

Beyond Voting

By Howard Zinn (1976)

Gossip is the opium of the American public. We lie back, close our eyes and happily inhale the stories about Roosevelt's and Kennedy's affairs, Lyndon Johnson's nude swims with unnamed partners and, now, Nixon's pathetic "final days" in office.

The latest fix is administered by reporters Woodward and Bernstein and the stuff is Nixon's sex life with Pat, Nixon drunk and weeping, Nixon cradled in the arms of Kissinger (who did it, we presume, for national security).

So we get high on trivia, and forget that, whether Presidents have been impotent or oversexed, drunk or sober, they have followed the same basic policies. Whether crooks or Boy Scouts, handsome or homely, agile or clumsy, they have taxed the poor, subsidized the rich, wasted the wealth of the nation on guns and bombs, ignored the decay of the cities, and done so little for the children of the ghettos and rural wastelands that these youth had to join the armed forces to survive-until they were sent overseas to die.

Harry Truman was blunt and Lyndon Johnson wily, but both sent armies to Asia to defend dictators and massacre the people we claimed to be helping. Eisenhower was dull and Kennedy witty, but both built up huge nuclear armaments at the expense of schools and health care. Nixon was corrupt and Ford straightforward, but both coldly cut benefits for the poor and gave favors to rich corporations.

The cult of personality in America is a powerful drug. It takes the energy of ordinary citizens which, combined, can be a powerful force, and depletes it in the spectator sport of voting. Our most cherished moment of democratic citizenship comes when we leave the house once in four years to choose between two mediocre white Anglo-Saxon males who have been trundled out by political caucuses, million dollar primaries and managed conventions for the rigged multiple choice test we call an election. Presidents come and go. But the FBI is always there, on the job,

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sometimes catching criminals, sometimes committing crimes itself, always checking on radicals as secret police do all over the world. Its latest confession: ninety-two burglaries, 1960-66.

Presidents come and go, but the military budget keeps rising. It was \$74 billion in 1973, is over \$100 billion now (the equivalent of \$2000 in taxes for every family), and will reach \$130 billion in 1980.

Presidents come and go, but the 200 top corporations keep increasing their control: 45 percent of all manufacturing in 1960, 60 per cent by 1970.

No President in this century has stopped the trend. Not even FDR.

Yes, Roosevelt took steps to help poor people in the '30s. Minimum wages. Social security, WPA jobs. Relief. But that didn't change the basic nature of the capitalist system, whose highest priority has always been profits for the corporations and to hell with the rest.

Roosevelt was humane and wise, but, also, he had to react to signs of anger and rebellion in the country. He had seen the Bonus March of veterans to Washington under Hoover. In his first year, mass strikes-400,000 textile workers out in the South and New England. Longshoremen tied up the whole city of San Francisco. Teamsters took over Minneapolis. The unemployed were organizing, the bootleg miners taking over coalfields, tenants gathering in the cities to stop evictions.

Roosevelt was a sensitive man. But something big was happening in the country to sharpen his sensitivity.

1976: the multiple choice test is here again. Sure, there are better candidates and worse. But we will go a long way from spectator democracy to real democracy when we understand that the future of this country doesn't depend, mainly, on who is our next President. It depends on whether the American citizen, fed up with high taxes, high prices, unemployment, waste, war and corruption, will organize all over the country a clamor for change even greater than the labor uprisings of the '30s or the black rebellion of the '60s and shake this country out of old paths into new ones.

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