

America's Symbol-Maker— How We See the President

"The American people have created almost a God-King in the office of the presidency."

—Senator Edward R. Brooke (R-Mass.)

"The most important, and least examined, problem of the Presidency is that of maintaining contact with reality."

—George Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency*

Michael Novak says that he began this book with two convictions: That the presidency is the nation's most central religious symbol and, that American civilization is best understood as a set of secular religious systems.

"The drama of the last six months," he adds, "has lent my thesis public demonstration I did not expect."

The election of a President, Novak writes, is almost a religious task; it intimately affects the life of the spirit, our identity.

"Who the man is," he insists, "determines in real measure who we are . . . the ascendance of Nixon (say) rather than the ascendance of McGovern has great power to depress or elate, to liberate energies or to shrink them."

In short, the President acting for us, is us, and that has traumatized millions of Americans who no longer feel Richard Nixon symbolizes them.

A short while ago of course, Americans gave Richard Nixon the greatest mandate in our history over George McGovern and Novak's poking around in ashes of 1972 stirs up poignant memories of the watershed Wisconsin primary.

- "Cutback in space," Gene McCarthy is saying at UW-Milwaukee, "Did you notice on television? The simulated shots were better than the real thing. We could simulate space probes more cheaply . . ."

- Ed Muskie at Capitol Court Shopping Center in the rain and high school kids yelling: "Ask him if he brought his crying towel."

- George Wallace at Serb Hall and the bartender saying afterwards. "Maybe for two years. He'd clean things out. More than that, he'd be dangerous."

- And of course George McGovern, around midnight in a Milwaukee restaurant telling Eleanor, "I always said that Wisconsin is the most progressive state in the nation."

One by one they would fall by the wayside and Richard Nixon was again anointed "King, Priest and Prophet" of the American people — seemingly invulnerable, omnipotent, flanked by the most



**BOOKS of
the TIMES**

by **GEORGE VUKELICH**

CHOOSING OUR KING

Powerful Symbols in Presidential Politics. by Michael Novak, Macmillan, 324 pages.

effective ministers of state since Richelieu. And then of course it all went smash.

The Office of the Presidency, Novak says, carried a "sacredness" of itself, and for a while Richard Nixon shares that "sacredness."

Watergate has turned us into a divided people hard pressed to distinguish between the Office of the Presidency and the man who occupies that Office by our sufferance.

The awe and majesty of the Office elevates its mortal occupants to a royal station more powerful than any other King on earth.

Where did all the awe and majesty come from?

Some say from our subconscious need as an immature people for a strong, wise, consecrated, if you will, father-figure.

"Royalty," Novak writes, "the human heart ceaselessly reinvents it. It brings unity and simplicity to the image of government, power at a single source. Television has only heightened the ancient hunger. Its cameras need a single actor, seek the symbolic event as the desert hart seeks water."

Symbolically, Novak feels, television dwarfs the Congress and the courts. There may be a balance of power in the government; but no such balance exists on television.

Yet, despite the fact that the President is treated like a King, Novak says that's not the danger.

"Our danger," he writes, "is not that the office has a sacred quality, that people invest in it too many of their hopes and fears and too much trust. Our danger is that one man, kept from humbling contact with humbling things is not a sufficient guide to the politics of daily reality. The metaphysical function of the President — his sovereignty over what we may take to be real — has been inflated beyond human capacity."

To keep the President in touch with the "politics of daily reality," the author offers these suggestions:

- Congress — in particular the opposition party in Congress — must have a single spokesman who can personify the Congress as the President personifies the executive branch.

- The President should be obliged on a biweekly basis to come before the leaders of the opposition for a public, hour-long accounting of his policies.

- The President's cabinet should always, perhaps by force of law, include a proportion of members from the opposition party.

The symbol maker of a nation, Novak contends, holds back the public's energies or invites them to unfold . . . what vast relief would flow if our public discourse actually described the nation as it is — if the constraints that stifle us were soon released!

"Such a president," he concludes, "will free the nation's wings."

Such a man, though, may be hard to come by if the Old Timer from Manitowish Waters has it right.

"It may be that the moment a man declares for the Presidency," the Old Timer says, "he proves that he's unfit to hold the office."

Michael Novak is consultant in the humanities to The Rockefeller Foundation. He has been professor of philosophy and religious studies at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, and at Stanford University. As a journalist, he covered the election of 1972 for Newsday until July, when he joined the staff first of Senator George McGovern and then of Sargent Shriver. He has written several highly acclaimed books, including "The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics."