

TWILIGHT TIMES

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In all of those years that we can remember (which now, unfortunately, number over fifty), we can't recall any pre-election when there has been as much uncertainty about the candidates and outcome of an approaching presidential contest. Usually, by this time, in one or the other major party, at least one candidate is confident of almost certain nomination. However, approaching 1976, there is confusion and insecurity in both parties.

For the Republicans, this has come about partly because of the unprecedented resignations of a President and Vice President whose offices are now held by men appointed and not elected. President Ford has not healed the scars left by Nixon, Agnew and Watergate and, so far, has failed to develop a strong leadership of his own. Now, even after the Cabinet shakeup and Rockefeller's bowing out, whether or not Ford will benefit in his attempt to squelch the Reagan challenge remains in doubt. Already the columnist pundits are emphasizing the President's deficiencies and doing their best to encourage cleavage between liberal and conservative elements within Republican ranks, probably in hope of mounting another anti-Goldwater type of effort. It wouldn't be at all surprising to see several new (and liberal) Republican hopefuls join the contest before long.

The picture on the Democratic side is even more confounding. In spite of their control of Congress and their support by the influential press, the Democrats have failed to come up with any forceful leader behind whom they can unite. Already, with nine announced candidates seeking nomination (and not even counting the ever-hopeful last Kennedy), the fact that our own improbable Jimmy Carter can stir some national interest or that the perennial Hubert Humphrey could be considered a front runner, indicates to what depths the Democrats have fallen. Nor does it take into account what to do about George Wallace.

It may be that the disorder and muddle of our national political scene at this particular time only reflects the general dissatisfaction with institutions of government evident throughout the Western World. This is the theme developed in Robert Nisbet's recent book, *The Twilight of Authority*. In contrast to the ever-strengthening, totalitarian authorities of the regimented, socialist, military regimes of Russia and China, we are, he feels, in a critical transitional period in the history of western, democratic government in which disillusionment and loss of confidence in all political authority are the prevailing sentiments.

In almost all historical ages, one form of government institution will dominate human loyalties in terms of function and authority. According to Nisbet, history is basically an account of the succession (and repetition) of ascending and declining authorities. In the Western World, the disappearance of the Alexandrian Greek empire was followed by the authority of the Roman family, and then the Roman Imperial State. Its disintegration saw the return of authority to family, kinship and feudalism in the Dark Ages. By the 12th Century this had receded with religion and the Christian Church assuming total authority until its disappearance with the Reformation, to be followed by monarchy and then the rise of the modern political state. What makes such authoritative institutions die or become weak is their gradual loss of power to command allegiance and respect. The political state, today, he says is in such a period of decline and weakness.

Nisbet identifies many elements contributing to our twilight era: loss of social roots, abandonment of old values, retreat from morality and integrity, preoccupation with equality of result rather than equality of opportunity, erosion of patriotism and national spirit. In addition, the increasing “intellectualization” of political thought and power, the growth of “democratic royalist” (initiated by Wilson and furthered progressively during the administrations of Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon). The toils of expanding bureaucracy, the spread of welfares and corruption in office have also contributed to the weakening of political parties. All of these, along with our escape into materialism and subjectivity, have brought about citizen unrest, indifference, alienation and even hostility to government.

So perhaps, the chaotic state of politics and the confusion that will attend next year’s election exercises are just part of a general repudiation of the political state that has existed for more than two centuries now. In any event, no matter which candidate or which party comes out on top next year, the twilight will deepen, and it will be unlikely that any administration can alter significantly the course of our history.

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