

The President Slipped in Front

of Just the Wrong Audience

1976

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The 'Ethnics' Vote in the States That Really Count

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

Driven from their Eastern European homelands by economic privation early in the 20th century and by Communist oppression 50 years later, Czechs and Poles, Hungarians and Bohemians, Slovaks and Lithuanians came by the hundreds of thousands to America. They settled in and near the great industrial cities of the North—the northwest side of Chicago, the blue-collar enclave of Hamtramck within the city of Detroit, the "cosmo" wards of Cleveland—and in small clusters elsewhere. Set incongruously in the cornfields of Nebraska, for example, is the almost entirely Czech-American settlement of Wilmer, and that state's junior Senator, Roman L. Hruska, is of Bohemian descent.

Illinois and Ohio, and the other northern industrial states in which the Eastern Europeans are concentrated matter a great deal to President Ford this year. He must carry most of them to beat Jimmy Carter, and it is now a very live possibility that through his gaffe in the debate last week he has killed his small but realistic hope of winning those states by winning many of the Eastern European-Americans away from the Democrats.

Like most other immigrants, they turned early to the Democratic Party, whose urban leaders in return for their political allegiance supplied them with some of the necessities of life in harsh and unfamiliar circumstances. After a time the sons of the pioneers

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began to win high office as Democrats, among them Senator Edmund S. Muskie, Gov. Frank Lausche of Ohio and Representatives Clement Zablocki of Wisconsin and Charles Vanik of Ohio and Daniel Rostenkowski of Illinois. Their constituents were New Dealers all, passionately anti-Communist, devoutly Catholic, builders and conservators of neatly kept "ethnically pure" neighborhoods. Once wed to the Democratic Party, the ethnics expected it to be marriage for life.

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Except lately. No sooner had they begun to gain a tenuous hold on prosperity than their values were threatened on every side. To these true believers, the Roman Catholic Church seemed less a rock than before in the aftermath of Vatican II, with its bold encyclicals and ecumenicism. The neighborhoods seemed less a shelter than before, in view of growing black assertiveness (and occasional disorderliness). The Democratic Party seemed less an anchor than before, as it swung from the politics of anti-Communism to the politics of accommodation. The Vietnam war, so reviled by the party in the later years, always seemed a just cause to Hamtramck, where perhaps one family in five had one relative fighting in Southeast Asia and another living in Warsaw or Cracow.

Some of them turned to Richard M. Nixon in 1968 and 1972, and some supported Republicans in local elections, too. There was Congressman Edward Derwinski, a crewcut conservative who seemed to represent the goals of the new suburban constituency outside Chicago that elected him, and there was Mayor Ralph P. Perk of Cleveland, a city where the tension between blacks and Eastern European whites ran particularly high. By the 1970's, these particular "unmelttable ethnics"—in the phrase of one of their spokesmen, Michael Novak—were the most conservative ethnic bloc except the Germans. Or at least so the public-opinion polls suggested.

There was good reason, therefore, for President Ford to think he might win the support of enough of them in November to tip some important states his way. Jimmy Carter, the Democratic nominee, could not have been more foreign to their experience, and he was less than a roaring success during the primaries in south Milwaukee and in the coal fields of Pennsylvania, with their concentrations of Eastern Europeans. Moreover, he was in trouble with the church over his stand on abortion; it was no coincidence that one of the most aggressive prolife



demonstrations Mr. Carter encountered early this fall came in northeastern Pennsylvania. Finally, he had used the kind of language in a Playboy interview that no self-respecting mother in Parma, Ohio, a heavily Polish-American suburb of Cleveland, would want her children to hear.

But Gerald Ford may well have fatally damaged himself with his comments in his second debate with Mr. Carter on Wednesday night, the comments in which he insisted that Eastern Europe was not now and never would be, as long as he was President, under Soviet domination.

Andrew Greeley, a Catholic scholar with a special interest in ethnic groups, commented: "The Poles hadn't made up their minds, but they have now and there's nothing Ford can do to change it."

Already made nervous by the implication in the Helsinki accords that the United States was accepting a Soviet sphere of influence east of the Elbe, leaders of the ethnic groups exploded in anger at the President's statement and his subsequent attempts to explain himself. However impractical it may be, the Eastern-European pressure groups cling to the notion that their homelands must be liberated, and they want their government to cling to it, too. At a minimum, they want their President to deplore the situation in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Although they are not nearly so numerous as the Irish or the Germans in America—those of Eastern European stock number perhaps 7 percent of the population, with the Polish Americans by far the most numerous—their anger could count for something on Nov. 2 because of their strategic location. They are concentrated in the very states, from New York in the East to Wisconsin in the West, in a broad arc around the Great Lakes, where Mr. Ford's strategists say he must win or perish. They could be pivotal in Illinois and Wisconsin, where the race is close. In Ohio, President Ford's managers have been telling visiting reporters for weeks that he would carry the state, which has been carried by every Republican elected President since the Depression, because Mr. Carter's unusual strength in fundamentalist rural areas downstate would be more than offset by defections to the President in the "cosmo" wards. This weekend, they were not so sure.

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