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August 2, 1976

THE SCHWEIKER AFFAIR

On one of those abominable radio "call-in" shows, a San Francisco woman last week announced that she had always supported Reagan, but had now abandoned him because she "could not vote for a Jew for Vice-President." If someone had pointed out to her that Richard Schweiker was a Christian, she would probably have said, in W.C. Field's words: "They are the worst kind of Jews."

Religion and political partisanship aside, there is something comforting in Ronald Reagan's choice of Senator Schweiker as his proposed running mate.

The comfort has to do with the current state of political extremism in America.

Political extremism is of special interest to the Jews because it has always been linked to disaster for Jews. Hitler and Stalin were only two of the teachers who made that lesson clear.

"Extremism" is defined as that political tendency which would suspend the rules of democratic procedure. Extremist leaders would suspend those rules in order to achieve some social program which they insist is essential for "the good of the people", even if the people don't yet see it. The cry of "conspiracy" is usually raised by the extremists in order to legitimate the suspension of democracy. (You can't play fair with those who aren't playing fair"). An ethnic group -- most often, the Jews -- is then identified with the "conspiracy".

he social and political program proposed by extremists is always rigid in its nature, not subject to compromise or negotiation. Thus, the phrase, "true believers". But politics in a democracy is, by definition, a process of compromise, of negotiation. There are many "publics", many interests which must be accommodated, as best as they can, in any given political decision.

The Democratic and Republican Parties have both served the republic best as coalitions of various publics. Their programs have been, at best, negotiated among their constituencies, rather than the ideological blueprints of any one faction.

In Weimar Germany, before the Nazis took over, the parties were, by and large, uncompromising factions, rather than coalition parties in the American sense. Such unbending factionalism was the substance of extremism -- and under the disaffected circumstances in Germany, the precursor of extremist (Nazi) victory.

The overwhelming majority of the American people have always had a healthy resistance to such factionalism/extremism. They sense that negotiation and compromise are the keys to stability in a quiltwork America. About six months ago, a national poll was taken on attitudes towards George Wallace. As many as 20 per cent of those polled said that they sympathized with Wallace's social point of view. But even most of these sympathetic Americans said that they would not finally vote for him. The most common reason was their fear of his "extremism".

The Goldwater and McGovern presidential campaigns were both recent cases in point. In each case, an ideological faction seemed to take over the whole party. The result -- two of the most losing campaigns in America history. Now, Reagan, who had solid control over an ideological faction, has said that he did not want to repeat the Goldwater

mistake. He put his factional leadership in jeopardy by choosing Schweiker, an effort to create the image of a coalition ticket. (Some would say that the Cater-Mondale ticket is a less dramatic effort in the same direction).

Whatever else this is, it is striking evidence that the politics of factionalism and extremism is in a weak state in today's America. That, at least, is good news for Jews, and for all partisans of democracy.