

Campaign Lacks Humor And Wit

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NEW YORK—The 1964 Presidential campaign has been sadly lacking in wit and humor; and this lack is more serious than the simple spectre of unrelieved somber campaign oratory.

It is also a sign of the most divisive election race in decades, a genuinely ideological clash in which the base of goodwill which usually underlies surface partisan attacks has disappeared.

Candidates Share Consensus

For the last 25 years, the two presidential candidates have shared a common belief in the necessity of governmental involvement in economic and social affairs, in a national commitment to racial equality, and in a prudent, cautious, and open approach to the Communist world combined with military preparedness.

With such a consensus, election campaigns have usually been run without an honest feeling that the nation would "go to hell in a handbasket" if either candidate became president. Consequently, participants were able to detach themselves from a crusade complex, and laugh not only at their opponents, but at themselves and the whole uniquely American political style.

FDR's Dog Fala

Franklin D. Roosevelt, for instance, cashed in heavily on Republican accusations that he used a government destroyer to retrieve his dog Fala who had been left behind during a tour of defense installations.

"Fala, you know is Scottish," FDR told a Teamster's rally in 1944, "and when he heard how much they said I spent he hasn't been the same dog since."

Adlai Stevenson brought an erudite, educated wit into the campaign—one that many commentators felt alienated him from his audiences. And only four years ago John F. Kennedy demonstrated a flair for ad lib, ironic quips that ranked him among the masters.

Father to Son

"Dear son," he began, reading a mock telegram from his father, "don't spend one cent more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'll pay for a landslide."

His fund-raising dinners were often accompanied by a brilliant parody on his own Inaugural address, which he regarded as his finest rhetorical achievement.

In these and countless other instances, candidates on both sides have given the American voter a grateful respite from the hot air of campaign speeches, so often filled with heavy-handed and well-worn shibboleths. More important, it has worked as an antidote for both candidates and voters who tend to take themselves and their causes too seriously. Humor, while an effective political rapier, has been used by political figures as a mirror to reflect the foibles of America's political heritage.

Humor and Consensus Gone

It has, in sum, reflected the broad consensus on which the American political system has tended to function. Now that consensus is gone; and so, consequently, is any sign of a light touch in the Johnson-Goldwater Presidential battle.

It is a campaign in which the candidate of a major political party is, in effect, challenging the direction of American government for the last 30 years. The Goldwater philosophy is a direct, frontal challenge to many of the assumptions which both parties have taken for granted at least since the Wilkie campaign of 1940. It is also a campaign in which the GOP standard-bearer is starting far, far behind his opponent.

The combination of Goldwater's departure from recent bipartisan assumptions, and his position as underdog, has resulted in a smashing, offensive campaign waged by the Republican nominees. Goldwater has charged the Kennedy-Johnson administration with every sin possible, from personal dishonesty to risking nuclear war for political gain.

"He Drives Johnson Nuts"

Rep. William E. Miller, his running mate, was chosen for the Vice-Presidential slot because, in Goldwater's words, "He drives Johnson nuts." He has painted a picture of a terrified, fearful nation at the brink of anarchy and socialistic totalitarianism. Rightly or wrongly, he has linked rioting and lawlessness with Kennedy-Johnson social legislation; and he has charged the President in effect with ducking military service and with endangering national security for political gain.

The Democrats have responded in kind, calling Goldwater temperamentally and emotionally unfit to be President, and have

painted him as a bigot, and as a man who would be likely to unleash nuclear holocaust on the world. They have sought to link him directly with the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan.

Sense of Humor Difficult

In such an atmosphere, it is difficult to retain a sense of humor. The Goldwater campaign, which has really been in operation since 1960, has long assumed the characteristics of a holy crusade to save America from socialism. While feeling for Johnson runs nowhere as strong, opposition to the Arizona senator is as fervent and emotional as his support.

In 1964 the American consensus has been ripped asunder by the candidacy of a man who has not, and has never pretended, to represent a compromise position. The political battlelines in the United States have polarized more than they have at any time since 1936. It is no laughing matter; and the campaign thus far has been depressingly ample proof of this. It is going to be a long six weeks.