

States of the Union

HOMOGENIZED DEMOCRATS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



WALTER MONDALE

WHEN John Anderson was still deciding whether or not to make a third-party run at the Presidency in 1980, he telephoned his father for advice. "Don't do it," the elder Anderson cautioned. "Remember what happened to Teddy." He was not referring to Edward M. Kennedy but to Theodore Roosevelt and his ill-fated Bull Moose apostasy.

Anderson's poor showing—he collected just 7 per cent of the total vote, compared to Theodore Roosevelt's 27 per cent in 1912—fully confirmed his father's warning. It also shed doubt on various commentators' claims that the two major political parties had declined to a point where they could no longer

command mass loyalties. The 35.5 million votes cast for Jimmy Carter may have been far fewer than he needed, yet they were surely more than he merited. At bottom, the Carter ballots seemed less an endorsement of his record than an expression of fealty to Democratic traditions. For a party that had so obviously lost its way, the Democrats continued to enjoy a surprisingly large and faithful following.

Now, as we approach the abyss of yet another Presidential campaign, the Democrats seem no closer to self-discovery. It is not that the seven Democratic candidates differ so sharply from one another. On the contrary, with the exception of George McGovern—who was never in step with party leaders, even when he headed the ticket—all the hopefuls appear to hold remarkably similar views. Alan Cranston may be on the left and John Glenn may be on the right, but the ideological spectrum between them is exceedingly narrow and uninteresting, with Gary Hart and Walter Mondale occupying one end and Reubin Askew and Ernest Hollings the other. Each is reasonably bright and articulate; none, in my view, possesses the passion and eloquence to fire our hopes or inspire our trust. Let me take them individually:

John Glenn of Ohio is a Taft Democrat who has circled many a political issue as well as our planet. He is the perfect metaphor for our high-tech era: a pioneer without imagination, a hero without panache.

Reubin Askew of Florida and Ernest Hollings of South Carolina suffer from Carter's failures. The public has had enough, for a while, of Confederate leadership.

Gary Hart of Colorado, an Atari Democrat, seems bent on committing hari-kari. The personality he projects is as cold as a computer's, and his thinking processes appear equally binary. After starting his career on the peaks of Rocky Mountain populism, Hart has betrayed his legacy for the depths of Silicon Valley.

Alan Cranston of California is a decent liberal who, alas, seems incapable of catching the popular fancy. Bald and aging, he lacks Ronald Reagan's Hollywood buoyancy or Dwight D. Eisenhower's bumbling fatherliness. Still, I would say he's probably the best of the bunch.

George McGovern has taken up in 1983 where he left off in 1972—as the most inept Presidential campaigner in American history. In announcing his candidacy, he instantly lost the pro-Israel vote by calling for an "even-handed policy" in the Middle East. If elected, he said, he would treat Israel "the same as other countries in the Mideast if I became convinced that Israel was blocking reasonable negotiations of a settlement." McGovern is still saying "Come home, America," only now he means the Marines in Lebanon.

Walter Mondale of Minnesota, the front-runner, has emerged as the candidate of the moderate Left, otherwise known as the AFL-CIO. Mondale's ideological timidity is based on his perception of America as growing ever more conservative. In the mid-'70s, when George Latimer first ran for mayor of St. Paul, Mondale gave the progressive-minded candidate some characteristic advice. "George," he said, "start running to the right and never stop." Mondale has spent the subsequent decade heeding his own advice.

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So there we have it—the Democrats playing Seven Dwarfs to Reagan's Snow White (or, if Reagan fails to run, to George Bush's Prince Charming). Among the sadder points to note about this fairy tale is that distinctions between the two casts, Republican and Democratic, grow murkier each day. Now it is Ronald Reagan who can't balance the Federal budget, while Democrats like Hart and Hollings call loudly for fiscal prudence; now it is the Democrats who demand reprisals against Russia for shooting down a Korean airliner, while Reagan and Bush risk charges of being soft on the Soviets.

Pundits have been lamenting the "Balkanization" of American politics; by that they apparently mean a prismatic shattering of the parties into dozens of single-issue components. The fear may be father to the thought. In any case, what we are actually getting is something worse, namely the homogenization of American politics, where policy differences tend to disappear and personality differences—i.e., media images—loom increasingly large.

THUS IT has come to pass that Ronald Reagan's neoconservatism is oddly paralleled by Walter Mondale's neoliberalism, and that George Bush's views on welfare and justice can be found to the left of those held by several of the Democratic candidates. After all, Bush was one of only five Southern Congressmen who in 1968 voted for the Open Housing Bill.

Voodoo economics, moreover, has become a bipartisan practice, as have voodoo ecology and voodoo defense. Democrats in Congress have been looking on with hardly a murmur as Interior Secretary James G. Watt forfeits our land and our resources; and they have gone along with Reagan's Pentagon spending binge, including a green light for the MX missile. The Democrats will have to run on their record in 1984, but what, one wonders will they run against?

It is true that Reagan remains a slippery opponent and that few of his original ideas have survived long enough to serve as convenient targets. Supply-side

economics, a form of madness that only two years ago had everyone in Washington drawing Laffer curves, is today as dead as the gold standard. Equally moribund, it appears, are the Reagan-backed Constitutional amendment to prohibit Federal deficits and his dietetic promise to overhaul the Federal bureaucracy. Indeed, in economic matters Reagan has become a President without a policy, which, considering his earlier initiatives, is probably just as well.

What little substantively remains of Reagan's original notions is closely related to war—war on insurgents abroad who are thought to enjoy Soviet or Cuban support, and on poor people at home who are thought to enjoy no support whatsoever. If Ronald Reagan is re-elected, a dismaying but not unlikely event, it will be largely because his poverty-stricken victims have failed to obtain a voice in either of the major parties and, for the most part, do not possess sufficient faith in the efficacy of politics to come out and vote. Among the 48 per cent of eligible voters who did not register for the 1980 election, a majority were young or poor, or both.

The Democrats, to be sure, are not licked yet. They still have ample time to forswear their neoliberal fantasies and substitute a scenario that makes sense to their natural constituency: the disillusioned, the disappointed and the disenfranchised. Unlike the wars in Central America, Reagan is winning his domestic war against the poor; this means that many of the Great Society's reforms must once again be thought through and fought through. Racism, hunger, poverty, and joblessness have all made comebacks under Reagan's smiling tutelage; they will not be expunged by free-market rhetoric or tax breaks for the rich. Only a return to humane politics can deliver us from evil.

My advice to Mondale, therefore, is as follows: Walter, start running to the left and never stop. You will probably be the Democratic standard-bearer in 1984, but you won't win unless voters get a chance to see you as you once were—a caring, bleeding-heart liberal generous in your formulations and brave in your acts.