

# States of the Union

## POLONIUS VS. TARTUFFE

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**T**HE DEMOCRATIC Presidential hopefuls, a traveling roadshow that got mixed reviews from me in this space last November, fared better in late January when the candidates returned to explain their views on U.S. foreign policy. For reasons related to the extraordinary length of their run, the candidates' performance was consider-

ably crisper and more engaging this time around.

Politics-as-theater that evening probably benefited from the unexplained absence of Reubin Askew, the most lackluster member of the cast, as well as from the presence of Jesse Jackson, the troupe's freshest addition. The woman I sat next to, a former aide to the Congressional Black Caucus, nudged me midway through the debate and whispered, "Imagine what it would be like without Jesse Jackson sitting there: completely pale."

Jackson did add a touch of color to the proceedings. In a two-hour discussion that pivoted almost exclusively on the East-West axis—the U.S.A. vs. the Soviet Union—he alone reminded us that Africa and Asia also merited our attention. And Jackson's accustomed sauciness, as when he called John Glenn "Mr. Right Stuff," drew frequent laughter from the crowd.

Once again the setting was Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, with the face of its youthful patron saint, depicted in oil by the artist William F. Draper, gazing out at the candidates; once again the klieg lights shone hotly for the convenience of commercial television; and once again the hall was jam-

med with weary reporters and questing academics. The behind-the-scenes mechanics, however, differed conspicuously from the earlier occasion, and in ways that suggested the campaign was getting serious. For one thing, the building was aswarm all day with Secret Service agents, most of whom could be identified by their headphones, and also by the neat contrast their dark jackets made with their light-colored trousers.

Everyone at the Institute of Politics, the part of the building where I have taken refuge this year, was required to vacate the premises by 4 P.M., three hours before the debate was scheduled to begin. The Secret Service wished to "sweep" our quarters, to search for bombs and other lethal devices, and the television people commandeered our offices as dressing rooms for the candidates. My office, which houses a dowdy areca palm of the sort one might encounter at Cape Canaveral, went to John Glenn. He left the place no messier than he found it.

I have been informed by a man who wrote speeches for John Anderson during the 1980 campaign that no less than 22 Secret Service functionaries are assigned to protect each Presidential candidate. From this I conclude that at least 154 such worthies must have been on hand to guard the seven candidates. If there is an antonym for "overkill"—*oversave*, perhaps—it is applicable here, though understandable as well, in the light of what happened to Robert Kennedy and George Wallace. The air in America remains heavy with the scent of assassination.

Still, the ultimate futility of the Secret Service's humane exercise occurred to me when Diane, my wife, received a last-minute invitation to attend the debate. The rest of us had been invited several days in advance, and had been required to submit our birth dates and Social Security numbers to the Secret Service, presumably for clearance. The enormous effort involved in examining the biographies of so many invitees—portions of the faculty, staff and students at Harvard University—was probably a waste of time, else Diane's uncleared attendance should not have been allowed.

Diane aside, security that evening was anything but tight. People wandered at will; any admirer of Sirhan Sirhan could easily have picked off the candidate of his choice. What we had was the *appearance* of security: Secret Service agents, beribboned ushers and narrowed points of egress. As is unfortunately customary in such matters, ambience overshadowed substance.

The trouble with our reflexive response to terrorism, it appears, is that it makes strangers of us all. We dismiss time-honored signals of trust—friendships, facial expressions, handshakes—and rely instead on official files sequestered in unknown places. The real terror here was having to reveal our Social Security numbers as prerequisites to sorting out our future leaders, politicians whom in due course we would freely choose or reject. Diane's late arrival seemed a small antidote to a spreading toxin.

The debate itself belonged chiefly to Walter Mondale, who is within sight of the nomination but still miles from the White House. Mondale seemed relaxed and winning, and his answers invariably hit the mark. When a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal*, wearing a loud smock and a smirk to match, asked if the U.S. should protect "the Christian enclave in Lebanon" just as it now protects "the Jewish enclave in Israel," Mondale was quick to point out the distinctions between an established Jewish state and a country beset by 27 contending religious factions.

And when Senator Ernest F. Hollings thought he had Mondale on the ropes by inquiring exactly what weapons systems he did in fact support, the leading candidate was ready with a concise reply: "I'm against the MX but for a single-warhead missile. . . I'm against the B-1 bomber but for the Stealth bomber."

The questions from the floor, posed by preselected reporters and professors, did not add much to the evening's enlightenment; those asked by the candidates of each other revealed more, if mainly about the questioners. Mondale's queries were wonderfully innocuous, as if he had determined to be seen as a peacemaker among his squabbling

colleagues. He asked poor Gary Hart at one point to explain his theories about a new Navy. Although that may be one of Hart's pet topics, it had little electoral pizzazz.

In general, one came away from the debate admiring all seven performances and feeling that any one of the candidates would be a great improvement as President. David Nyhan, a columnist for the Boston *Globe*, only slightly exaggerated when he described the candidates that night as "articulate, knowledgeable, nimble, charming, inspirational, resolute, and spontaneous."

Nyhan and the rest of us were probably as grateful for what the candidates did not say as for what they did say. None of them stated, for example, that the people who stand in line at soup kitchens are actually well-fed freeloaders, or that some Americans who lack shelter have been found, on close inspection, to be "homeless by choice." Apparently the poor can discover no misery sufficiently conspicuous or painful to be certified as genuine by our present leaders in the White House.

Nor did any of the Democratic candidates imply that God was a politician and the Bible was His platform. Indeed, the admixture of cruelty and piety that from the beginning has characterized this Administration's rhetoric was blessedly absent from the proceedings at Harvard—which is reason enough to be a Democrat this year.

**R**ONALD REAGAN'S OWN campaign began about the time the Democratic debate took place, with a State of the Union message that mentioned God 18 times, prayer seven and the poor not once. His campaign script, it appears, calls for a fence-mending fest with the Far Right, and it has been a predictably ugly spectacle. In late January he and a large retinue from the Reagan-Bush Re-election Committee journeyed to Atlanta, where the President sermonized at a "Spirit of America" rally staged by the Amway Corporation. Amway, the second largest direct sales corporation in the United States after Avon, blends promotion and profits with God and

country in a way that Reagan appreciates and perhaps envies.

It did not seem to trouble Reagan that God had temporarily abandoned Amway in November, when the Canadian government levied a \$20 million fine on the company for failing to pay import duties on home cleaning products shipped north of the border. The very next month, according to an Amway spokesperson, a White House staffer telephoned to say the President "would like to speak at an Amway event following the State of the Union address." So the President, America's most popular cleansing agent, marched through Georgia.

A few days later he found an even more zealous audience in Washington. Addressing 4,000 religious broadcasters—the mouthpieces for what White House political advisers are pleased to call "the Christian Far Right"—the President this time made 24 references to God, attacked the American Civil Liberties Union, thanked the broadcasters for "the mighty power of your prayers," and extolled the Bible for containing "all the answers to all the problems that face us today—if we'd only read and believe." It was old home week for the self-righteous by choice. Pat Boone introduced the President and the Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell thumped him on the back. Praise the Lord and pass the ballots.

No one can fail to note the difference between Reagan's Tartuffe, who equates domestic policy with the Book of Genesis and foreign policy with the story of Joshua, and the Democratic candidates' composite Polonius, who takes a comparatively sensible approach to the great issues of our time, of *any* time: war and peace, poverty amid affluence and the struggle for universal justice. Mondale & Company may not have all the answers, but they seem to be struggling with some of the right questions, and they are posing those questions with a measure of grace and humility that Reagan would do well to emulate. If Presidential campaigns are meant to educate the public, it can be said that only one of the major parties this year has consented to play teacher.