

James Comer.

Fence Sitters Beware

In the fall of '68 people told me they weren't voting for President because they couldn't stand Nixon or Humphrey. With Bobby dead and "clean Gene" out of the running, how could it make any difference who won? Liberals disdained a choice between "the lesser of two evils" and millions of them stayed home on election day. As a result, Richard Nixon oozed into office by 500,000 votes.

Those who boycotted the polls in '68 helped to usher in the era of Agnew, Mitchell, Ehrlichman, Haldeman, and Butz. The well-intentioned abstainers were partially responsible for an administration which treated us to the Cambodian invasion, the Ellsberg break-in, White House buggings, CIA spying, and "enemies lists."

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In the fall of '72 people told me they didn't like Nixon and didn't trust McGovern. The South Dakotan seemed "wishy-washy" and "fuzzy" on the issues. In contrast, the incumbent appeared "stable and clear thinking." He hadn't won their hearts and his upper lip perspired suspiciously, but voters doubted that Nixon would do anything hair-brained. Millions of independents and Democrats swallowed hard, played it "safe," and awarded the Republican President his ironic landslide. In return, he gave them the "Watergate Follies," the longest-running display of hair-brained fuzzy-mindedness in presidential history. As a further bonus, the unconsulted citizenry inherited Gerald Ford.

It is now the fall of '76 and once again people tell me that neither candidate merits a vote. Ford is too dull and Carter too devout. The President lacks lustre and his challenger is trying too hard. Ford is ineffective and the Georgian inexperienced. The incumbent hides and seeks office from the Rose Garden while Carter talks not only to God but to Playboy.

Despite 30 primaries, two conventions, and televised debates, the populace seems listless and bored by it all. Yawns abound. Pollsters predict the lowest election day turn-out in years. Apathy is in. Voters are unmoved by their options: Nixon's hand-me-down or a smiling peanut farmer. The lever-pulling public must again choose between imperfect specimens. A latter day Lincoln has yet to surface.

Many look for a respectable alternative in the candidacy of Gene McCarthy. A resurrected hero seems better than none at all. Yet this decent man could prove a dangerous Don Quixote. If enough lost-cause-liberals march in his parade, they might inadvertently renew the Republican lease on the White House.

Protest votes hold no allure for me, nor do I accept the prevailing mood of cynicism. An attitude of lofty disinterest strikes me as childish. Abdicating responsibility isn't noble, merely self-indulgent. Sacrificing a vote on the altar of indecision only allows others to decide by default.

I've made my decision. Though I campaigned in the snows of New Hampshire for Morris Udall, I'm voting for Jimmy Carter. Have I compromised my principles in doing so? Did I taint my dogmatic purity? I believe not.

I'm simply making the best of the available options: Gerald Ford or Jimmy Carter. One of them will be elected President. I find that the choice is not beyond me.

I'm not pretending that Jimmy Carter is perfect. He doesn't have to be. He's not running for sainthood, but for President, an office traditionally inhabited by the fallible. Carter has made mistakes in the campaign, and he'll make more if he's elected, but he pledges a program of humane change. This is why he has my support. I've had enough malign neglect.

The fact is inescapable: For the next four years Jimmy Carter is the only alternative to Gerald Ford. Yes, I like Betty, too—but not enough to keep her husband in office until 1981.