various appropriation bills. "Privatization" (the turning over of federal programs to the private sectors) remains almost exclusively a concept in Professor Peter Drucker’s The Age of Discontinuity and in the mouths of a few of Nixon’s aids. Decentralization, the turning over of federal programs to the states, a keystone in the conservative rhetoric, has been implemented only on a limited scale. Recently, a move to turn over control of oeo programs to the states was not actively supported by the White House, was opposed by Donald Rumsfeld, director of oeo, and defeated by Congress. To put it briefly, continuity has been very close between the Johnson and the Nixon administrative programs, but not between the speeches.

Where Is the Center?

For years, the pollsters have been asking representative national samples of Americans, “What do you consider, yourself in your political point of view—a conservative, a liberal or a middle-of-the-roader?” As far back as there are data, which covers more than a generation, only a minority of Americans have answered that question by saying “liberal.” At the end of 1968, 17 percent declared themselves liberals, the same proportion as at the end of 1967. The percentage of declared liberals was higher in 1964—23 percent—but still less than a quarter of the country. When similar questions were asked on earlier occasions, in 1960 for instance, or even way back in 1938, the answers were very similar to those given in 1964, with the liberals gaining a few percentage points over the years.

It is not that the remainder of our fellow citizens call themselves conservatives, although for decades more citizens have seen themselves so than as liberals, both before and after the drummed-up “backlash.” At the end of 1968, 38 percent of a national sample of Americans defined themselves as “conservatives,” a meager 3 percent more than the 35 percent who so declared themselves in 1967, and 1 percent less than the 39 percent of conservatives in 1964, before the backlash had even been mentioned.

A major part of the public, larger than the liberal camp and about the same size as the conservative one (but, we shall see, of much greater political importance) is made up of the middle-of-the-roaders (38 percent of the national sample in 1964, 32 percent in 1968). In the forties and fifties the American people were not asked the same question, but rather whether they wished the country to turn to the Left or to the Right. The majority preferred, on each of the ten occasions when the question was asked, for the nation not to turn either way: the size of the minority that favored a left turn ranged from 19 percent to 23 percent; from 17 percent to 24 percent chose a right turn.

In short, public opinion polls suggest only a small drift to the Right after 1964, with no majority on either the conservative or the liberal side—silent or otherwise. The majority went, and continues to go, to those candidates who can carry one of these political wings plus significant chunks of the pivotal middle-of-the-roaders.

Many commentators see a much sharper turn to the Right than polls indicate because they judge public attitudes according to election results. Voting in a presidential or mayoral election can be an atypical and unreliable expression of the underlying views of the public, because voters may be influenced by citizens who hold conflicting views about various aspects of the nation’s affairs and policies to cast one vote only. The voter must go through a kind of “averaging” process; he has feelings or articulated positions about quite a few issues, about the war in Vietnam, the racial situation, crime, federal aid to education, welfare programs, the space program and so on. (That is, about seven out of every ten citizens respond in some way to issues; the remaining three, surveys show, are rather uninterested and uninformed about most issues. Although they know about welfare, crime and so forth, they do not see these matters as political, as subject to policy or as dealt with in a way by which governments may be judged, but rather as “natural” occurrences, like freezing rain.)

Votes Do Not Show Basic Trends

Of the relatively informed and concerned citizens, a small minority maintains highly consistent views and hence can readily choose for whom to vote (or for whom not to vote.) About 6 percent of the American public are die-hard liberals; they favor more welfare, more social justice, more federal aid to education; they regard the reports about rising crime rates as largely exaggerated and feel crime is best eliminated by providing more welfare services. These people easily vote for John Lindsay and against Richard Nixon. Similarly, there are about 6 percent “pure” conservatives who have relatively little difficulty in choosing, let us say, between Humphrey and Nixon. But the rest—about 20 percent moderate liberals, 24 percent moderate conservatives and, above all, the 34 percent who see themselves as middle-of-the-roaders between these two moderate positions—must find a way to combine conflicting positions in regard to various aspects of our social and political life into one vote. If these citizens favor increased welfare and more federal aid to education but also want more action against crime and price increases, and if they find one political candidate more likely than another to advance a certain program, they must decide which program is the most important and vote for its promulgator. Thus, in the process of selection, these citizens decide, in effect, to disregard some issues and to vote on the basis of others—this time (Continued on page 16)
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around. However, these moderate and middle-of-the-road citizens who make up the actual majority are still committed to those programs they did not vote for this time. (If they had had two votes each, they would have given only one to Nixon, while the consistent conservatives would have been inclined to give him both.) This majority would come out of their political computing in a similar way at the next election, only if they will continue to consider the same issues overridingly important, "bumping" off the other issues in their final decision for whom to cast their vote.

This weighing and averaging process is not explicit and conscious for many citizens; it frequently takes place subconsciously and emotionally. Nevertheless, a kind of averaging does occur, with some issues receiving extra weight, so that currently these citizens feel more strongly and react more to some issues than to others. For this reason, if you base your analysis of where the country is headed (or even where it is now) on election outcomes and voting patterns, as commentators and the press have been inclined to do, you will come up with an image of a country moving much more decisively to the Right (or to the Left) than the people really are. This image will reflect more accurately the key issues of the moment than it will long-term tendencies.

Public opinion studies tell us that many who voted conservatively in recent elections (in Minneapolis, for instance, Charles Stenvig, an obscure head of the Police Officers Federation, won the city's mayoralty by a margin of 74,748 to 46,739) actually did so only because they feel at present that two specific issues, law and order and inflation, are more salient than the others. Many liberal programs—expanded Medicare, improved welfare and so on—are favored by these conservatives, but their chief concern is focused elsewhere now. To put it differently, the majority of the public, while neither liberal nor conservative, do not rest in the middle, in the sense of a moderate position somewhere between the liberal and conservative. The majority of voters are middle because they are part conservative, part liberal and shift, according to the issues that are foremost in their minds at a particular time, to support conservative or liberal political candidates. Therefore, even if the composition of the public or the list of issues does not change significantly, the election outcome can differ radically. This is a key reason why, with only a few more full-fledged, strongly committed conservatives than there were four years ago, there are many more middle-of-the-roaders who now support President Nixon or conservative mayors. It also explains why today's leading conservative candidates are far from secure in their offices. Governor Ronald Reagan, for instance, a much "purer" conservative than Nixon, should have—by the conservative-backlash theory—an easy ride back to his Sacramento post. Actually, he faces a tough challenge from his Democratic rival, Jesse Unruh, who emerged as a strong competitor in a recent poll (it showed him only 5 percent behind the governor in the voters' favor). Other pure conservative candidates have not fared well either. In California, Max Rafferty, the conservative educator, lost that 1968 race for Senate. In Cleveland, a liberal black mayor, Carl Stokes, was reelected.

The discrepancies between the results of an election and the much more complex positions most citizens hold can be determined in two ways: the position they take on domestic reforms (liberal issues) as opposed to their stand on law and order and inflation (conservative issues) and in the differences between their positions regarding specific programs and general political "philosophical" questions.

In Specific Issues

In 1969 Americans in a national sample were asked to comment on "priorities" for government spending. They were given a list of priorities and asked if they wished each particular category of programs to be cut, kept as it is or increased. Thus, according to a study of Middle America conducted by Gallup for Newsweek in late 1969, 36 percent of white, middle-class Americans favored more money allotted to job training for the unemployed, 47 percent favored medical care for the old and the needy, and 66 percent would cut the support of military aid to other nations such as South Vietnam. As in several other similar polls taken recently, law-and-order programs gain a high support (to 22 percent who would "keep or increase" for every 1 percent who would cut). However, a popular liberal program initiated by the Democratic administration gains an almost similar end at (keep or increase); actually, six of highest in are liberal ones. As

**NATIONAL PRIORITIES IN GOVERNMENTAL SPENDING PREFERRED BY A NATIONWIDE SAMPLE, FEBRUARY 1969**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Keep or Increase</th>
<th>Cut First</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticrime, law enforcement</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-poverty program</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medicaid</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antiar and antwater pollution programs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare and relief</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to cities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidies to farmers</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam War</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highway construction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space program</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</tbody>
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Actually, there is only one kind of domestic program for which support has significantly declined over the last four to five years—and that is support for reforms favorable to the black people.

A Narrow Backlash

There is, according to polls, a backlash, but it is a sharply focused one, found primarily in attitudes toward the blacks and towards some of the youth. But these attitudes do not color significantly the “rest” of the domestic reform. To the question “Does the administration push racial integration too fast?” less than a third of those polled answered in the affirmative in 1964, but by October 1968 that proportion had grown to more than half (54 percent). In 1964 a third (34 percent) felt that integration had been pushed “too fast”; by 1968 their ranks had doubled, with two-thirds (67 percent) indicating they felt that Negroes were asking for more than they were ready to assume. Furthermore, about half of the sample felt that Negroes sought to live off handouts. The majority of Middle America now feels that Negroes already have the same or better opportunity than white Americans in getting jobs, education, housing and other advantages.

What these findings underscore is the selective reaction of the electorate to special programs. Among the domestic programs, those that are viewed by the public as catering to one group—farmers, users of highways, blacks or the poor—tend to be much less popular than those that are believed to benefit everyone, such as federal aid to education or Social Security. The only exceptions are those programs explicitly aimed at a group the majority considers deserving of charity—the needy, hungry or aged. In effect, there are two different politics at work—one of guilt and demands articulated by conservatives, too, have needs, some rather legitimate, and all needs which affect their votes. The liberals often proceeded as if it would suffice to motivate the public to support civil rights and anti-poverty legislation on the basis of altruism and guilt, and that the political pay-off would be limited to relief from a bad conscience; however, this relief does not carry programs very far even for those liberals who do have a bad conscience. Many conservatives do not feel a special obligation to the poor or the minorities.

Appeal to self-interest offers an alternative to guilt politics if one wishes to rally conservatives to the support of social reforms—with Social Security and Medicare everyone gets a slice of the pie. But this appeal is rapidly diminishing. First, many such programs already exist, thus decreasing the saliency of additional health or education benefits; second, many of the other programs are not allocative but concern the quality of life, especially the quality of the environment; third, for the first time in several decades, conservatives, instead of chiefly opposing reforms, are actively promoting two programs: they wish to curb both crime and inflation and, beyond this, to restore respect for authority and morality.

Liberals are learning that crime and inflation are genuine issues. The rise in crime is a matter of concern to most citizens. This concern is not just a result of better reporting or of a change in statistical methods—facts long emphasized by liberals. Crime is a potent issue because of its saliency: unlike taxes, which, after all, are just money, or debates about the deserving poor whom most taxpayers never see, or even the war, which until recently, was remote from the middle classes, crime hits close to home.

Rising prices do not pack the same emotional wallop, but nevertheless they are far from trivial, and they are encountered daily by everyone; they rob the aged of the value of their savings and pensions, and workers of their wage increases.

Now that these two issues, added to the underlying—and related—uneasiness about the erosion of morality and authority, have been mobilized into an active political demand, they must now be given the same kind of attention as the legitimate needs of the blacks and the poor. It is true, historically, that these disadvantaged groups have had to wait much longer before their needs were accorded attention and that they are still far behind, despite some progress between 1962 and 1967. But as of 1968 their time is up, and the needs and demands articulated by conservatives must now also be taken into consideration, one hopes without replacing the attention being given to those of the others, but in effect competing with them.

A Projection

The Talmud says that upon the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem, prophecy was given to “the deaf, fools, and minors.” The record of social scientists who have tried their hands at prediction would support this ancient dictum. At most we dare point out that if the preceding analysis is correct and no new major forces will intrude themselves into the situation, the following predictions based on an investigation of the spectrum of feelings the majority has displayed outside the voting booths may not be too farfetched:

1) Just as it is a gross exaggeration to say that a major dramatic shift to the Right has occurred in the last two or three years, so it is a mistake to expect one in the future. Nixon may win the 1972 election (incumbents have the inside track), and the leaderless, splintered Democrats seem set on helping Nixon win by a wider margin than in 1968. But even so, we expect that at least 40 percent of the country will vote against him and that it is impossible for Wallace or someone like him to win the 1972 elections. Nor can we see Nixon implementing anything like the right-wing rhetoric his administration, specifically in the persons of Agnew and Mitchell, frequently expresses. Just as the extreme rhetoric of Rap Brown did not bring about a left-wing revolution, so will the inflammatory speeches of Agnew not bring about a right-wing repression. To put it less cautiously, we expect the United States in 1975 to be
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very much as it was in 1968, with mas-
sive welfare systems, expanding Social
Security, low unemployment rates and
no significant increase in the abridgment
of civil rights and civil liberties.

2) If the Nixon administration will
successfully resolve salient issues by ter-
minating the war and reducing crime,
rebellion and inflation, then, most likely
old and new demands for reforms
(from improving public education to
depollution) will increase in saliency
and will either push the administration
towards a more liberal program or, if
it will not respond, elect a more liberal
replacement. In this very way the Labor
Party gained power in the United King-
dom in 1945, despite Winston Chur-
chill's success, in part because this suc-
cess was on a front (the international
one) other than the one that had next
to be faced (the domestic one).

However, if little is done, disappoint-
ment is likely to be unfavorable to the
present administration. If the Nixon ad-
ministration, after four years in office,
fails to curb crime and inflation effec-
tively and to end the war, then voters
may well be much more disappointed
than they are right now and turn their
support to other possibilities: some will
go to the far Right (Wallace), some
will resign to apathy (by not voting),
and some will turn to "more liberal"
issues or new reforms, like the environ-
mental ones.

Other factors will, of course, affect
the situation, especially in the area of
foreign policy (from Latin America
to the Middle and Far East) and the
extent to which the Democrats will be
able to unite around a fresh person and
a new program. But even if the present
disarray of personalities, factions and
programs continues, we expect the con-
servative trend to continue only slowly,
extending itself, possibly, by a few per-
centage points in terms of electoral end-
dorsement. And, as long as this dis-
array continues, few of the many do-
mestic issues close to the hearts of the
liberals, many conservatives and most of
the pivotal middle-of-the-roaders will
be effectively attended to. As of now,
no one has a clear mandate, liberal or
conservative.