

States of the Union

THE 49TH CAMPAIGN

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

“POLITICAL campaigns are designedly made into emotional orgies which endeavor to distract attention from the real issues involved,” observed the historian James Harvey Robinson 45 years ago, adding that they “actually paralyze what slight powers of cerebration man can normally muster.” This year’s Presidential campaign, the 49th in our history, may be no less intellectually paralyzing than its predecessors, but what distinguishes it from most others is the lack of *emotional* content, the uncharacteristic way it has of numbing the spirit as well as the brain. For those who believe that passion has no place in politics, this may be a welcome change. My own suspicion is that the democratic process, as practiced by us Americans, is more susceptible to mood and instinct than to logic and evidence. When we step into the booth we have remarkably little to go on other than the prejudices in our heads and the hunches in our hearts. We are all cardiac voters.

But this year, as I was saying, the heart has been a lonely hunter, though that has not been all the candidates’ doing. Indeed, every time they have

tried to inject a little old-fashioned orgiastic pizzazz into the proceedings, they have inspired a righteous clamor from editorialists suddenly and unaccountably committed to tearoom politics. When Jimmy Carter happened to mention that Ronald Reagan in Mississippi was using the notion of States’ Rights as a code-term for “racism,” the *Washington Post* blushed for the President, accusing him of being “mean-spirited” and of resorting to “demagoguery.” Well, Carter can get pretty nasty, but his comments on Reagan’s coy appeals to bigotry in the Deep South came very close to the mark and hardly merited the niagara of outrage that followed. Besides, Carter made those remarks to a Southern black audience, every one of whom understood that in America the most effective way to practice racism is never to name it.

Similarly, Ronald Reagan’s early campaign efforts to reanoint the Vietnam War as a “struggle for freedom” and “a noble enterprise” were widely criticized in the press as attempts to divide the country over an ancient issue that had long ago been settled. But a large proportion of Reagan’s core following believed in that war, and to this

day thinks we lost it only because we would not wage it with sufficient force or gusto. Reagan had every right to summon a particular ghost, if only because it still haunts us.

As voters, moreover, we have every right to learn which issues excite the candidates and which leave them yawning. If Reagan still finds it important to defend Vietnam and to embrace Formosa as our own, surely that tells us something about his Presidential possibilities. What it tells us, I think, is not that he would drive us into another Asian land war, or even that he would close down our new embassy in the People’s Republic of China: History and Henry Kissinger have outrun Reagan’s convictions, and he knows there is no turning back. Reagan’s real message is that he can still get more exercised over the remembrance of wounds past than over the administration of programs contemplated.

To be sure, a victory this November would give him a long-sought opportunity to lead us out of the wilderness; but more important to him, I suspect, is that it would vindicate all those lost causes he and his minions have been pursuing for two decades. Reagan’s vision of America thus tends to be retrospective; it is what he can see through his rear-view mirror.

Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, projects no vision in any direction. He has lost much of his following because he himself appears to have lost the master map. As James Fallows has pointed out, Carter lacks an intellectual context, a set of guiding principles, that might give his policies shape and consistency. He is like a clown on ice.

By all reasonable standards of politics and history, Carter should be a certifiable one-term President, a victim of his own incompetence: His cure for inflation has thrown 2 million more Americans out of work while doing little to lower the cost of living; his domestic program—tax reform, welfare reform, energy conservation—is a joke, not necessarily because his ideas have been bad but because he and his fellow Georgians in the White House haven’t had the slightest notion how to get

them enacted by Congress. A Democratic freshman Congressman told me recently that the White House has lobbied him only once during his two years in Washington—and when the call came one afternoon, it was for a bill that had been defeated that morning.

In fairness, the times we live in have shaped Jimmy Carter more than he has shaped the times. If he lacks greatness, perhaps this is due to his having had the bad luck to officiate over a moment in American history that is still inchoate, still devoid of consensus on most major issues—e.g., the economy, energy, the environment, women's rights, health reform, income distribution, the hostages in Iran. We faced a similar dilemma in the mid-19th century: The nation could not agree on answers to critical questions about slavery, railroads, Western expansion, and the preservation of the Union. The result was a string of one-term Presidencies featuring such stalwarts as Franklin Pierce, John Buchanan and Millard Fillmore, surely a match in mediocrity for any one-term trio we could come up with now—for instance, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

When, in 1860, consensus finally arrived, it was through the instrument of the new Republican party, a coalition of Free-Soilers and Wall-Streeters able to replace the politically bankrupt Whigs. What finally did in the Whigs was their growing indistinguishability in several important respects from their opposition, the Democrats. The Whigs tended to be antiabolitionist, sympathetic to the feudal South and reluctant to endorse Western expansion unless it were achieved in ways satisfactory to Mississippi plantation barons. Today's Democrats may be in a similar bind: Jimmy Carter is a "Whig" whose conservative policies seem strikingly similar to those being promoted by the other major party. Like Reagan, he believes in a balanced budget; like Reagan, he wants to lower corporate taxes; like Reagan, he subscribes to a foreign policy that is both ideological and imperial, a policy aimed at making the world safe for human rights and General Motors.

In the circumstances it would seem the time is right for the formation of a new political party to the Left of Jimmy Carter. What we have witnessed instead is the appearance of a nonparty, one led by John Anderson, a noncandidate. Anderson owes his unenviable position to the plight of the Republican party, which has dwindled down to a precious few—and those few are a saving remnant of an old guard still debating the pros and cons of Social Security. They nominated Goldwater in 1964 and Reagan in 1980. John Anderson, a Middle America conservative, two parts Billy Graham and eight parts Babbitt, was too liberal for a majority of Republicans.

So now, reading from Left to Right, we have Carter, Anderson and Reagan, all essentially conservative candidates but all drifting Leftward, hoping to stake out a claim somewhere near the center. Carter has donned the mantle of Harry S. Truman; Anderson tells us he sometimes reminds himself of Teddy Roosevelt; and Reagan keeps quoting FDR. What all this means is that the New Deal has become the Old Deal, its once-shocking innovations now firm traditions that no one, not even Ronald Reagan, dares dislodge. We have seen the past and it works.

It also suggests that, whoever wins in November, the future will not be strikingly different from the present, for while all the candidates are ready to tolerate things as they are, none seems prepared to project a vision of things as they might be. Progressive imagination is in short supply, most of it having been used up by Edward Kennedy in his losing cause. And there, of course, somewhere near Hyannisport, is where the real third party is hiding, patiently awaiting 1984 while a single light burns in Camelot.

BUT IT IS not just aging New Frontiersmen who "curse the bread and wait for the light." As the Kennedy campaign made clear, the Democratic party is full of citizens eager to push on with America's unfinished business of using state power to engineer a more just distribution of

life's blessings, be they health, shelter or cash. Or peace—don't forget peace, the niftiest blessing of them all and surely Jimmy Carter's strongest talking point.

For voters, peace is the hardest part of choosing, mainly because candidates like to lie about it. Woodrow Wilson in 1916 ran and won on the slogan, "He kept our boys out of war," something he lost interest in doing soon after the election. Lyndon Johnson made much mileage from his portrayal of Goldwater as a trigger-happy jingoist ("Whose finger do you want on the button?"), and he solemnly pledged not to "send our boys to fight a war that Asian boys should be fighting." The rest, as they say, is history, but it is a history few could have predicted. As the War escalated and ramified, as the deaths mounted, many of us felt that the voting machines had somehow jammed: We had elected Johnson but we had gotten Goldwater.

No one living in the nuclear age wants a nervous President or one who sees a moral challenge in every bullet fired across remote borders. The conflagrations that break out from time to time in one or another corner of the world—Uganda, Ethiopia, Thailand—are seldom ours to win or lose. Not every event that takes place in the world need be written into a Cold War scenario; and not every skirmish need impel the Soviet Union and us to choose up sides.

The Carter Administration appears to have understood this lesson more clearly and with deeper conviction than any previous Administration since the signing of the Yalta agreements. Aside from his somewhat hysterical response to the Soviet adventure in Afghanistan, Carter has generally reacted to foreign wars with admirable restraint. And his Afghanistan tantrum was a political ploy to get himself renominated, something he (and we) won't have to worry about next time around. So, viscerally speaking, I shall cast my vote for Jimmy Carter, one of the lightest weight presidents in our history, but on my scale, the best available this year.