

What the Voters Need Is a Good Laugh

Carter's solemnity is part of his personality; Reagan has a talent for humor, but he wants to prove himself 'weighty' enough for the presidency; Anderson insists he is a 'serious' candidate.

By Jeff Greenfield

Since every commentator worth a lecture fee is deploring the state of this presidential election, let me offer a specific complaint, not about the lack of noble rhetoric, or the absence of serious ideas, but about a dearth of something else once considered essential in presidential campaigns.

Laughter.

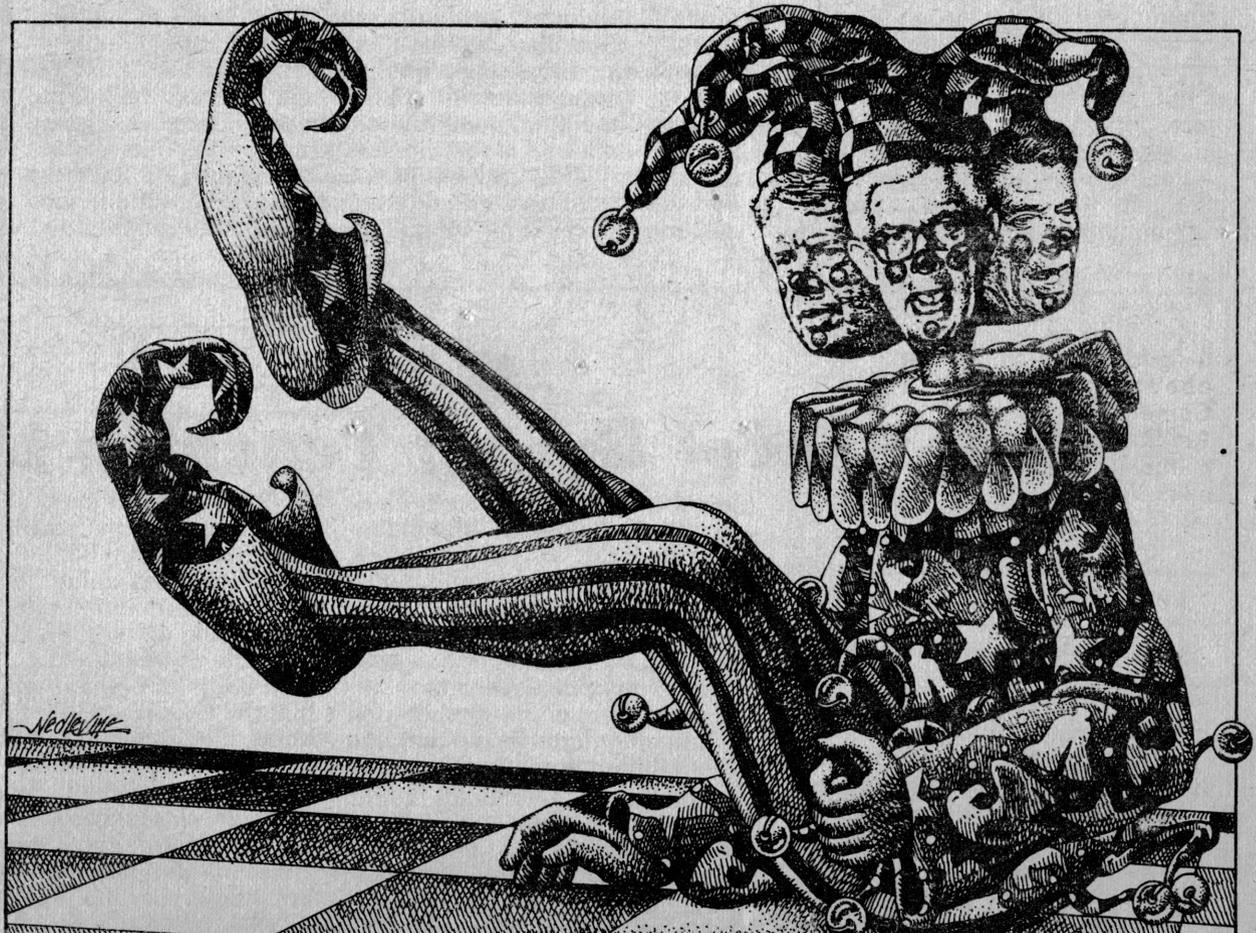
The 1980 presidential campaign may set a record for solemnity; there hasn't been a single memorable moment of humor to give it character.

Well, perhaps that isn't entirely fair. There *have* been moments of high humor, but they haven't been *intentional*. When Jimmy Carter, declaiming to the Democratic National Convention, referred to that great American Senator "Hubert Horatio Hornblower," that was indeed worth a chuckle. When Ronald Reagan seemed to be indicting the Redwoods of California for producing more pollution than General Motors, we could almost hear H.L. Mencken chuckling with glee.

But when it comes to putting a pin into the pretensions of political speech, neither Reagan nor Carter nor the sometimes-pastoral John Anderson has given us much to laugh about.

Not that they haven't tried from time to time. Reagan, a polished speechmaker, can spin amusing tales about his Hollywood experiences, as a method of defusing his actor image by laughing at it. He tells a story of campaigning with his wife, Nancy, and running across an old man who asked him whether he and his wife had ever been in the movies. Yes I was, Reagan responded. Whereupon the man yelled to his wife, "Come quick! Roy Rogers and Dale Evans are here!"

Carter tried to ridicule Reagan's inconsistent for-



eight policy pronouncements—on the Soviet grain embargo, the Olympic boycott, and the arms race—by saying that Reagan “doesn’t know whether he wants to feed [the Russians], play with them or go to war with them.”

But neither Reagan nor Carter has used the splendid weapon of humor as a potent political tool. It’s a

Jeff Greenfield is host of the CBS news program “Sunday Morning” and author of “Playing to Win: An Insider’s Guide to Politics,” published by Simon and Schuster.

far cry from what our most successful politicians have done in past campaigns.

At least once, a single joke seems to have blown a presidential candidate out of the water. In 1944, Thomas Dewey and the Republicans challenged Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fourth-term bid by accusing him of “imperial” use of presidential prerogatives—specifically, sending a naval destroyer back to an Alaskan island to pick up his Scottish terrier, Fala.

Addressing a friendly labor group, Roosevelt proclaimed: “I don’t resent these attacks . . . and my family doesn’t resent it. But Fala *does* resent it . . . You know, Fala is Scotch. And when he heard that the Republican fiction writers . . . [accused me of wasting millions of dollars] his Scottish soul was furious. He has not been the same dog since.”

They might as well have counted the votes then and there.

Humor is also a splendid device for deflecting criticism, lessening the severity of a charge by publicly excusing it. The Kennedys were particularly adept at this. Speaking at the 1960 Al Smith dinner, candidate John F. Kennedy defused criticism about his father’s wealth by reading to the assembled a “telegram” from his father. “Dear Jack,” the mock telegram read. “Don’t spend one cent more than is necessary. I’ll be damned if I’ll pay for a landslide.”

In his early Senate races, Edward Kennedy liked to tell of campaigning at a factory when a worker charged, “You’ve never worked a day in your life!” But, Kennedy would end his story, another worker came up to him later and said, “If it’s true you’ve never worked a day in your life, you haven’t missed a thing.”

Reagan occasionally told a self-deprecating joke to good effect early in this campaign. For instance, in a primary debate Reagan claimed that the ancient Ro-

man leader, Diocletian, had tried wage-and-price controls—and that they hadn’t worked then, either. “And I’m the only one here old enough to remember that,” he quipped in obvious reference to his age.

But Reagan’s minor-league jests aside, intentional jokes have been little used this campaign season. The lack of humor can be traced, I think, to the personality of one of the major candidates, and to the kinds of issues that have come to dominate the campaign.

President Carter is, by accounts of friend and foe alike, a man who takes himself and his office very seriously. Unlike Dwight D. Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Roosevelt, Carter has approached the presidency as a solemn duty, not a job to be savored. One had the sense that FDR and JFK *enjoyed* the White House, appreciated the absurdities that can attend even the most powerful office in the world and used laughter to share that pleasure with the citizenry. When Kennedy

dedicated a huge power plant by pushing a button, and remarked, “I’m always afraid that when I push one of these things I’m going to blow up Massachusetts,” he was, in effect, mocking the panoply of power. Carter simply does not suggest this zest for the job, no matter how hard he is fighting to keep it.

Reagan’s solemnity, in contrast, comes not from his personality but his need to prove his “presidentiality.” By all accounts, Reagan is an affable man with a talent for humor. But if you are a one-time actor with a reputation for remarks more glib than weighty, you have some doubt about contributing to that reputation. And whatever native propensity Reagan might once have had for jibing at others, it disappeared fast after the brief public uproar over the offensive ethnic “duck” joke Reagan told reporters last spring.

Of course, it is possible to joke without either poking fun at yourself or inadvertently offending segments of voters. But to do that you need joke-worthy issues. In this campaign, Reagan’s critics have expressed doubt that Reagan understands the complexities of the world, and have charged that he would risk national stability by impulsive action. This is not the kind of criticism that can be defused with a healthy dose of humor. A politician can joke about government red tape or inflation or even unemployment. But the prospect of nuclear holocaust does not set funnybones to tickling.

I do not mean to suggest that most of the problems facing the nation are minor ones or that a good joke can compensate the American voter for bad ideas or empty promises. Clearly, we ought to demand of potential presidents honesty of thought, clarity of expression, the courage to prod the citizenry into necessary action as well as to promise it solutions.

But humor is a way of signaling goodwill to voters; a wink in the midst of the solemn procession that tells us that they, too, appreciate the clay feet under the robes of the processioners. It is a way of reassuring us that, while candidates may take the issues and the campaign seriously, they know better than to take *themselves* too seriously.

The absence of that kind of gesture is hardly the major reason this presidential campaign, like the three before it, has left the American voter discontent. But in some small way, the lack of a good laugh adds to the nagging sense that we will go into the voting booth whistling not “America the Beautiful” but ask-

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