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Essay; The Voting Trigger

By **WILLIAM SAFIRE** OCT. 29, 1992

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Perhaps you, too, have had a rough time this year deciding which candidate you are less against. Here is how one Undecided Voter reached a decision: I searched for my key trigger.

Each voter has an array of triggers inside his mind: these range from taxes (higher under Clinton) to concern for human rights (lower under Bush); from government domination of the economy (worse with Clinton) to government intrusion into private lives (worse with Bush).

The character trigger? My instinct is not to trust Clinton, whose campaign has achieved a Dewey-eyed smugness, but I have learned from hard experience not to trust Bush. (Perotnoia is not an option.)

My own key trigger this year, which is probably not most people's, is bunkerism -- a corrosive penchant for secrecy, compounded by ethical blindness to conflict of interest. A generation ago, I saw that arrogance of insiderdom destroy an Administration and many people's lives; that's why the need for Washington glasnost seizes me now.

As a test, I submitted a question to Bill Clinton last month about more open government: Did he support extension of the Freedom of Information Act, which

permits citizen and press access to unclassified papers in executive departments, to cover Congress and the White House?

On any other subject, I would get a call back from Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos the same day; but on this, silence. After weeks of pestering came this fudge: "I support principles of FOIA. . . . Having said that, I have not studied the particular policy questions raised by extending FOIA to Congress and the White House." Having ducked, Mr. Clinton added soothingly: "As President, I would look at this issue with a strong preference for public disclosure. . . ."

He would sell dangerous F-15's to Saudi Arabia and keep open unnecessary defense installations to pick up a few votes, but on a matter that might open up closed-door political operations in the White House -- thereby keeping them clean -- Bill Clinton and his policy wonks were too busy to study the policy question. That puts those few of us whose votes are triggered by excessive secrecy between Little Rock and a hard place.

The hard place is George Bush's refusal to permit independent investigation of obstruction of justice within his Justice Department. He has just personally and publicly joined Attorney General William Barr, his former C.I.A. aide, in the Iraqgate cover-up.

Asked yesterday by Charles Gibson of ABC's "Good Morning America" about accusations in this space, Mr. Bush replied: "He's making charges that are not true. . . . The Justice Department had 40 lawyers that are nonpolitical. And they looked at these charges out of the partisan House [Judiciary] Committee and they said there isn't anything here. Forty that are nonpolitical wrote a 97-page report."

The President is associating himself with the unsigned apologia for nonfeasance attached to his Attorney General's rejection of the House's first call for independent counsel. The "career prosecutors" so often cited therein, whom Mr. Bush misidentifies as 40 "nonpolitical" lawyers, are mainly his political appointees. Most of these whitewashers serve at his pleasure and their jobs depend on his re-election.

The real career prosecutors at Justice include many who have been on the phone to me to express their disgust at the 97-page Barr apologia -- a document already exposed as misleadingly inadequate by the recent C.I.A.-F.B.I. accusations. These veteran straight arrows will not risk retaliation by volunteering evidence to their political boss's patsy prosecutor -- but will testify about their superiors'

wrongful interference when a grand jury is convened by a court-appointed independent counsel.

Now to my voting trigger. Mr. Clinton's reluctance to stand foursquare against unnecessary secrecy is troubling, but Mr. Bush's embrace yesterday of a document that may figure in a criminal conspiracy is far worse: his encouragement of Barr's stonewalling places the Iraqgate scandal in the Oval Office.

New York Times columnists traditionally do not endorse any candidate, and I'm for traditional values. But any reader who cannot figure out against whom this lifelong Republican is voting this year isn't trying.

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