In the Nixon-Humphrey election, I refused to vote for the ‘lesser of two evils.’ That was a mistake

By HENRY WEINSTEIN
OCT 21, 2016 | 4:00 AM

President Richard Nixon, center, meets with Henry Kissinger, left, and Vice President Gerald Ford in 1973. He resigned from office about 10 months later. (Harvey W. Georges / Associated Press)

When I stepped into the polling booth on Nov. 5, 1968, to cast my first vote for president, I was an angry Berkeley law student active in a variety of causes, including the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement and endeavors to enable California farmworkers to unionize.

I did not like either of the major candidates. Richard Nixon and his running mate, Spiro Agnew, promised to bring an unholy version of "law and order" to our country, just as Republican candidate Donald Trump is hawking now.

I also had no enthusiasm for Democratic candidate Hubert H. Humphrey. Until he became vice president under Lyndon Johnson, I admired Humphrey, the Minnesota senator who had championed civil rights. But Triple H morphed into Johnson's surrogate, supporting an unwise, immoral war in Vietnam.

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A devastating Bill Mauldin cartoon crystallized my feelings about Humphrey's noxious role. It depicted Humphrey speaking to a Vietnamese woman seeking shelter from American bombs in foxhole. The caption: "Ma'am, I represent The Great Society."

My hostility to Humphrey intensified during the Democratic convention when Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's gendarmes beat demonstrators with truncheons on city streets, prompting Connecticut Sen. Abe Ribicoff to blast the police's "Gestapo" tactics in a speech from the convention podium. In response, Daley, a Humphrey backer, brandished his middle finger.

So, what to do on Nov. 5? Be practical, settle for half a loaf with Humphrey? Or "take a stand on principle," not succumb to voting for "the lesser of two evils" and declare, in effect, "it really doesn't make a difference?"

My emotions prevailed. I wrote in Dick Gregory, an African American comedian who championed civil rights and opposed the war. Some friends voted for Black Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, the Peace and Freedom Party candidate. We walked out of our polling places feeling righteous.

In California, the smattering of votes garnered by Cleaver (27,707) and Gregory (3,230) had no impact on the outcome. Nixon defeated Humphrey by 223,000 votes. But there were people like us across the country who did not take the long view and consequently failed to do what Humphrey needed to win — register voters, talk to neighbors, canvas to increase election-day turnout. Nationally, Nixon prevailed — 31.7 million votes to 31.2 million votes.

Once ensconced in the White House with a little help from those of us who took a "principled stand," Nixon and his chief foreign policy advisor, Henry Kissinger, dragged out the Vietnam War for another seven years, leading to thousands of American deaths and a million more Vietnamese deaths. Nixon's reign also brought an era of dirty tricks culminating in the Watergate scandal. Of more enduring consequence, Nixon appointed several men to the Supreme Court who sought to curb or undo the expansion of democratic liberties achieved while Earl Warren was chief justice. (President Obama's successor may get three Supreme Court appointments. Trump's model justice is the late Antonin Scalia, whose hostility to progressive causes knew no bounds.)

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Those of us who helped Nixon win by failing to support the better candidate naively acted as if voting in a presidential election was a simple matter of morality that overshadowed practical consequences. I made a bad decision in 1968 because I failed to acknowledge: (1) the clear potential damage Nixon and his henchmen could wreak; (2) the likelihood Humphrey would ultimately pay greater heed to antiwar protests than Nixon, not to mention how much more progressive Humphrey was on domestic issues; and (3) that voting in an election is just one action, among many, that an American can take to make a better society.

Staunch supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders, whose views are much closer to mine than Hillary Clinton's, seem to feel like I did years ago: "The system is rotten; I will vote for a third party candidate or sit it out." But history shows progressives that it is folly to vote for a sure loser such as Gary Johnson or Jill Stein.

Antiwar activist Michael Ansara, a leader of Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, recently urged Sanders stalwarts to reject the path we took in 1968. "Looking back," he said, "we young idealists and activists were not so much wrong in our assessments of Humphrey as we were totally wrong in our assessment of whether

it matters if a corporate center liberal is elected over an insecure, unstable, right-wing candidate who does not respect the Constitution."

Trump has stoked racism, xenophobia and sexism, expressed contempt for a free press, denied climate change, urged repeal of the Affordable Care Act, advocated mass deportations, sanctioned torture, belittled the physically disabled, boasted of tax avoidance, lied endlessly and continually spoken from both sides of his mouth. Within moments of advocating restoration of "law and order" during the second debate, Trump, sounding like a Third World dictator, proclaimed that if he were president, Clinton "would be in jail." Mind you, she hasn't been indicted, much less convicted, of a crime. More broadly, he has attempted to delegitimize democratic institutions by alleging the election will be "rigged," without any evidence.

It's tragic that people who even remotely consider themselves progressives would do anything that could help Trump win. Voting for Stein or Johnson will.

Where I am coming from? I'm a proud member of the Democratic Party's Elizabeth Warren wing. I worked eight months for George McGovern during the 1972 presidential campaign and regret not a moment despite the outcome. Clinton is not Warren, and she's not Sanders; she's too hawkish, voted wrong on the Iraq war and is too close to Wall Street. But she wants to achieve immigration reform, mitigate climate change, regulate gun ownership, make college more affordable and invest in infrastructure. She has a record of work on issues of great importance, including her stint at the Children's Defense Fund and her efforts to achieve healthcare reform. Even Trump acknowledges that she is indefatigable.

It's absurd to argue that there is not a vast difference between Clinton and Trump, a real estate mogul and celebrity TV star with no record of public service. Perfection is not the issue. I periodically remind myself of what President Franklin D. Roosevelt told labor leaders who urged him to enact progressive legislation after his 1932 election: "I agree with you. I want to do it; now, make me do it."

If Clinton wins, progressives can push her to do things she might not do of her own volition. Russian President Vladimir Putin is more likely to get an audience with Trump than progressives are.

In April 2008, a month after leaving the Los Angeles Times and free to participate in politics again, I joyfully knocked on doors for Obama when he beat Clinton in North Carolina's critical primary. I have not gone door-to-door this year but plan to later this month in a state where the race is close. Not long ago I donated to Clinton — specifically at the behest of U.S. Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, the longtime civil rights leader whom I consider the greatest living American. His guidance is considerably more credible than that of a purist supporting Stein or Johnson.

Merely defeating Trump is not sufficient. On Nov. 8, progressives need to be part of a loud message that what Trump represents is anathema to a democratic society. Voting for Stein or Johnson will mute a message about the dangers of Trumpism that must be delivered as forcefully as possible.

Henry Weinstein was a Los Angeles Times staff writer from 1978 to 2008, reporting on poverty, labor, politics and law. He now teaches law and journalism at UC Irvine.