

New Orleans 88: George Was There

PHOTOS BY EVANN DUPLANTIER

NEW ORLEANS — In 1970 author Jerzy Kosinski published a highly implausible novel about an affable dolt named "Chance" who becomes president by virtue of his uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time. The book, and the movie made from it (starring Peter Sellers as the bewildered gardener who wanders into the presidency), was called *Being There*. George Bush may not be the least likely candidate ever to run for the highest elected office in the land, but "being there" does seem to be his primary claim to qualification.

What began in Atlanta as a shameless taunt from someone whose own whereabouts cry out for closer scrutiny became in New Orleans a badge of merit for the victim of the jibe. The answer to the question, "Where was George?" turned out to be surprisingly simple, and will no doubt find its way into workbooks for fifth grade grammar students as an exercise in the transformation of interrogatives into declarative statements: "Where was George? George was there." What exactly George was doing there may be harder to determine, but that he was indeed "there" was corroborated by a series of unimpeachable witnesses who took the stand in George's defense during his recent four-day trial by convention in New Orleans.

Al Haig, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Bob Dole, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan have served notice on Michael Dukakis: Don't you dare say that George wasn't there, because he was, and we saw him! Ford, it seems, has spotted George all over the place. Jerry caught a glimpse of George in Congress in 1966. He pinpointed him at the UN in 1972, at the Republican National Committee in 1974, in Red China in 1975, and again at CIA headquarters in 1976. During the last eight years Jerry has repeatedly sighted George lurking about the Capitol building, gavel in hand. Lucky for George, Jerry has been following him around for two decades just to see where he was.

The question then arises: If George Bush has been *there* in so many different places, why have we never really noticed him? Could he enter the Oval Office in



The Reagans: now only part of the audience

January and exit again eight years later without a single American looking up to see who had come in? Will George Herbert Walker Bush — with his genteel manner, his unobtrusive presence, and his impeccable references — be a kind of butler-president, the country's premier valet, a cheerful manservant carrying the baggage of his former employer (Reagan), with no agenda of his own, and no other talent than a consummate skill in pressing pants and poaching eggs?

The Safe Candidate

Though obviously a caricature, this image of the vice president is perpetuated by the candidate's allies and the candidate himself, as well as by his enemies. Al Haig may have been getting in a subtle dig at his former rival for the nomination when he described George Bush as "the safe candidate for America," but more than likely he was publishing the authorized version of a meticulously vague persona formulated by shrewd campaign strategists, who would prefer to defend a lack of personality than the many negatives of a well-defined one. Much the same strategy was evident in Barbara Jordan's less than ringing endorsement of Lloyd Bentsen in Atlanta as a "sensible" running mate for Dukakis, who in turn has taken great pains to establish his own lack of personality. One can envision the "Great Debate" of 1988 as a contest of anti-charismatics:

Dukakis: I think the American people have a right to know which candidate has less personality, and that candidate is Michael Dukakis.

Bush: There you go again, Michael. I'll admit you have very little personality, but I think the American people realize that I have none at all.

Bush would seem to have the edge in the battle for blandness, for even his origins are subject to obfuscation. Dukakis, despite his success in obscuring his record as governor of Massachusetts, is undeniably a native and lifelong resident of the Bay State. Bush, on the other hand, though born in the selfsame county as his Democratic opponent, has had more homes than a gypsy or an Army brat; the incessant renditions of "Deep in the Heart of Texas" by the Republican Con-

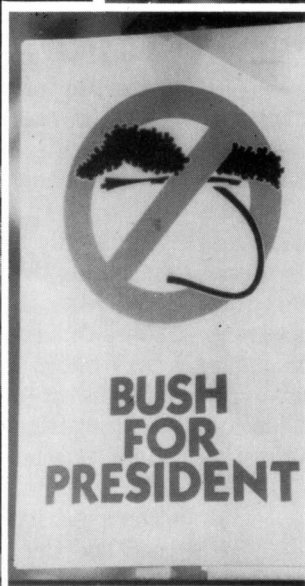
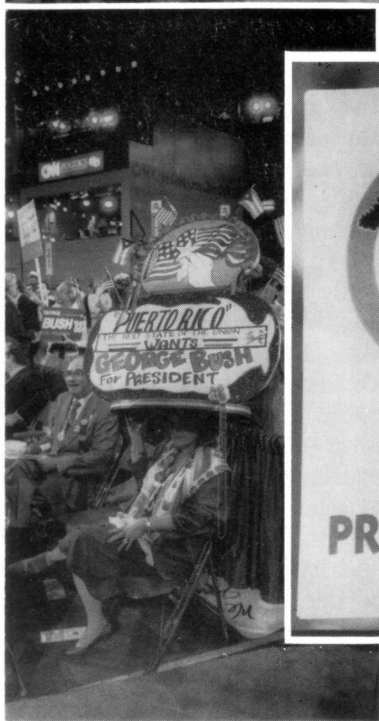
vention orchestra served only to underscore his dual or triple or quadruple state citizenships (as did the presence of his sons at the Convention as members of diverse state delegations).

The paling of personality has its perils. First and foremost, there is the difficulty of generating excitement for a candidate so manifestly unexciting. Because the most reliable alternative to salaried par-

tisans is the unpaid teenage enthusiast, on cue, at regular intervals throughout the convention, hordes of the underaged and unenfranchised would hurtle down the concourse to parade "homemade" placards and banners across the floor of the Superdome. Repeated appeals to reverence and patriotism also had their intended effect upon the delegates. Speaker after speaker reminded them of



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the veto by Michael Dukakis of legislation intended to permit the saying of the pledge of allegiance in Massachusetts schools — with the result that, when Yakov Smirnoff, Lionel Hampton, Charlton Heston, and others mounted the podium to lead the assembly in a display of loyalty that was almost banned in Boston, there was a note of outrage and defiance in the recitation. So many of the speakers

ended their addresses with a hearty “God Bless You” — Elizabeth Dole, Kemp, Robertson, Ford, Bush — that one might have thought the delegates were catching chills from the high-powered air conditioning system in the dome and sneezing when they should have been snoozing.

Having no discernible personality of his own made it that much easier for

Bush to adopt the popular persona of Ronald Reagan. George now has Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan in his employ, and with her assistance is resizing to fit himself the self-deprecating humor and grandfatherly image that proved such winning trademarks for his predecessor. In acknowledgement of this most sincere flattery, Reagan bestowed his blessing on the metamorphosis, assuring the delegates during his Monday night address:

I care that we give custody of this office to someone who will build on our changes, not retreat to the past — someone who will continue the change all of us fought for. To preserve what we have and not risk losing it all — America needs George Bush.

Roasted Quayle

The stronger personalities that might have overshadowed the “safe” candidate — Kirkpatrick, Haig, Robertson, Reagan — were safely confined to the opening nights of the convention. The standard for dullness that nominator Bill Clinton established in Atlanta to permit comparative vitality for Dukakis was matched in New Orleans by keynote speaker Tom Kean, whose monotonous delivery and lame wisecracks gave apparent life even to the report of the rules committee. Bush also went to great lengths to choose a running mate who would not upstage him. He might have succeeded in his objective, had the media not latched on to Dan Quayle’s service in the National Guard during the Vietnam War in an effort to turn this detail of little consequence into a major controversy. The hypocrisy of the liberal press’s preoccupation with duty to one’s country was transparent and no doubt contributed to the unanimous approval of Quayle by acclamation (notwithstanding media reports of delegates determined to enter other names for nomination and of Bush’s inclination to withdraw his man from consideration).

The Quayle “controversy” was one of several non-stories created and circulated by a communications industry frequently accused of manufacturing the news and in this case (to their way of thinking) left with little alternative. Bush’s reference to his mestizo grandchildren as “the little brown ones,” ut-

Michael Dukakis's furlough plan allowed convicted murderers to take a weekend leave from prison. One, Willie Horton left and never came back. Instead he viciously raped and beat a woman while her fiancée was forced to helplessly listen to her screams.

This is only one example of many. In the last several years, Mike Dukakis has murderer per day.

Mike Dukakis is the killer's honest citizens' worst ene

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COMPLIMENTS OF MICHAEL DUKAKIS

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Card distributed at Convention scores Dukakis's furlough plan

tered as he pointed them out in a crowd, was transformed into a racial slur by a gaffe-hungry press, despite the fact that — to anyone with eyes to see — the children were undeniably little, and brown. Nor did Bush's status as the grandfather of Mexican-Americans prevent the media from harping on the alleged underrepresentation of minorities among the delegates to the convention. The supposed incongruity of "straight-laced Republicans" frolicking in the wicked French Quarter also generated reams of newsprint. One out-of-town newswoman noted with pharisaical disdain that she had encountered — shudder, shudder — an inebriated person on Bourbon Street, prompting the station manager at the local CBS affiliate to warn that she might even discover wild animals at the Audubon Zoo. Of course, speculation as to Bush's choice of a running mate dominated the first two days of convention coverage, and the fact that his selection of Quayle came as such a surprise to the seers was no surprise at all.

The perfunctory nature of the modern political convention may contribute to the dearth of hard news, the endless speculation into matters that will soon be decided, the desperate search for interesting "leads" and "angles," and the pumping up of trivialities into bloated "scandals." But the primary cause of this surfeit of soft news is the media's steadfast refusal to address legitimate issues, to provide honest comparisons of the platforms and positions of the parties, and to offer frank and comprehensive appraisals of the public records of the re-

spective candidates. The exposure of the many repugnant details of the Dukakis record as governor of Massachusetts may have been the greatest service performed by the Republican National Convention. Yet, low viewership of the proceedings, and the network penchant for cutting away from the more provocative portions, may have ensured that ideology will play only a limited role in the decisions of many voters.

Ideas Have Consequences

But it is ideology more than anything that distinguishes the two parties. The Republican party platform supports the right to life of the unborn, promotes abstinence from drug abuse and extramarital sex as "the safest way to avoid infections with the AIDS virus," opposes tax increases, and rejects "job-destroying" increases in the minimum wage. In his acceptance speech, George Bush outlined some of the ideological differences between the Democratic and Republican candidates:

Should public school teachers be required to lead our children in the pledge of allegiance? My opponent says no — but I say yes.

Should society be allowed to impose the death penalty on those who commit crimes of extraordinary cruelty and violence? My opponent says no — but I say yes.

Should our children have the right to say a voluntary prayer, or even observe a moment of silence in the schools? My opponent says

no — but I say yes.

Should free men and women have the right to own a gun to protect their home? My opponent says no — but I say yes.

Is it right to believe in the sanctity of life and protect the lives of innocent children? My opponent says no — but I say yes. . . .

I'm the one who believes it is a scandal to give a weekend furlough to a hardened first degree killer who hasn't even served enough time to be eligible for parole.

I'm the one who says a drug dealer who is responsible for the death of a policeman should be subject to capital punishment.

I'm the one who won't raise taxes. . . . My opponent won't rule out raising taxes. But I will. . . .

It is only by playing up ideology and assuming the mantle of Ronald Reagan that George Bush can hope to defeat Michael Dukakis in November. Conservatives would be well advised to question the sincerity of Bush's "conversion" to the conservatism that Reagan espoused, and Bush rejected, during their campaigns for the Republican nomination in 1980. The disparity between the Reagan rhetoric and the Reagan record has proven disheartening to many conservatives, and there is little reason to believe that Bush will adhere any more faithfully to the principles that Reagan himself seems to have abandoned. After all, when the Reagan Revolution was betrayed, George was there.

And yet, one ought not to underestimate the value of rhetoric. Ideas do have consequences; once they gain currency, they develop a momentum of their own, independent of the hidden agendas of the politicians who traffic in them. Jack Kemp was right when he insisted that Ronald Reagan has "shown us that the power of a right idea is the greatest force on earth." We may never know for sure whether or not Reagan really intended his revolution to succeed, whether or not George Bush's "mission" really is to continue that revolution, but we do know one thing: that this "greatest force on earth" has been unleashed, and that nothing can stand in its way, whether George is there or not. ■

— F. R. DUPLANTIER