

States of the Union

OFF THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

HERE ARE some random notes I took during the early days of the current Presidential campaign, before I grew discouraged. They are the jottings, by and large, of a bemused bystander.

September 7. Everyone thinks Jimmy Carter is a shoe-in. All the polls say so. A young pollster seeking fame and fortune would be smart to predict a Ford victory. If he were wrong, people would quickly forget; if he happened to be right, his reputation would be assured.

That is how statistician Louis H. Bean did it in 1948. He published an article in the *Nation*, amid much derision, that flatly predicted Truman would beat Dewey. Bean had the next-to-last laugh, just before Truman's.

Several months ago I was introduced to Bean and his wife; they looked distinguished and cheerful. He resembled Arthur Goldberg, only comelier.

The Democrats were then busy going each other in Presidential primaries, so I asked Bean who he thought the nominee would be.

"That's easy," he confidently answered. "The winner will be the man who's not running—Hubert Humphrey."

His wife disagreed. "You only say that because you like Hubert," she told him.

"I just say that because it's true," he replied.

Mrs. Bean's affectionate hint that the pundit's wish may have been father to his prediction reminds me of my quondam journalism professor, Ed Emory, who was possibly the only other writer in America to have correctly prophesied the outcome of the 1948 race. Although Ed never told us freshmen how he did it, we noticed that his office walls were covered with charts and maps and that he had stuck a lot of mysterious pins into the maps. "It's got to be Truman," he kept muttering as he shifted pins. "It beats me why, but Gallup and Roper have missed the boat."

Ed was lucky enough to have had his forecast printed in a late-October issue of the *Minneapolis Tribune*. So the day after the election he emerged as a prophet with honor in his own land, a territory

the *Tribune* was pleased to call "The Upper Midwest."

Four years later Ed and I were still holding forth in the journalism school (he was teaching; I was simply hanging around), and Ed was again playing Saurat to his political wall-maps. I respectfully sought him out. I was planning to place some shrewd bets based on his '52 divinations. "Who's it going to be this time, Ed?" I asked.

He didn't hesitate. "Adlai Stevenson," he said.

I lost a small fortune.

September 8. This morning a Washington cabbie presented me with an entirely new version of Southern Rim politics. First he told me he was a Southerner through and through. Then he let it be known that he would not vote for Jimmy Carter. "You can never trust a President from the South," he said. "Especially when it comes to matters having to do with the colored."

I demurred. "People tell me there's a New South nowadays."

"It's not the new South or the old South I'm worried about," he said. "It's what happens to a born Southerner once he gets up here and sets foot in the White House. Now you take LBJ. There was a a guy, a *Texan*, who knew how to keep the nigras in their place; but then he got to be President, and before you could turn around he'd passed that damn-fool integration law. I tell you, you can't trust a Southern President."

I asked him what he thought of Gerald Ford. "Ford's all right," came the answer. "*He* won't stand for no busing nonsense. *He's* from Michigan."

That cabbie, I have concluded, spoke a perverse truth. Surely there is something curious and corkscrewish in our political system that compels leaders to repudiate their origins by bending over backward: Kennedy coming out for planned parenthood; Kissinger wooing the Arabs; Nixon embracing Mao; and

all those rural-born chief executives masquerading as dedicated urbanites. (Kennedy is the only city-born President we have elected since William Howard Taft, of Cincinnati.) Our national politicians, it appears, feel they cannot afford to be associated with a single ethnic or regional quirk. Adhering to one's heritage may be fine in theory, yet it is absent from the White House, possibly the only place in America where the Melting Pot actually works.

September 9. Just three days since Labor Day, and already the tide is turning. Carter is getting roughed up by the antiabortionists, not because he favors abortions but because he doesn't *disfavor* them enough. It is hard to be a centrist nowadays. Ford, meanwhile, stays in the White House, sniffing petals in the Rose Garden and acting like the President. This strategy could pay off, as it did for Nixon four years ago. "Support the President," proclaimed the bumper stickers—and most American voters were happy to comply.

Carter, who swept the primaries by saying nothing (and saying it rather badly), seems now to have developed a taste for specificity. He will not support an antiabortion amendment; he will pardon Vietnam deserters; he will fire Earl Butz. It is driving some of his supporters crazy. This afternoon I had a beer with a young lawyer friend who is doing a bit of research for the Carter campaign, which he hopes will get him a job in the new administration. He was crying into his suds: "Why can't he be vague and inconsequential the way he used to be. Every time he opens his mouth he loses votes. Doesn't he know my whole career's at stake?"

September 10. One of the polls assesses Gene McCarthy's voting strength at 7 per cent. I suppose most of his supporters are young and idealistic. "It is a sign of maturity," wrote Santayana, "to be able to live in an unfinished world."

Youth seeks ideological finality (McCarthy), while maturity settles for ad hoc tentatives (Carter and Ford). Experience lowers one's expectations; lack of experience makes one an Augie March, the kid with "a weak sense of consequences."

Was the 18-year-old voter amendment a good idea? I favored it when it was proposed, but now I wonder. Voting is not a puberty rite; for most of us it is a deadly serious commitment, an act of public consequence taken in absolute privacy. The majority of 18-year-olds I'm acquainted with are still struggling toward adulthood: We have given them the pill, the key to the family car and the vote—but in what they have yet to learn and to achieve or botch, they remain children. Only half of all citizens ages 18-29 are registered to vote, compared to 72 per cent of those 30-49 and 85 per cent of those 50 and older. Political opiates are the religion of the young.

If we are to have a children's crusade, though, Gene McCarthy seems the ideal candidate. He is the Peter Pan of Presidential campaigns, more debonair than Harold Stassen, peskier than George Wallace. A mediocre poet and a wretched politician, McCarthy may nonetheless emerge as the spoiler of Carter's master plan.

September 13. Two negatives make an affirmative, or so grammarians tell us; but what would they say about 56 negatives—the number of vetoes Ford has slapped on bills passed by the Congress? (He issued the 56th this morning.) Ford has been the most persistent nay-sayer in White House history, a chief executive with a handy ballpoint pen in search of a policy. Surely he is the worst President we never elected.

People keep telling me that Ford is "likeable"; I find him offensive. Only twice during his stint in the White House has he demonstrated compassion for another human

being—first for Nixon, whom he pardoned, and then for Clarence Kelley of the FBI, whom he let off the hook. Nixon had suffered enough, Ford said; and Kelley, who indiscretely allowed Federal workmen to decorate his house, had already learned his lesson. There is hardly a misdeed Ford will not forgive, provided it is committed by a political colleague.

Two years ago the Congress approved Gerald Ford's appointment as Vice President because of all possible choices he seemed the least likely ever to run for President. Who believed back then that Ford would come so far by doing so little? The price of Watergate, like the price of nearly everything else these days, continues to rise.

September 21. Carter's *Playboy* interview is strewn with such ancient oddities as "sin," "lust" and "humility." He said he had "looked on a lot of women with lust" and had "committed adultery in my heart many times." Well, an adultery in the heart may be worth two in the bed. In any case, to judge from history, the White House is not a sexual fidelity institute. The rooms are too cold. If Jimmy wants to throw the election he'll have to find a better way.

September 24. There is agreement among TV commentators this morning that the 28-minute sound failure during last night's Ford-Carter debate was the highpoint of the show. The view suits the medium and its habitually smart-ass newscasters, who would sooner trivialize the news than report it. David Brinkley assured us last night that the debate contained "nothing new," the ultimate putdown of journalists and advertising executives. TV teaches us to smirk at politics, then tells us in shocked tones that 70 million eligible voters may stay away from the polls this election. The medium is the message, and the message is that the debate was just a spectator sport, like the Super Bowl.