

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

1968

White middle-class America now has a President it can call its own. This is the middle-class America of people who have “pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps.” It is the middle-class America of the Puritan virtues of all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, but so what? It is the middle-class America of housing subdivisions midway between the cities and the suburbs, the middle-class America of rectangular lawns that are mowed on Saturday morning and car washing in the driveway on Saturday afternoon and a drive out in the country on Saturday evening. It is a respectable world which believes in the system because the system worked for them.

Richard and Pat Nixon, Spiro and Judy Agnew are model representatives of this world. Each of them came from backgrounds that were poor, but they struggled, they worked, they sacrificed and they made it. They not only cannot understand black America, Spanish America, poor white America, they resent the insistent and angry demands these Americas make. Spiro Agnew cannot understand that it doesn't matter a damn that his father was a Greek immigrant who conquered the odds he faced. Agnew's father had a white skin and in America, that matters.

The new leaders of the “free world” are not only incapable of understanding the dispossessed, they are incapable of understanding the young white people who have fought against the system. These young people have grown up with advantages the Nixons and Agnews did not have. Nixon probably resents them the most. He grew up resenting them, as any poor boy resents those who're better off economically. Those who elected Nixon resent them also.

Nixon was not elected by the people of America's large cities. As Murray Kempton wrote in the *New York Post* on Nov. 6, “...there seems to be no city larger than Peoria from which he has not been beaten back; he is the President of every place in this country which does not have a bookstore.” While Kempton's statement has a touch of Gene McCarthy intellectual snobbery in it, it contains much truth. The people of rural, small-town America are ill equipped to understand the social upheaval of the past eight years, but it is they who have elected the man who is going to have to deal with it. Many of these people and certain segments of the large cities flirted with George Wallace for a while. But they decided to try Nixon's “cool” approach to fascism rather than Wallace's “hot” one. (Yes, it was an election that could be understood from a McLuhanistic analysis rather than a Marxist one.) They decided to see if Nixon could restore the country to Mother and God before they opted for a Wallace.

This became very clear in the Congressional races. It was expected that the country's swing to the right would be most apparent in Republicans coming to power in the House. This never materialized. It was almost as if the country were saying, “let's wait and see. Let's go half way. Maybe that'll be all that's necessary.”

And maybe it will be. The left is in a state of disarray and frustration. At such a time, it has begun to show a tendency of activism for the sake of activism. This does not necessarily mean that it's the correct thing to do politically. People are getting busted all over the country in acts which mean little, and are no longer getting 30 days for disorderly conduct. Those days are over. The man is playing for keeps now.

The question can even be raised of whether or not there exists anything called “the movement.” There is a vast body of frustration coupled with radical sentiment which is, in the main, oriented toward demonstrations. Is there, however, a body of people organized to build a movement that can have, for example, the effect upon unions which the Communist party had from the thirties until McCarthy in the fifties? (“Aw, whadda you mean? The Communist

party? It's irrelevant.") Is there a body of people organized to build a movement that can have the impact which the International Workers of the World [sic] had? ("The IWW? Yeah, they were groovy.") The left isn't even as well organized as the Democratic party in its present state of disarray.

The only way out of this dilemma, of course, is to start building cadres of organizers. America presently thinks that the left, blacks and the war in Vietnam are its main problems. Such is not the case. We only know America's problems as they affect us—the draft, spiritual malaise, etc. But America's problems have only begun, given the increasing number of labor strikes, the current New York City school crisis and the new consciousness it is bringing to the liberal middle class. What's going to happen when the war in Vietnam is over and those GIs finally come home? After all, the biggest employer in America is the Pentagon. What happens when a half million men reenter an economy which is already unable to provide enough jobs?

The left has reached a point where it must either find the way to evolve to a new level of political activity or die. The past eight years have had a fantastic impact upon the country and the country has responded with reforms and now repression.

Possibly one answer lies in a direction in which few wish to look. The liberals, having been in power for almost eight years, are now out. It is a mistake to think that they, who have so seldom tasted power, will accept their defeat calmly. Maybe they will, but if Murray Kempton, a liberal Democrat, is any indication, maybe they won't. He ends his column of Nov. 6 thus: "Richard Nixon occupies us. If that is the name of the game, that is the game we will play. This morning a battle slumps exhaustedly to its end. This afternoon the war begins. To the knife."

Maybe that means nothing more than let's start working now for Ted Kennedy in '72. Maybe it means something else. We have nothing to lose by trying to find out.

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