

16 Feb. 1976



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### Notes and Comment

LETTER from a friend:  
 Did the ordinary folk of ages gone by appreciate the world-shaking nature of inventions and innovations when they were first introduced? Was Gutenberg's printing press instantly hailed? Did David Hume's theory of knowledge dazzle the populace, or was the reaction matter-of-fact? I ask because I recently chanced upon a report of a device destined to change the world of politics as we know it. And so overcome was I by the staggering consequences of this breakthrough that a single account of its birth, buried in a very large newspaper, all but seized me by the throat and hurled me to the floor.

It seems that the supporters of Senator Frank Church, an estimable Presidential hopeful, had come to a caucus of liberal Democrats in Massachusetts determined to claim a psychological victory from the caucus's balloting. (Psychological victories have largely replaced real vote-counting as a measure of political strength.) Before the votes were counted, Church's followers had printed a press release proclaiming, "The Senator's achievement in winning — per cent of the vote here today was termed remarkable by his supporters, who went into the caucus with little hope of any kind of victory." Following the vote, they scribbled in the correct number (about twenty-four per cent) and distributed the prepackaged expression of wonder and glee to the press.

As a longtime political operative, I was for a moment puzzled by this tactic. It was certainly brave. Had all of Church's supporters somehow been kept from the caucus (by a felonious violation of the laws of probability, or by tainted chicken salad at a prepsychological-victory lunch), it would have left the statement a shade limp. ("The Senator's achievement in winning one-tenth of one per cent of the vote here today was termed remark-

able. . .") It also raised some exquisite epistemological questions. Can something be proclaimed as remarkable before it happens? Indeed, is not an expectation of remarkability a self-contradiction? The readiness of those press releases meant that *nothing* Senator Church might have done—not even winning every single vote and conclusively proving Fermat's Last Theorem—would have been really remarkable. It was then that a shock of recognition swept my doubts away. I realized that, intentionally or not, these citizens had devised an instrument of such cunning as to remake the political landscape of our time. They had struck a stunning, perhaps fatal blow to that mortal enemy of modern politics: spontaneity. As any experienced campaign worker will tell you, the spontaneous event is the nightmare of the electoral battle. An uncontrolled outburst—a campaign worker's admission of doubt about his candidate's capacity or the campaign's momentum—can unravel the most carefully devised political strategy. None of the tools of the trade—the thirty-second spot, the four-color brochure, the six-city jet tour, the carefully chosen words and carefully frozen smiles—can make up for the accidental, unvarnished expression of vulnerability. For years, strategists have struggled to combat this menace. Each year, the weaponry has grown more sophisticated. Computers have learned to drop names and addresses into the body of the letters they type, to make them

appear a more authentically individual expression. ("Believe me, Mr. Willis, nothing would please me more than to personally visit you at Cloverleaf Lane.") At the 1972 Republican Convention, the minute-by-minute briefing sheet for the chairman informed him that at the moment of Richard Nixon's renomination he would attempt unsuccessfully to quell the spontaneous outpouring of delegate joy. Now the final weapon is at hand: the totally planned expression of emotion and reaction. Since the key aim in primary campaigns is to do better than anyone expected, the trick is to proclaim that your vote exceeded your fondest expectations. (Remember, Lyndon Johnson beat Eugene McCarthy on write-ins in New Hampshire in 1968, but McCarthy "won" because of the expectations. And in 1972 Edmund Muskie "lost" with forty-six per cent, while George McGovern "won" with thirty-seven per cent.)

Following in the footsteps of Senator Church's doughty pioneers, a candidate need only print up a single victory statement for all primaries, with a simple formula: "Senator Frazier today scored a surprisingly strong  $x$  per cent of the vote in the — primary, surpassing the highest expectations of his supporters, who would have been happy with  $x-10$  per cent of the vote, and chilling his rivals, who were known to have wanted to hold Frazier to  $x-25$  per cent."

Indeed, this tactic can be applied to the substantive world of politics as well. Suppose, for example, the President is going to announce whether he will sign or veto a housing bill. Whatever the President does, Senator Frazier, a candidate for the President's job, must be against. (That is how the system works; if you don't like it, you can go back where you came from.) Up to now, the Senator's only recourse has been to wait until the President made his speech and then react—incurring all the dangers inherent in letting a politician say something in public. Now



the solution is clear. Hours before the President's speech, the candidate's press office sends out a release as follows: "Senator Frazier today expressed an overriding sense of dismay and outrage at the President's decision to (a) sign (b) veto the housing bill. At a time when the No. 1 issue across the country is (a) excessive government spending (b) lack of decent housing, the President's callous decision to (a) further erode the budget (b) condemn Americans to slum conditions can only be called immoral. I shall do all in my power to fight this outrageous example of (a) profligate waste (b) miserly indifference."

There are, of course, technical difficulties. You will need to carefully instruct the copy desks that all the (a)s or all the (b)s must be struck out in accordance with the President's decision. (It would obviously not do to attack the President for profligate waste if he vetoed the bill.) And, given the free-flowing alcohol on election nights, there is the danger that a happy-go-lucky campaign aide may scribble "So's your old man," or even more spicy comments, in place of both the (a)s and the (b)s. But these are trivial objections. The fact is that by eradicating the last vestiges of unrehearsed dangers the prepackaged expression of post-electoral emotion will surely rank as one of the great —s of our time.

### Mr. Dolan at the Met

WE'D like to tell you about the recent activities of Mr. James J. Dolan, president of the Dolan Steel Company, of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and, for one evening last week, the Metropolitan Opera's most unusual Ethiopian slave. His appearance as a special guest super in the triumph scene of the new "Aida" climaxed a brief but spectacular operatic career that began one afternoon in December, when Mr. Dolan and his wife, Edna, attended a charity auction in the opera-house auditorium. Mr. Dolan, an opera buff, was planning to bid on Rosa Ponselle's shawl, but instead he got carried away by Item 5, which was listed as "Chance for man to Super in New Met Production of Aida... and Invitation to Cast Party." After some spirited bidding, Mr. Dolan acquired Item 5 for four hundred and seventy-five dollars. When he checked with a Met official the following day, he was asked to report at 10:15 A.M. on January 28th for the piano dress rehearsal. We met Mr. Dolan at the stage door on the appointed day, and found him to be a

tall, thin, amiable Irishman in his late forties, with sandy hair, blue eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses, and an open, friendly manner. He was wearing a tan raincoat and carrying a shiny black leather briefcase.

"My family is thrilled at the thought of seeing me onstage at the Met," Mr. Dolan said as we stood at the door. "Five of my eight children are coming down for the dress rehearsal, and my wife will be in the auditorium on opening night."

We asked about Dolan Steel, and discovered that it was a family business, founded by Mr. Dolan's father. "We buy semifinished steel, process it, and sell it in flat sheets," he said. "The year 1975 was a pretty bad year for us, and I needed cheering up, which is one of the reasons I'm here."

At ten-fifteen, Charles Caine, the Met's staff costume designer, conducted Mr. Dolan to the supers' dressing area for a costume fitting. The two men disappeared into a crowd of seventy-odd bare-chested males of various sizes and colors, most of whom were dressed only in undergarments. Some supers were applying body or eye makeup; others were pulling on armbands and collars or folding onto themselves short gold Egyptian skirts that closed at the waist with Velcro. When Mr. Dolan returned, he was barefoot, minus his glasses, and wearing a pair of white shorts, having left his clothing and his valuables with a security man. Mr. Caine handed him a jar of reddish-brown liquid and asked him to put on his body makeup. "It's called Texas Dirt," Mr. Caine told us as Mr. Dolan slathered the stuff over his torso. "A water-soluble makeup that gives a nice gloss to the skin under lights. You apply it in layers and get darker and darker." When Mr. Dolan was the color of coffee-with-cream, Mr. Caine helped him into a short brown cotton tunic that left one shoulder bare, handed him a knobby black wig, and stepped back to admire the effect. "We're aiming for a simple, comprehensive Ethiopian look," he said. "You're one of the prisoners."

As our party of three headed for the stage, Mr. Caine told us that this "Aida" required three hundred and

twenty-five separate costumes. "We have eighty changes of costume in the triumph scene alone, with three groups of people changing twice or more, so that in those twenty-four minutes eighty-six people give you a hundred and sixty-six different looks."

When we asked how this worked, Mr. Caine explained that groups of marchers wearing animal heads turned into Ethiopians or Radamès' guards by changing costumes and headpieces in the wings, and that a group of spoils porters became a platoon of archers for the scene's final tableau. "It's a matter of precise coordination and timing," he said. "You'll see."

Onstage, John Dexter, "Aida's" director, was showing a line of animal-headed men at the front of a large circular platform how to kneel in the profile position familiar from Egyptian bas-reliefs. "Kneel upright first and then lean back on your heels," he told them. "And don't wiggle as you go down." During a break, Mr. Dexter was introduced to Mr. Dolan, who shook him enthusiastically by the hand, transferring a considerable amount of Texas Dirt to Mr. Dexter. "You're going to have a terrible time," said Mr. Dexter with a slightly manic grin. "You and sixteen other prisoners come in at the back—bent over and looking very defeated, I hope. Then all seventeen of you cross in front of everybody to stage left as Amonasro enters from stage right." Mr. Dexter assumed a defeated crouch and moved rapidly across the front of the platform with Mr. Dolan in tow. Placing Mr. Dolan halfway back on the left side of the stage, Mr. Dexter said, "Here is the difficult part. You have to stand absolutely still for the rest of the scene. If I find you blocking the chorus, I may have to decapitate you so they can see the conductor." Mr. Dolan, shivering slightly in bare feet and brief tunic, nodded enthusiastically. "This is going to be a hairy rehearsal," Mr. Dexter added, "because our tenor is sick, and if I try to use a substitute who doesn't know the stage traffic he could get run over by a chariot wheel."

"I wish I had brought my glasses," said Mr. Dolan.

On opening night, we found Mr. Dolan in his private dressing room—Dressing Room 24—wearing his tunic, his wig, and a liberal portion of Texas Dirt, and surrounded by his considerable family. Everyone was sipping champagne, admiring two bouquets of flowers sent by old friends, and listening to Marilyn Horne, the Amneris, warm up in the dressing room across the hall. Mr. Dolan

