

States of the Union

GEORGE, MIKE AND ADLAI

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

"I am easily swayed by emotion until I think, which I occasionally do."

—FROM A VOTER'S LETTER
TO ADLAI E. STEVENSON

IN COMPILED his 1952 campaign speeches for publication, Adlai E. Stevenson chose for the epigram one of William James' encomiums to reason. That faculty, James conceded, was "the very feeblest of Nature's forces, if you take it at any one spot and moment." But "it has the unique advantage ... that its activity never lets up and that it presses always in one direction, while men's prejudices vary, their passions ebb and flow...." In a democracy, Stevenson added with a characteristically hopeful flourish, reason must inevitably triumph.

It is possible this Presidential year, even in a campaign beclouded by irrationality, to discern one or two Jamesian silver linings. Both candidates, for instance, have proposed day care programs for the children of working parents, and both have called for stronger measures to protect the environment. (Despite his mentor's hesitations, George Bush knows enough to come in out of the acid rain.)

These are relatively new items on the bipartisan national agenda. If they even-

tually turn into appropriations and titles in the Federal canon, it will be because their logic never lets up: "It presses always in the same direction."

By and large, though, the present campaign gets low marks in both drama and reason. It has inspired hardly any emotion and only occasional thought. That may not be the candidates' fault. It may be a case of post-Reagan melancholia, a suspicion among voters that the fun is over: Both the Reagan revolution and the accompanying entertainment have run their course.

If the 1988 election can be said to be a test of anything, it is of whether the nation's Rightward shift under Ronald Reagan represents a permanent transformation or a passing fancy, an ephemeral salute to the Great Communicator or something we shall have to live with the rest of our days. Just as Harry S. Truman's surprising triumph in 1948 tended to confirm the durability of New Deal reforms, a George Bush victory in November would certainly ratify many of the changes wrought in the '80s, especially the upward redistribution of wealth and the consequently widening chasm between rich and poor.

The Republicans appear to be betting that they have finally soured the nation's 200-year-old love affair with liberalism.

Their gleeful allusions to "the L word" suggest that in our civic glossary "liberalism" has become vaguely scatological and thus unmentionable in polite society.

Still, the words we use do not always reflect our intentions, much less our needs. If scatology embraces a vocabulary we cannot abide, it also refers to functions we cannot do without. "Do you have to go number one or number two?" we ask a child. However we care to phrase it, the kid has got to go. To pursue this embarrassing metaphor just a step further, it does not stretch credulity to envision our body politic cranking out liberal measures without once uttering "the L word."

In some conservative circles, of course, liberal Democrats are portrayed as sentimentalists who pamper criminals, consort with Communists and encourage indolence among the poor. In short, they are the worst kinds of wimps. It remains to be seen whether a majority of voters will sit still for so ancient and far-fetched an assessment.

Bush seems to be counting on it. In his anxiety to shed his own reputation for wimpishness, he has turned unexpectedly mean. In Michael S. Dukakis the Vice President has had a largely unknown opponent and thus a clean slate on which to splatter all manner of damning graffiti.

Few opportunities have been lost. Bush has called Dukakis "a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union." He has voiced a suspicion that "my opponent thinks naval exercise is something to be found in Jane Fonda's workout book." He has even accused the Massachusetts governor of presiding over a weekend furlough program for prisoners that unleashes "those who rape, pillage and plunder."

These are not occasional insults hurled in the heat of debate. Like Bush's superpatriotic references to the Pledge of Allegiance, the sneers and the leers seem part of a carefully crafted script designed to emasculate Dukakis, to define him as weak, permissive, unpatriotic, and soft on Jane Fonda.

Bush's sneak attacks do more than trivialize the proceedings. They tell us something we ought to know about this

stiff-necked yet ideologically elastic candidate, who only eight years ago seemed the Republican's last best hope for common sense and moderation. In the interim he has developed a talent for innuendo that must rank him now among our all-time minor demagogues—still far behind Joe McCarthy, to be sure, but closing in fast on Spiro Agnew.

Personally, I liked him better when he was a wimp. In those days, at least, he wasn't constantly trotting out his family as proof of his own dubious virtues, a ploy best described as hiding behind the Bushes.

In fairness, the Vice President is only doing what has come naturally to Republicans ever since the Great Depression, when they became a (permanent?) minority party and therefore a perpetual underdog given to nastiness. In his treatise on *The Democrats* (1976), the liberal historian Herbert S. Parmet writes of "the common tactic of Republicans ... to move to siphon off Democratic strength by appealing to the jingoistic instincts of supernationalism and the internal fears of the insecure."

They stoop to such stratagems, says Parmet, because they are "unable to compete on the basis of domestic economic and social welfare issues...." Adlai Stevenson understood the unreliable tendencies displayed by an edgy electorate. He spoke of "the vaporous anxiety of people to vote themselves out of trouble."

What is astonishing in all this is that the Republicans, who in the last two decades have been locked out of the White House for only four years, still feel like underdogs. As Freud noted, the big thing about paranoia is its sealed-tight invulnerability, even to good news. Apparently George Bush and his touchy minions can't tell the difference between a footstool and a catbird seat.

THAT SO UNATTRACTIVE a candidate may actually win the election is testimony to the plight of the Democrats, who do not know which way to turn. Left or Right? Black or white? The poor or the not-so-poor? As usual, they are hoping to be all things to all people. Maybe those insecure Reagan

Democrats will come home at last. Maybe women voters will prefer Lloyd Bentsen's fatherliness to Dan Quayle's sexiness. Maybe, just maybe, people don't feel as prosperous as they look.

The trouble is that the Democrats can no longer count on a solid middle class majority. Nowadays they have to eke it out—a few votes here, a few more there. Meanwhile, broad elements within the party's natural constituency of minorities and the working poor remain disenfranchised, either voluntarily or by virtue of restraints imposed by the states. As Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward make clear in their



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recent analysis of *Why Americans Don't Vote*, modern voter registration obstacles continue to function "as de facto equivalents of the poll tax, literacy test and other class- and race-oriented restrictions on the suffrage of an earlier era."

Only Jesse Jackson seems to care, but all Democrats suffer the consequences. "The Reagan victory of 1980," according to Piven and Cloward, "was literally made possible by large-scale non-voting. Just as polls showed that voters tilted toward Reagan by 52 per cent over Carter's 38 per cent, so did nonvoters tilt toward Carter by 51 per cent over 37 per cent."

The Democrats have nominated a decent candidate, but one unlikely to galvanize nonvoters. Many of his strong points resemble those of a competent bank teller—honesty, good manners, an ability to keep track of other people's money and, not least, an emotional barometer that won't go haywire under pressure.

Such traits are not to be dismissed lightly. Compare Dukakis' brave refusal to forswear a tax increase to Bush's cowardly no-tax pledge. That alone should separate the man from the preppie. Yet Dukakis' quiet integrity may be inadequate to the task at hand, which is getting elected. What he lacks is the theatrical punch that comes with a political vision. That vision need not be especially imaginative (see Reagan's speeches), but it ought to be clear and within most people's grasp.

Who knows? Deep within his soul Michael Dukakis may actually harbor such a vision. As of this writing, though, he has not found the words to share it with us. According to his own testimony, he hasn't read a novel since his freshman year at Swarthmore, and the omission shows painfully whenever he reaches for eloquence. The best he can summon on most occasions are metaphors from the corporate or sports worlds: He's a "competent manager"; he's "the quarterback."

It is true that Stevenson's own peerless eloquence got him nowhere, but the challenge back then was much tougher. Dukakis, after all, is not running against a war hero so popular he could win on either ticket (or on both).

In the end, one fears, Dukakis' lack-luster language may consign him to the fate of his more eloquent predecessor. Thousands of voters, Stevenson marveled after his first loss to Eisenhower, wrote him "gracious, flattering letters... explaining why they did *not* vote for me. They seemed to feel that they owed me an explanation." Stevenson found the explanations touching, and yet: "I confess the thought occurred to me now and then that a little 'X' in the right place on the ballot would have been so much easier than a long, thoughtful letter."