

New Direction In the U. S.: Right?

By RUSSELL KIRK

RONALD REAGAN'S thumping victory in the California primaries has opened the eyes of some people to what anyone might have noticed earlier: Public opinion, across the country, is shifting in a conservative direction. In terms of elections, the consequence of this drift may be heavy Congressional losses for the Democratic Administration this autumn—not on the scale of 1946, but sufficiently unsettling for liberals.

And by 1968, President Johnson may be as distressed as was President Truman in 1952. Or, conceivably, he may have floated along with the conservative stream, rather than fighting against it.

There seem to be two immediate causes of this shift of opinion: public discontent with the conduct of the war in Vietnam, comparable to the unpopularity which fell upon Mr. Truman with the stalemate in the Korean War; and public uneasiness at the state of the economy, with its rising prices and shaky dollar.

Behind these large complaints, however, one may discern an inchoate public uneasiness at the general character of latter-day liberalism, a discontent expressed in resentment against such concerns as school busking to achieve racial balance, higher Social Security taxes (to pay for Medicare), and the increasingly radical character of civil rights and peace groups. A popular feeling grows (though seldom clearly expressed in words) that liberal reformers are tinkering with American society piecemeal—with very little idea of the consequences.

It would be inaccurate to call this swelling conservative mood a "swing to the right." For one thing, the terms "left" and "right," borrowed from French parliamentary usage, ordinarily mean little enough in American practical politics. For another, conservatism (in the phrase of Dr. H. Stuart Hughes of Harvard) is "the negation of ideology." The American public is not about to embrace the ideology of the Birch

Society (whose membership drive, as Robert Welch confesses, has been flagging), or of some Radical Right organization still less prudent. Nevertheless, conservative candidates for office will fare much better this fall than they did in 1964, and the policies and personnel of the Johnson Administration, responding to the public's mood, will become distinctly less liberal.

Far from being extremist in character, this revived conservatism is a reaction, in part, to the extremism of the New Left and its eccentricities. In 1964, much of the American electorate (always, like the British public, suspicious of positions allegedly extreme) was convinced that Senator Goldwater (or, anyway, some of his supporters) would upset the applecart. But in 1966 nobody really worries about the Birch Society, super-patriots, and all that. Clearly, for more than a year, the vexatious extremists have been the radicals of the National Conference for New Politics, Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Vietnam Day enthusiasts, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the whoie congeries of New Left activist zealots.

This reaction is a necessary and healthy one, and of course it includes many people who never would think of calling themselves conservatives. Take, for instance, the words of Miss Lillian Smith, the novelist, on resigning recently from the Congress of Racial Equality: "We have new killers of the dream. CORE has been infiltrated by adventurers and nihilists, black nationalists and plain old-fashioned haters, who have finally taken over."

The Radical Right groups never went into the streets; to the average voter, they were, at worst, a dim threat and a minor nuisance. But when "peaceniks" invade the White House and try to bog down the Oakland, Calif., Army terminal; when gentlemen of the New Left carry Vietcong banners; when black nationalists turn to arson—why, the public begins to look about for candidates who profess some interest in law, order and national unity. It is interesting to reflect that the "free speech" and "foul speech" demonstrators at Berkeley, not to mention California's militant pacifists, did much to secure the Republican gubernatorial nomination for Mr. Reagan (though nothing was further from their thoughts), quite as the Negro extremists of Watts obtained for Mayor Samuel Yorty of Los Angeles many of his 850,000 votes in the recent Democratic primary.

This public distaste for New Left extremism extends beyond the New Left gentry themselves to those officeholders and legislators who fail to do anything effective about this form of political insanity, or who retain some connection with the radical groups. Thus the political victors of 1964 find themselves unhappily squeezed between a popular dislike of radical demonstrators, and the disaffection of the New Left circles themselves. Since the latter represent only a small segment of the voting population, there is little doubt as to which way the men in power will shift, when they are compelled to choose.

THE New Left, for all that, is merely an irritant to the American public; the discontent with foreign and domestic policies goes deeper. In terms of national issues, the real public pressures upon the Johnson Administration are to obtain victory in Vietnam, to concert a general foreign policy with better prospect of success, to achieve fiscal stability, and to proceed very gradually, if at all, toward any more proposed Great Society reforms.

If the doctrinaire liberals are bewildered by this alteration of public opinion, they have their own premature jubilation in November, 1964, to blame. Contrary to the liberals' assessment in that month, the victory of Mr. Johnson over Mr. Goldwater was not a triumph of liberal ideas over conservative ideas. The American people, as everyone should have heard by this time, do not elect a President, they defeat his opponent. And they rarely make decisions on the basis of abstract ideas.

Mr. Goldwater was rejected by more than six out of every 10 voters for two clear reasons: (1) They feared that he was "trigger-happy" (as the poll-in-depth of Louis Cheskin Associates showed some weeks before the election, the prejudice against Mr. Goldwater was so strong on this score that no possible prejudice in his favor on some other issue could have (Continued on Page 23)

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saved him); (2), they suspected, confusedly, that he was "some sort of radical" (a feeling which carried for President Johnson even this writer's own Michigan county and township, Republican from time out of mind). So Mr. Johnson won handsomely, precisely because the electorate judged that of the two candidates, he was the more conservative.

Thus the Presidential election of 1964 obscured the real drift of public opinion. President Johnson, re-elected, had election promises to fulfill; but he received no mandate for a Great Society. The only considerable innovation of the Johnson Administration has been Medicare, and as the public discovers how limited are the benefits of that program—the butter being spread too thin, with no test of need—and how sharply the rates of the Social Security tax will rise, the reaction may be startling. Other programs, notably the War on Poverty, already are suspect in Congress and out of Congress; their functioning will be a sore point with the national Administration—this year and in 1968. Similarly, the immense subsidies for public schools will not be gladly supported by many voters. For, though the Federal budget is burdened by these grants, poor school districts are not much better off than before, and the real need has been for qualitative improvement of schools, of which there is little sign as yet.

Emphatically, the public does not demand larger Federal expenditures, which could be accomplished only by increasing taxes or by further inflation of the dollar and of prices through deficit spending and issuing of more Federal bonds. In the nation, as in California, the pressure is for governmental retrenchment.

Still less is there a widespread public demand for fresh civil rights legislation at any level. It becomes increasingly clear to most people that the mere enactment of laws does not bestow equality of condition upon the Negro, or allay discontent in the urban ghettos. One cannot live upon abstract rights. The prospect of Federal interference with the sale and renting of houses is not calculated to rouse a great glad cry of public rejoicing. Already disturbed by fumbling attempts of the Federal educational bureaucracy to require speedier integration—or remedying of racial imbalance—in North-

ern cities as well as in the South, the public takes a dim view of projects like that of Harold Howe 2d, United States Commissioner of Education, for "educational parks" of 20,000 students apiece, where the schools may be utilized for grandiose sociological experiments.

ONE finds no strong pressure, then, for larger chunks of the Great Society. Rather, a current of dissent from liberal attitudes in politics runs stronger every month. The steady increase of crime and urban violence, with which the typical liberal politician seems to have small notion of how to cope, is a really urgent grievance, not an abstraction. The failure of the present Congress to do anything about the Supreme Court's forbidding of prayer and Bible reading in public schools produces a smoldering resentment in many parts of the country that might burst into a hot political issue. The solicitude which the Johnson Administration displays for big labor and big business, coupled with the discontents of that very large class which Mr. Goldwater once called "the forgotten Americans," produces more disillusion with Great Society slogans.

Liberals who mistake these complaints for the laments of little old ladies in tennis shoes may experience ruder shocks than the one they received from Mr. Reagan's margin of victory. The dissatisfaction with liberal cant and slogans extends to people whom even the most ritualistic liberal cannot pooh-pooh. Consider these mordant observations:

"Liberalism will be seen historically as the great destructive force of our time; much more so than Communism, Fascism, Nazism, or any of the lunatic creeds which make such immediate havoc. . . . It is liberalism which makes the Gadarene swine so frisky; as mankind go to their last incinerated extinction the voice of the liberal will be heard proclaiming the realization at last of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

A voice from the lunatic fringe? No, gentlemen: the voice of one of the more perceptive men of our time, the witty Malcolm Muggeridge.

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BUT can American conservative politicians and thinkers provide the imaginative leadership which would supplant liberal moralizing by conservative action? Nominating—and electing—10 Ronald Reagans would make no

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noticeable dent in the liberal ascendancy if ideas and courage are lacking.

First of all, if this nascent conservatism is to take on flesh, conservative leaders will have to grasp the nettle in Southeast Asia. Abject evacuation of South Vietnam is inconceivable; but so is success by simple bombing. Democratic publics demand — sometimes imprudently — prompt victory. A party or a faction that tries to settle in Vietnam for anything less than the *status quo ante bellum* achieved by the Korean War will be indignantly rejected by most American citizens. Yet a guerrilla war cannot be won by bombers, or by masses of half-trained American conscripts.

So the architects of a conservative program must come forward with fresh military and diplomatic plans. They will need to propose, for instance, some such strategy as this: cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail by a land defense in depth, from Thailand to the China Sea, right across the peninsula, which line would have to be manned, presumably, by troops competent to fight such a prolonged war of attrition — Korean divisions, the Thai Army, American elite forces, and probably the big reserve of the Nationalist Chinese.

The supply lines for Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces having been severed, there would be a fair prospect of dealing with the guerrillas isolated behind the line, as the British successfully extirpated the Communist guerrillas in Malaya. Then diplomatic negotiation from strength might be possible. Until conservative critics of the Johnson policy in Vietnam outline some such general design for carrying on the struggle to a tolerable conclusion, the public will look upon conservative critics as men without practical alternatives.

Next, conservatives will need to convince the public that they can resist inflation, and reduce or check governmental expenditure by a consistent economic plan. As yet, they

have done little enough in this direction in opposition. From school-lunch subsidies to the military budget, some of the Congressional conservatives have voted to enlarge appropriations, rather than to accept the Administration's proposed reductions.

Again, conservatives must offer something better than piecemeal criticism and objection to programs for improving the conditions of Negroes and for dealing with urban disintegration. They need not be afraid to speak caustically of the sentimentality and impracticality of present approaches, provided they bring forward real alternatives to civil rights sloganizing, bureaucratic mismanagement of poverty schemes, and the creation of urban deserts in the name of urban renewal.

The public appears to be tired of kowtowing to every racist demagogue, followed by two or three hundred dupes or fanatics, who claims to be a civil-rights leader; it is almost as tired of the feckless administration of the War on Poverty; it resents the destruction of whole communities, under the guise of urban renewal to increase the prosperity of certain speculators and builders. But again, a conservative success founded only upon the resentments of the hour could not endure; the Negro, the urban poor, and the city rotten at the core are not going to vanish. The public must know more or less precisely how the conservatives would deal with these conundrums.

IN general, the public seems to want an end to liberal breast-beating, sermonizing, and promises of the secular glory to come; it is bored with utopian and salvational politics. In its present mood, the American public is looking for men of decision with principles that might secure the national interest, shore up the economy and offer bold, practical approaches to domestic disorder.

So far, the conservative drift, even in volatile California, generally is good-natured, inquiring and fairly

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LOSER—Johnson beat Goldwater in '64, says Kirk, "because the electorate judged that of the two candidates [Johnson] was the more conservative."

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tolerant. President Johnson is not admired, but neither is he detested; the oddities of the New Left are contemplated with amused contempt, rather than with anguish; the full force of increasing political centralization is not felt as yet, and so not yet bitterly resented.

But if American troops in Asia should be pushed into a corner, or if inflation should commence to gallop, or if Grand Designs from Washington should be imposed against the will of some of the abler and more energetic elements in the community—why, one can imagine a conservative crusade that would make the work of the Goldwater volunteers in 1964 seem a feeble gesture. A good many conservative-minded folk, neophytes in practical politics in 1964, have since learned what to do and what not to do in primary and general elections. Witness, as evidence of a new proficiency in tactics, the emergence of Ronald Reagan.

Mr. Reagan is something of a surprise. Previously he was a man of One Speech—

and that chiefly an address to those already converted. But clearly he has been doing much reading and thinking and conferring, so that now he is ready with persuasive answers to nearly all questions.

Whether he can develop into a genuine leader of responsible conservatives will depend upon his performance as Governor—if he is elected. He is more supple than Mr. Goldwater, and willing to work. He will have to go a great way beyond his famous Speech, which was almost wholly a rapid-fire attack on a variety of afflictions without alternative courses being presented, if he is to lead the conservative interest out of simple negativism.

THE vision of Burke is needed in this hour; and the honesty of John Adams, and the cleverness of Disraeli, and the energy of Theodore Roosevelt. Can those qualities be found among American conservatives now? Long deprived of power, and almost deprived of duties, some American conservatives have become apathetic, sour, or enraptured of opposition for op-

position's sake. However, the future of the American conservative impulse will be determined more by the rising generation—those who were conservatively inclined college students about 1953 or 1954—than by Mr. Goldwater or Mr. Reagan. By and large, the conservative newcomers are a promising lot.

THE intellectual bankruptcy of American liberalism, which Lionel Trilling noted just before the revival of conservative ideas commenced in this country, will give way before conservative imagination and confidence—if the conservatives are not equally bankrupt in thought.

One hopes that the conservatives will be right, but not Right; determined, but not rash; realistic, but not ungenerous. The fatigued and fatiguing quasiliberalism of the Johnsonians, rooted in slogans a generation old and in largess to voting blocs, seems incapable of opposing successfully our present sea of troubles. Given a touch of humor, the conservatives may laugh salvational liberalism out of power.