

# The Difference to Me

*The fading cliché of the current campaign is that there is no real difference between the candidates*

by JAMES FINN

**B**Y THE TIME election day arrives one of the hardest myths of the 1960 Presidential campaign—that there are no differences between the candidates—may, mercifully, have been laid to rest. There are already strong signs that it is dying. This article is written to help it on its way.

During the early weeks of the current campaign for the Presidency of the United States, I was visited by a feeling of political unreality that I had experienced only once before—during the election returns of 1948. I was in Chicago when I heard those predictions of Dewey's victory along with the early scattered returns that favored Truman. At first the discrepancy was neither surprising nor disconcerting; it could be accounted for. The rural areas were still to be heard from. But as the morning hours approached, and the Truman totals soared, and the untroubled voice continued to proclaim Dewey the victor, the feeling of unreality became distinctly troublesome. It was as if, with signs of dawn already breaking in the East, the commentator were declaring with calm assurance, "and today the sun will rise in the West."

The unreality which pervaded the early weeks of this campaign did not derive, of course, from the calm prediction of an overwhelming victory for either candidate. It derived, rather, from a frequently stated assertion that it didn't make any difference who won. John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, several commentators said, were the first political twins to attempt to divide the voters' allegiance. There was no discernible difference and the voter was, consequently, left with no choice. This lack of choice, lack of conflict, was supposedly confirmed by a lack of interest among the voters, by a general nationwide apathy.

Since the large crowds which greeted both candidates, even early in the campaign, did not allow me to think that the nation was blanketed with apathy, and

since the candidates looked distinct and distinctly different to me, I regretted the existence of this myth which, prematurely delivered by some commentators and too readily accepted by others, seemed to feed on itself. The appearance of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s political pamphlet *Kennedy or Nixon: Does It Make any Difference?* (Macmillan. \$1.95) was to me particularly welcome. Mr. Schlesinger meets the current political clichés head-on. He writes as an avowed partisan and friend of Senator Kennedy, but no one who reads the pamphlet—whether he was previously a partisan for Kennedy, for Nixon, or uncommitted—will be any longer comfortable with the cliché. What is particularly interesting is that Mr. Schlesinger wrote weeks before the television debates between the candidates and before their most vigorous campaigning got under way and that much of what he wrote has been borne out in these recent weeks.

**I**N ITS FULL splendor, the principal cliché of this campaign goes something like this. There is little or no difference between the parties, their general policies are the same, and the candidates are practically mirror images. Not only are they said to be alike, but they are alike in an ugly way. Both Kennedy and Nixon are allegedly cool, calculating and ambitious. They are the apotheosis of the organization man; they manipulate emotions, but feel none themselves. One reporter who discerned some differences yet said they were joined in one intangible but terrible quality: "Neither seems to be a man at whose funeral strangers would cry."

One could explore the grounds from which the cliché sprang. For there are superficial resemblances between the candidates and their careers. But rather than speculate how these surface similarities led some people to the superficial conclusion that Kennedy and Nixon are essentially alike, it may be better to examine the essential differences that become, with every passing day, increasingly clear.

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Vice-President Nixon has been on the national political scene for some years—and has no definite political identification. This is an achievement of no mean proportions. It means that he can talk of “the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration” not only as if the Presidency were a partnership but as if the partners never disagreed. While doing this he can, with some concessions, draw Governor Rockefeller into his camp and, at the same time, persuade Senator Barry Goldwater that he is, deep down, really conservative. By these means the Vice-President has staked out the widest possible ground for maneuvering within the party; for if any three men can represent the range within the Republican Party they are Rockefeller, Eisenhower and Goldwater. But it also suggests that, at this late date in his political career, even his most valuable supporters do not know his true commitments.

Any politician in office for a number of years will make contradictory statements from time to time, but the list of Mr. Nixon's is impressively long. He once said that history would judge Secretary Benson to be “one of the best Secretaries of Agriculture in our history.” If so he has opposed himself to history's verdict, for he has made clear his present opposition to Benson. In 1958 he delivered a speech in which he said that we should “speak less of the threat of Communism and more of the promise of freedom.” During the present campaign, he has seemed to reverse the injunction. In 1958 Mr. Nixon, speaking before the Newspaper Publishers Association, pointed to the “sobering fact [that] the Soviet economy is growing faster than ours.” A few weeks ago he termed his opponent a “spokesman of national disparagement” for pointing out the same fact. Not long ago he favored, as President Eisenhower and Senator Kennedy still do, repeal of the restrictive Connally Amendment under which the United States, alone among NATO nations, reserved the right to judge which cases come under the jurisdiction of the World Court. Recently, even to the surprise of some of Nixon's advisers, Senator Goldwater produced a statement in which the Vice-President had, in effect, quite reversed his course. Mr. Nixon tells the voters not to vote by label or party but to be discriminating and vote for the best man; he then says that he himself will support the entire Republican ticket across the country.

This list of contradictory positions, which are of varying degrees of importance, could be greatly extended. But the point is already clear. Mr. Nixon has, chameleon-like, adapted himself and his opinions to the demands of the immediate political surroundings. Because he is committed to no political philosophy, because he follows in no political tradition, because almost every general statement of principle is balanced by its counterpart, Mr. Nixon is free to move readily

from a “liberal” Rockefeller position to a conservative or reactionary Goldwater position, pausing to say a few words for Eisenhower Republicanism on the way. But this freedom is superficial, deceptive and dangerous, for it is based entirely upon the freedom to respond. A man who achieves such “freedom” is free to follow strong opinions but not to form them. He can place himself at the head of surging opinion—if he can first detect where it is going. He can give the appearance of leadership but not leadership itself.

In this role, which does require intelligence and a sensitivity to the reactions of others, Mr. Nixon functions very well. He is articulate, shrewd and comfortably reassuring. In a time free from crisis, domestic and international, his particular qualities could be very useful.

SENATOR John F. Kennedy, who entered Congress at the same time as his opponent, has shown himself to be a completely different kind of person. Outspoken from his years as a freshman Congressman, Mr. Kennedy has delivered major statements on most of the grave issues of our time. Those statements—many of which are collected in his book, *The Strategy of Peace*—and his voting record indicate what he believes, how he will act, and in what direction he will move.

There are some contradictions in Mr. Kennedy's record. He, too, once favored Secretary Benson but does no longer. He, too, once held a more benign view of Senator McCarthy than he now does. But on the other major issues of our time where Senator Kennedy has changed, the change is a development, not a contradiction, of his earlier opinions. The record is so consistent that, without knowing his stand on some particular issue, one could safely guess and stand an excellent chance of being right. One who was acquainted with the issues would, for example, guess that he opposed the loyalty oath in education bills, that he favors the extension of social security benefits to include medical care for the aged, that he expressed strong moral support for the “sit ins.” And one would have guessed right. Still, this merely indicates that he generally adheres to a recognizable political tradition. It reveals neither depth of interest, real conviction, nor original thinking.

But, as Mr. Schlesinger points out, “he has regularly devoted speeches . . . to topics whose only significance lies in the remote future . . . issues far in advance of packages and hackneyed opinion, because they interest *him* and strike *him* as crucial—whether or not anyone in the audience is ready to respond or to appreciate.” For example, he early called attention to the impending crisis in Indo-China and suggested a policy similar to that which was eventually followed. He raised a small furor in 1957 with his stand on

Algeria, a stand now regarded not only as possible but desirable. In 1958 he gave a speech on U.S.-Latin American relations which is as sturdy and applicable now as it was then. It has been urged that a large contributing factor to these speeches was the lure of the 1960 election. This is possible, but the same lure did not contribute as much, apparently, to several other potential candidates.

**A**NOTHER DIFFERENCE, and a major difference, exists in what may be described as the "style" of the candidates. One gauge of Kennedy's style is the manner in which he dealt with the religious issue and the way he has buried all discussion about youth and an alleged lack of experience. Kennedy met the questions concerning his religion directly and head-on. All substantive questions that could legitimately be asked he answered unequivocally, and many questions that are irrelevant. After the first T.V. debate between the Vice President and the Senator, only scattered partisans thought there was still some political mileage in stressing Kennedy's age and his supposed political inexperience. It was all too evident that he spoke with at least equal authority and that he had an impressive grasp of facts, figures and sundry details. His major fault may well have been that he appealed too little to the emotions.

Nixon, on the other hand, has a quite recognizable and effective style. The "Checkers" speech remains the classic example, but almost any major address will do. Facts and sound information are employed, but they are all too often left behind in a blatant appeal to emotions. In itself this is not necessarily harmful; unfortunately, however, the emotional appeal frequently has little to do with any political issue.

A couple of examples from the third T.V. debate will reveal this great difference in style. When Senator Kennedy was asked how one could determine whether American prestige was declining, he responded in a methodical fashion, ticking off the ways: first, the statements of George Allen, head of our information service; second, the ascertainable greater growth of the Soviet Union compared to the United States; third, a recent Gallup Poll of opinion in other countries; fourth, the recent votes at the U.N. And each point was developed with facts and accurate paraphrases.

When Mr. Nixon was asked to comment on the rude language Harry Truman had used in discussing the Republicans he replied: "One thing I've noted as I travel around the country . . . I see mothers holding their babies up so they can see a man who might be the President of the United States . . . And I only hope that, should I win this election, that I could approach President Eisenhower in maintaining the dignity of the office; in seeing to it that whenever any mother or father talks to his child, he can look at the

man in the White House and, whatever he may think of his policies, he will say, there's a man who maintains the kind of standards personally that I would want my child to follow."

There is clearly no danger that either Mr. Kennedy or Mr. Nixon will adopt the style of either Mr. Truman or President Eisenhower. And no one is going to run on a platform that opposes decent language. Further, the question is, as Nixon suggested, quite apart from the issues. Yet in a valuable, nationwide debate where no single serious issue can be adequately discussed Mr. Nixon spoke up fearlessly, humbly, and at considerable length, on behalf of little children and parenthood.

These answers of Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Nixon are, I submit, typical. Mr. Kennedy, of course, is not always as sharp and clear in his answers nor is Mr. Nixon always as emotional and irrelevant. The point is that Mr. Nixon rarely gives the point-by-point factual response Mr. Kennedy did, and Mr. Kennedy never makes the naked, emotional and irrelevant response that Mr. Nixon gave. Mr. Kennedy tends to give the hard, disagreeable facts which demand attention and engage the intelligence. Mr. Nixon tends to give the reassuring generalization which comforts and which attaches the pleasurable emotions.

**C**LEARLY ALL wisdom does not reside in one party, nor does one candidate possess all the political virtues. No party or candidate has ever been, and none in the future will be, free from error, poor judgment and justified criticism. But there are clear and present differences in this campaign and the choice the electorate makes on November 8 will do much to determine our national and individual histories, indeed the histories of nations around the world.

If this were a time of worldwide peace and prosperity, and if it were true, as Mr. Nixon asserts, that "at the present time Communist prestige in the world is at an all-time low and American prestige is at an all-time high," the decision in this election might not be so urgent.

But it is not true that we have worldwide peace and prosperity, and there is much evidence to show and responsible opinion to assert that relative to the U.S.S.R. the power of the U.S. has declined in the last eight years. In this time of crisis—for such it is—the country needs a President who is concerned more with reality than with appearance, more with substance than with technique, more with issues than with images. It needs a man who is assured, authoritative, informed and determined, a man who can persuade others to follow him because he will fight for his positions rather than compromise them, a man who will talk sense to the American people. On the basis of his past record and his present performance, John F. Kennedy appears to be such a man; Richard M. Nixon does not.