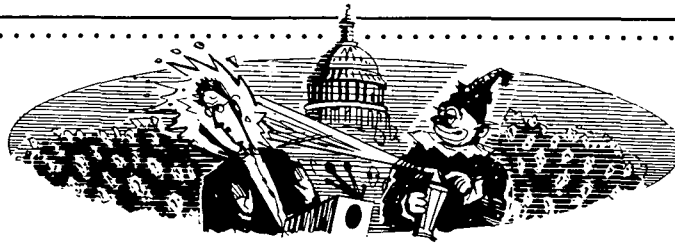

THE CAMPAIGN SPECTATOR



WINCING AT MESSAGES

by Andrew Ferguson

Manchester, New Hampshire

If you've read even one-fifth of the 5,473,296 words that have been written about the 1988 primary here, then you've come across the quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The God who made New Hampshire taunts the lofty mountains with little men." To which I would add: "Yes, but only for a couple weeks every four years." New Hampshirites themselves seem like a nice bunch, but when the little men with the big campaigns show up the natives should have enough sense to stay home and watch it on TV.

But no. They force-feed instead on a diet of things like the "Rally Finale" (in New Hampshire the words rhyme). It was held (where else?) at a mall, in Manchester. There I saw democratic hell: roiling, orgiastic partisanship, heaving sweaty bodies wrapped in campaign ribbons, flushed damp faces shoved together shouting, cardboard signs cracked over heads and trampled underfoot, a sea of plastic boaters bobbing, overweight mothers in stretch pants using baby carriages as battering rams to get a better look at . . . Bruce Babbitt! Or was it Paul Simon? "Which is the one from Arizona?" asked a lady who was using my right shoulder as a balance beam. "My sister's in Arizona and she loves him." She was wearing a Dukakis button.

The candidates—I mean the five (of a possible eleven) who were desperate enough to show up—appeared one by one through an access hallway cleared by the Secret Service. The podium, set up at the confluence of Florsheim Shoes and Zale's Jewelers, had as a backdrop an air-brushed painting of a caboose platform, a reminder of campaigns as they were in the olden days and (went the proud implication) still are, here in New Hampshire. A quartet of musicians in Gay Nineties garb, the Dixieland Strollers, struck up "Hail to the Chief" as Babbitt, the first victim, made his way to the microphone. Before he could open his mouth a chant

rose from the assembled democrats: "Babbitt sucks! Babbitt sucks!" Bruce stuttered and headbobbed his way through his set-piece, and then Pete du Pont stepped into the abattoir of universal suffrage. His supporters, many of whom had joined in jeering Babbitt, cheered wildly when Pete cleared his throat, but a Jackson fan suggested he go to hell. Then, as Paul Simon meandered through his plea for a "government that leads that cares that dreams," his dim, unmodulated voice (it sounds like a jew's-harp) was lost in a chorus of "Get to the point!"

When it was over and the candidates had hurried away, very few people made for the exits—the mall was like home—and I decided to linger too. I looked over my notes: Simon had showed up, and Babbitt, and Jackson, and Kemp, and du Pont. All losers. What would the mall people do if a winner had dared make a bid for their votes? I approached a woman by the Waldenbooks and asked her why she had come. "I'm still undecided," she said. "I just thought this might help me make up my mind." And? "And I'm still undecided! But I kind of like Gore. He looks so gorgeous on TV!"

This particular circle of hell has been called "retail politics" by the press, meaning that voters get to lay eyes on an actual candidate—or if they're really lucky, they can hold one of New Hampshire's celebrated coffee klatches, so the pol and a half-dozen camera crews can track slush across the living room carpet and prop their snow boots on the coffee table. Although the press devoted much energy certifying retail politics as an exclusive privilege of New Hampshirites and Iowans, in the final days of the campaign the privilege was revoked as quickly as it had been granted; several news shows ran features to declare retail politics a myth. Here as elsewhere, said Kathleen Sullivan, TV is the great mediator between candidate and voter.

This, as the lady at the mall instruct-

ed me, is surely true, but it's the kind of double-cross—the media convincing us, through constant repetition, of one thing, and then pulling the rug out—that was typical of the way the press covered this over-covered event. The most prominent example was the minute-by-minute handicapping of the candidates; before Iowa, for example, the Rev. Robertson was not expected to do well here, but after his trouncing of Bush there, he was expected to do better than expected here, and then as the polls piled up before primary day it was suddenly expected that he wouldn't do as well as expected when he was expected to do better than expected. If nothing else, it keeps you alert.

As it happened, of course, Pat didn't do as well as expected (correct me if I'm wrong). The pundits came up with all kinds of reasons why, chief among them the low percentage of evangelicals among New Hampshire voters. There is very little evidence to suggest that Pat will ever extend his support beyond this rarefied bloc, notwithstanding his efforts to play to the average Joe. On the day before the primary he engaged in what was arguably the most degrading photo opportunity of the campaign (the runner-up was Vice President Bush's turn at the wheel of a sixteen-wheeler, with his Secret Service agents perched watchfully on the running board). At Samson's Gym, in Manchester, the Rev donned rayon warm-ups and (probably weighted) gloves and boxed a couple rounds with a born-again Golden Gloves champ, whose astonishment at the man of God's aggressive left-hand was made horribly manifest in a series of muted, plaintive shrieks.

A more expensive, though less conventional, try for the mainstream was Pat's mailing of cassette tapes to every registered Republican in the state. "What I Will Do As President," it's called; the faint echo of Huey Long is probably unintentional. I made the mistake of listening to my copy on a Walkman; Pat's short-of-breath deliv-

ery—you can hear him smiling—is deeply unsettling at such close range. Much of what he says is standard-issue conservatism (supporting right-to-work laws), some is merely fanciful (making Ross Perot secretary of defense), and much of it carries unmistakable overtones of right-wing kookery (the Trilateral Commission is leading us to a one-world socialist state).

Ever since he blew up at Tom Brokaw for calling him a "television evangelist," there's been more attention paid to what Pat is than what his "stands on the issues" are. He himself prefers the title "religious broadcaster," and technically he's correct, since he was never a TV preacher in the strict sense. To counter what he perceives as an attempt to trivialize his qualifications, Robertson took every opportunity in New Hampshire to run through his résumé: "I founded the fourth largest cable company in the country, I'm president of a university, I've been in television for twenty-five years, I've been a film buyer, a programmer, a producer, a director"—hold it! I'll settle for the evangelist.

Republicans who would like to discredit him should face the fact that none of this—the résumé, the policy positions, the wild, unfounded stories he's fond of telling—none of it matters to those who have heard the Rev's call. After spending time with the Robertson crowd in New Hampshire, I'm convinced that the precinct workers would labor unperturbed even if the candidate announced that he enjoys wearing leatherette pasties during his off-hours. In this he has much in common with his ordained counterpart in the Democratic party. Robertson's political appeal, like Jackson's, is rooted in concerns that are properly extra-political, and so it requires little in the way of specific reinforcement: "We must restore our moral strength," grins Pat, and his followers flood with passion. You may wonder how a President will go about doing that—enforce the sodomy laws? abolish off-track betting? Pat isn't saying, and his devotees aren't

Andrew Ferguson is assistant managing editor of The American Spectator.

listening anyway. The campaign is the message.

“Once we got our *message* across—how’re we gonna get this *deficit* down, what’re we gonna *do* about education—that’s when we started to see some forward movement,” said George Bush, the morning after he won the primary here. He and his chief rival, Bob Dole, were locked in a war of messages—George trying to get his message across, Bob trying to keep George from distorting his message—made all the more confusing by the fact that neither of them has one. Pete du Pont and Jack Kemp, the only two candidates who represented a body of ideas—who had, that is, a message—faded further into irrelevance with each tracking poll.

The emptiness of the two front-running campaigns was made obvious during the final debate before the primary. In Bush’s case, it was a high-water mark of the Wince Factor: the Vice President’s tendency to say things that cause his right-wing admirers, of whom there are many, to cringe and reach for the channel-changer. At one point in the debate, exasperated at Kemp’s skepticism toward the Soviets’ promised withdrawal from Afghanistan, he said, “Don’t fight progress when you see it. Just give peace a chance.” When Kemp’s jaw dropped, Bush tried to qualify: “With your eyes wide open,” he added. The qualification didn’t help. Bush is a pol and pols deal in cant; for most of them it’s the only negotiable currency. But what kind of cant? Flustered by his opponent’s relentless hostility to the Soviets, he felt compelled for some reason to demur, and in defense he deployed the first cliché that occurred to him—not minding that it was childish, and the exclusive property of people who consider him the moral equivalent of Martin Bormann.

Bush’s closing statement didn’t help, either. For a moment it appeared to lead him up that same meandering California highway a confused President Reagan pioneered in the close of his first debate with Walter Mondale in 1984. Bush never quite got down to business, which arouses the suspicion that he hasn’t got much business to transact. “I don’t talk much, but I do believe,” he said earnestly. “I may not articulate much, but I feel.” This might be a sweet thing for a fellow to say after a partial lobotomy, but for a presidential candidate it’s dismaying. Bush’s conservative followers, I predict, are in for a campaign of many cringes.

In an attempt to carve out a message, George expended much campaign treasure contending that Dole has a secret desire to raise taxes. It was a rich spectacle: the man who thought Kemp-

Roth was the work of witch doctors accusing the architect of America’s largest-ever tax hike of an itch for “new revenues”! Bob, for his part, was appalled, and returned fire. “We gotta get the message out,” he said. Given a free hand, of course, either one would haul in new revenues until your teeth hurt, and this easily deducible fact makes the squabble slightly unreal—and hugely entertaining, especially since it seems to irritate Bob so. “Stop lying about my record!” Dole said—the press’s word was “snapped”—to Bush on primary night. At a polling place earlier in the day, a voter accused him, with some persistence, of being a taxpayer. “Get back in your cage,” Bob said—snapped. Gotta get the message out.

In the interests of natural science, I studied the candidates’ supporters as I traveled through New Hampshire, and found few surprises. The young Bushies, for example, were pretty much what you’d expect; the firm chins, square shoulders, splendid posture, and, in several cases, advanced cases of Long Island lockjaw—the kind of kids who look great in turtlenecks. Dole had his share of fresh-faced young people, but I found the real Dole organization-man outside a polling place in Manchester the morning of primary day. He was a twelve-year-old kid who told me his name was Richie: with a Dole button pinned prominently on his down vest, he circled the polling place ripping down every Bush sign he could get his hands on—our next Donald Segretti. When I caught up with him I pointed to the Dole button and asked, “What do you have against Vice President Bush?” “He’s an asshole,” Richie snapped, and took off like a flushed rabbit. Senator, give that kid a raise!

Republicans will have to corral a lot of Richies—voting age Richies—if Bob or George are to beat a Democrat this fall, particularly, I think, if it’s a Democrat named Richard Gephardt. There’s a reason for this: Gephardt, unlike Bush and Dole, has something to say. Sure, he looked ludicrous during Iowa, with the feed-grain cap yanked down over his blond head and his upper-half wrapped in a Michelin-man parka, but for the trip east the trappings of the hilljack were temporarily mothballed. Meantime, the case of the invisible eyebrows had been solved with a quick stroke of the brown wax-pencil. In New Hampshire, he stuck to a two-button suit of presidential blue.

I saw him speak in the town square of Portsmouth, on the Atlantic coast. Old brick storefronts, sandblasted to gentrified perfection, face the square, and the stores have names like “Macro

Polo” and “G. Willikers!” and “The Bagelry.” A Mozart quintet played over the p.a. The large noontime crowd had been prepped with little American flags, and as the music segued into Linda Ronstadt’s version of “Livin’ in the USA,” signalling the candidate’s arrival, they fluttered furiously.

I can’t explain the Mozart, but the little flags and the Chuck Berry jingoism were right on the money, for Gephardt’s message is nationalism in bone and sinew. He begins in the dolorous cadences of a man on the verge of giving up hope: “We are beginning—to sacrifice—this nation’s—strength.” (One enterprising reporter for the *Manchester Union Leader* studied this latest stump speech of Gephardt’s and discovered that the words “strength” and “strong” appeared thirty-nine times.) It’s a theme repeated in his television commercials: the weary voice, recorded with heavy echo as if reverberating down through the entire history of this great land, is ladled over vaguely melancholy music, and accompanies soft-focus images of wheat fields, wrinkled grandmothers, horny-handed workmen, gap-toothed children brimming with innocent (but fruitless?) hope.

Now *here’s* a message: something’s gone wrong, Gephardt said. It’s not your fault, or mine. It’s not the fault of the wizened grannies. And certainly not of the gap-toothed brats. The problem is *them*. Since Gephardt never quite spells it out, the identity of them must be a matter of deduction, but it seems to come down to the Japs (“Yes, we must compete, but fairly—by golly we have to make sure they treat us as well as we treat them!”), Capital (“Corporate America is up there in their offices worrying about how to make quick profits on America’s decline instead of down there in the work place trying to make the best products we can”), and the editorial writers at the *Wall Street Journal* (I’m still working on that one). This gloomy assessment (*somebody’s* gotta say it) reaches its nadir with Gephardt—visibly angry now—challenging the apologists of the status quo to visit the Caterpillar tractor factory where he recently spoke with 1100 men—1100 brave men!—who had to go home one night and tell their wives and kids they lost their jobs.

But wait! At once the tone and rhythm of Gephardt’s words change: the weariness, through sheer force of will, is shed: from the depths the cadence rises, slowly: We *can* make—America—great—and good—and strong again, you and he. “We have come to a crossroads. As one country, indivisible, we can make this nation what it can and must be. It’s time to tell the forces of greed: enough is enough.” Then: an inspirational story about a ninety-year-old schoolteacher

who gets Meals on Wheels, a program “I had the privilege to vote for eleven times.” Government is good! And then a boffo finish with his catch-all slogan: “It’s your—fight—*too!*”

Stupid? Sure. Monumentally, staggeringly stupid. But is it any dumber than Dole’s talk of “leadership” or Bush’s bid to become the “education President”? No, it’s smarter: there’s a growing sense, in New Hampshire and elsewhere, that things have taken a turn for the worse, and that America is getting kicked around: by the Asians, by Wall Street’s get-rich-quick guys, by up-pity allies. Portsmouth is a Reagan-era boomtown, with lower unemployment than the state at large, which itself has the lowest unemployment of any state in the country; and lined along the yupscale shops on the town square, within earshot of the cranes swinging over construction sites on the edge of town, the Portsmouth crowd, when Gephardt was through with it, was ready to take up the cudgels against the intellectuals and the robber barons and the politicians and the bureaucrats who tell us we have to accept the *way things are*. Governor Wallace, your redemption is nigh. □

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General Design of Warships, by William Hovgaard (London, 1920). Morris Guralnick, 261 Mandalay Rd., Oakland, CA 94618.

The Great Terror, by Robert Conquest. Frederic Wile, 160 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10024.

Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection, by Dr. Gary Habermas (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1984). Lowell T. Wucke, 10170 Pasture Gate Lane, Columbia, MD 21044.

A Diary of the French Revolution, by Gouverneur Morris, ed. Beatrix Davenport, 2 V., (Ayer Co., Salem, NH, 1939). Harrison Clark, 2215 Harbor Terrace, Alexandria, VA 22308.

The Almost Perfect State, by Don Marquis (1927). **Treatise on the Gods**, by H.L. Mencken (1930). Glenn Critton, 1802 Ford Parkway, St. Paul, MN 55116.

Thanatopsis, and other poems by Wm. Cullen Bryant. **Forest Fire**, by Rex Stout. C.H. Jefferson, Rt 1, Box 794, Green Forest, AR 72638.

The New Testament in Braid Scots Rendered, by the Rev. William Wye Smith, 3rd ed., rev. (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1924). Poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Rebecca McDaniel, 420 Disharoon Ridge, Big Canoe, GA 30143.

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CURRENT WISDOM

USA Today

A congratulatory message from the magazine reviewer of the incomparable *USA Today*:

Many people despise R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr.'s *The American Spectator*. Its conservative politics and contempt for liberal concerns repel those of a more compassionate bent.
[February 12, 1988]

Esquire

CAT scan of the brain of a hamster, whose first name is Robert:

At the house, he is informed that all air traffic has been halted for an hour because the Vice-President's plane is due in at the airport.

"What time is he coming in?" Redford wants to know.

"Three-fifteen," he is told.

"What time is it now?"

"Three o'clock."

"God, wouldn't it be great to go out to the airport and be there when Bush comes in. I'd love to do that and have the media come over and ask me what I think of him. Think they'd do that? That would be great."

"What would you say?"

"That I think he's a jerk."

"He was a pretty good baseball player in college, you know?" I tell him.

"Come on, cut it out," he says. "Really? He couldn't have been. He's too weak."

"Big war hero, too."

"Who? Bush? Come on."

"Seriously. You can look it up."

"Well, why isn't he talking about that?" Redford asks. "If that stuff is true, then that's what he should be talking about. That says something about him."

When Redford gets to the airport, Bush has already departed for town. His plane, Air Force II, sits on the lonesome runway washed in the fading light of dusk, a silver, red, blue and white canister of power, not necessarily of fame.

As Redford removes his bags from the car's trunk, one of the ground crew approaches. "Excuse me, Mr. Redford. The governor of Florida is inside and he wants to know..."

"Yeah," Redford says. "I know what he wants to know."

"If you'd have a picture taken with him?"

"No," Redford says.

"Excuse me?" the kid asks.

"Tell him no," Redford says. Then, almost to himself: "I know what it is all about; the picture goes right up on the wall in the office: 'Me and my new friend, Bob.'"

"Look," he says to the ground-crew guy, "I know it's not your fault. You're just doing your job coming out and asking me, but tell him I'm sorry, no."

This autographed picture deal, this posing with the great, the near-great, and those who only dream of getting next to the great, is something Redford takes seriously. Once, before giving a woman his autograph, he insisted that she remove a BUSH FOR PRESIDENT button from her jacket. She did. And Redford signed. It's part of who he is.
[March 1988]

Washington Post

Whilst reviewing Charles Colson's latest book, the luminous Prof. Colman McCarthy puts the kibosh to the author's mythical vision of Holy Russia, a land Colson also believes is teeming with Communists, KGB agents, and other mythical creatures:

Colson crams together these platitudes like a warden overcrowding a cell block. He hasn't written a book as much as repackaged a few pet mullings, most of which are unstirring conventional. "The Soviet system is committed to the eradication of any vital practice of religion," he writes. If that's true, why are Westerners regularly taken to monasteries and churches when they visit the Soviet Union, and why has Mother Teresa been invited to open a convent in Moscow?
[December 1987]

New Perspectives Quarterly

Mr. Frank Zappa makes a memorable attempt to become arts critic for National Public Radio:

There is a book called *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, with thousands of names in it. You have never heard of most of the people in that book, nor have you heard their music. That doesn't mean they wrote awful music, it means they didn't have hits.

So basically, the people who are recognized as the geniuses of classical music had hits. And the person who determined whether or not it was a hit was a king, a duke, or the church or whoever paid the bill. The desire to get a sandwich or something to drink had a lot to do with it. And the content of what they wrote was to a degree determined by the musical predilections of the guy who was paying the bill.

Today, we have a similar situation in rock 'n' roll. We have kings, dukes, and popes: the A&R guy who spots a group or screens the tape when it comes in; the business affairs guy who writes the contract; the radio station programmers who choose what records get air play.
[Winter 1988]

Washington Times

Washington's *Good Times* reports it all as the Hon. Mr. Hartpence indulges in some braggadocio over past triumphs:

"If I am elected, I won't be the first adulterer in the White House," Mr. Hart said. "I may be the first one to have publicly confessed, but I won't be the first."

Mr. Hart and his wife, Lee, met with the editorial board of the Des Moines Register during a campaign swing in Iowa.

On his marriage, Mr. Hart said: "We have been married longer than the president in the White House today. We have kept our marriage together. One could argue—I wouldn't—that Ronald Reagan walked away from a marriage. Not just Ronald Reagan but a lot of people."
[January 11, 1988]

New York Times Magazine

The author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom, Polite Society's latest Senator Joe McCarthy, takes a dreadful stream-of-conscience drubbing in the howls page of a polite weekly:

Allan Bloom's book is a pretentious account of his own nostalgia for the days when white-male authority went unquestioned. Such yearnings are the standard litany of extreme conservatism.

Elitism has never been an American value. Our country has a history of struggle for freedom and equality, in which the civil-rights movement, the women's movement and many of the new scholarly trends being embraced by humanities departments are the most recent developments.

Professor Bloom recently gave a talk at Oberlin College, the first co-ed college in this country as well as one of the first to admit blacks. He spoke longingly of Plato and Socrates, who spent their days debating "Great Ideas" with a group of like-minded friends in ancient Athens. University education, Bloom suggested, should operate on this model. Anyone who has read Plato knows that the very raison d'être of the Socratic confraternity was its deliberate exclusion of slaves and women.

—Natania Rosenfeld
Princeton, N.J.

[February 7, 1988]

Village Voice

The cosmic gibbering of Tom Hayden contained in a "Last Thoughts" memorandum sent by him to fellow Gary Hart supporters during last spring's post-coitus crisis:

Recognizing that it may be pop psychology, I think I understand now part of the reason for this identity problem. Gary's values and worldview were formed in the Church of the Nazarene, a very moralistic and guilt-driven denomination. When he left the Church orbit for Yale, and politics, and the world of relative ethics, he crossed at some point from Nazarene to libertine. But even if you leave your church, your church doesn't leave you. And so, even as he experimented with the new world of free relationships, the voice of his past reminded him that he was wrong. He entered a world of shadow and risk, a "double man" to use the title of his novel, operating according to his new ethical standards while judging himself a sinner. One resolution of this contradiction is to live dangerously, near the edge of exposure and destruction. To survive affairs, in this context, is to be vindicated in the view that the world is tolerant, forgiving, turns its back on commonplace transgressions. To be caught, on the other hand, is confirmation that the world is ruled by an iron moral law, and admission that one cannot meet the standard. I believe Gary was testing whether he was morally adequate to be the presidential front-runner by acting on the edge of risk.
[January 26, 1988]

Washington Post

Dr. Carl T. Rowan reveals the condition of our contemporary bonsai civil rights movement:

Show me a guy who rides around with a swastika on his bumper, and I'll show you someone who hates Jews. I'll point out a sicko who still worships Adolf Hitler's notions of "Aryan supremacy" and his vow to exterminate the Jewish people.

Show me a guy who rides around with Confederate flags flying on his front fenders, and I'll show you someone who thinks the Civil War still goes on. I'll give you a racist who thinks that it is only a matter of time before this nation makes white supremacy its official policy and returns to slavery, with black people the God-designated hewers of wood and drawers of water.

Show me a governor who insists on flying the Confederate flag over his state capitol, and I'll show you a social-intellectual Neanderthal, a person who is dangerously insensitive to the feelings of black Americans both inside his state and across the country.
[February 9, 1988]

Daily Forty Niner

The editors of Cal-State Long Beach's paper of record come down smartly on the side of progress:

Ignoring the rhetoric that both sides conveyed before, during and after the summit, it becomes apparent that only one leader may have been sincere when it came to making promises for world peace:
Mikhail Gorbachev.

[January 1988]

City Paper

Washington, D.C.'s simulacrum of the *Village Voice* puts a local Aristotle in charge of explicating a celluloid classic, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and, lo, the dolt sees contemporary Academe's hallucination of the fiend Reagan and our beloved body politic:

What's creepy about this movie, of course, is how closely its creators, by intuition or accident, foresaw what would transpire in the quarter-century between its release and resurrection—the rash of assassinations that shredded the fabric of our national consciousness; the emergence and, indeed, longterm presidency of a dullard Red-baiter manipulated by a tough, ambitious wife and right-wing interests; an electorate so numbed by media that it can no longer distinguish between how a candidate looks and what, if anything, he stands for; a society so demoralized and cynical that its few perceptive, altruistic members are forced, like Marco, to become outcasts.

Produced during the great rush of New Frontier idealism, *The Manchurian Candidate* was designed as a worst possible scenario comic-nightmare of what the progressive Kennedy era presumably had put to rest. Today, the film's vision of a corrupt, paranoid body politic is virtually a photographic likeness of our political reality.
[February 19-25, 1988]