

Two Good Men

What a sour, superficial, *misleading* campaign: George Bush is not the nasty propagandist that his harsh attacks have made him seem. Michael Dukakis is not the unfocused incompetent that his late and lame responses have made him seem. Both are better men, and better potential Presidents, than the images they project on television.

The modern televised campaign shows more and less. As the candidates' every move is photographed, every flaw is magnified. As every campaign day is choreographed, the human beings are dwarfed by larger-than-life melodrama. The public loses perspective and people ask, why does the system yield such unimpressive candidates?

Seen in perspective, George Bush is an informed and affable man of decent instincts who goes out of his way, for instance, to defend Federal officials against cheap bureaucrat-bashing. If he has not, in the Reagan years, been a decision maker, at least he has become highly conversant with foreign affairs, and has now proposed some interesting domestic initiatives.

Michael Dukakis is a disciplined and serious man also of decent instincts who says, for instance, when asked about special-interest money: "I'd like to know where the PAC for the *homeless* is." If he lacks some of Mr. Bush's broader exposure, he has had deeper executive experience and has pioneered in finding new ways to meet public needs.

To judge by the polls, the public likes Mr. Bush better, perhaps because he has run a much tougher campaign. Whatever the reason, America is likely to be well served if either man is elected. Still, the choice remains. One basis for making it is to assess the campaign, another to assess the candidates' experience and a third to examine the issues already straining at the gate labeled Jan. 20, 1989.

The Campaign

The 1988 campaign has been unusually superficial. Compare it with 1980: in his nomination acceptance speech, Ronald Reagan spent five paragraphs detailing his energy policies. In 1984, Walter Mondale spoke with harsh honesty about taxes. This time, an instructive debate might have occurred on several central subjects:

Can the prosperity that many Americans now enjoy be trusted to last — or is it a false binge, financed with reckless borrowings from our children's future? The Communist world rings with change; how might the West best pry open opportunities to reduce external tensions and enlarge internal freedoms? The large democracies grow steadily more influential in the world's business; how will the American colossus respond?

These are Presidential issues. Yet last summer, the Dukakis forces seemed to scorn issues. Leading in the polls, they talked as though they needed only to highlight bumbling George Bush's "high negatives." Then, as nominee, Mr. Bush went on the attack, seizing on misleading, non-Presidential issues like prison furloughs.

The tone of the campaign was set, a tone for which the Vice President bears responsibility. He has worked daily to paint his opponent as far to the left of the mainstream. He has pounded away at a technical Dukakis legal decision on the Pledge of Allegiance that, while hard to explain on the run, in truth honors freedom of religion.

Hard blows, perhaps even low blows. But why, astonishingly, didn't Mr. Dukakis fight back? On the Pledge, for instance, instead of answering with huffy legalism, he might well have explained why the Supreme Court ruled in 1943 that children of Jehovah's Witnesses didn't have to say it. Their faith permits them to pledge only to God, and bigots were blowing up their churches.

The campaign, in short, has seen George Bush run, irrelevantly, like someone seeking to be Grand Inquisitor and Michael Dukakis run, mechanically, like a candidate for Plant Superintendent. The candidates share responsibility for a campaign that produced more mud than light. Even so, the effectiveness of a campaign is one test of executive ability. By that test, Mr. Bush has been a clear winner.

George Bush: Resilient, or Weak?

In the New Hampshire primary, aides to Senator Bob Dole contemplated mocking Mr. Bush as someone who left no footprints in the snow. Notable Republicans have wondered about his lack of leadership on, for instance, the task forces on drugs, terrorism and regulatory reform. The question arose with particular force in the Iran-contra affair. If anyone in the Administration should have said no, never bargain with terrorists, it was the Vice President, head of the terrorism task force.

Yet there is another way to perceive him. In New Hampshire, after all, he fought from behind to win, and left some pronounced footprints — on Senator Dole. An invisible man could not have attracted the lifetime loyalty and friendship of able, pragmatic men like James Baker, Nicholas Brady and Dick Thornburgh. Such associates may be the best answer to the concern symbolized by a blue Dukakis button that says only "MBB" — for Marshall, Brennan and Blackmun, the three Supreme Court Justices now in their 80's. One can speculate that Mr. Bush would choose moderate judges like his old friend, the late Potter Stewart.

But any such moderate assumptions are belied by Mr. Bush's first big Presidential decision: picking Dan Quayle. Senator Quayle is not the buffoon depicted by partisans or parodists. Yet he is wholly unqualified to be President. Not only is he no Jack Kennedy; he is no George Bush, a Yale Phi Beta Kappa who left the aura of a famous father to make

his own way in Texas. The question reverberates: Why Quayle? And it encourages blunt speculation — that Mr. Bush needed someone sure to be submissive; or that he felt the need, though already nominated, to be submissive to the Republican right.

Michael Dukakis: Strong, or Rigid?

"Where Bush has seemed too flighty, Dukakis looked too confined. One has been too yielding; the other too rigid," Garry Wills concluded last week on a compelling Public Broadcasting documentary. Mr. Dukakis is known as a stubborn, practical pioneer of "post-liberalism," looking for answers other than public programs for needs like health insurance, escaping welfare and job development.

Yet try as they might, people cannot warm up to him. Determined to elicit his sense of fun, aides on the campaign plane one day started a conga line with reporters. When it neared his seat, he raised a disapproving hand; the dancing and laughter curdled. Mr. Dukakis may leave clearer footprints but seems to walk alone. His choice of Lloyd Bentsen, the courtly conservative, punctures the shrill Bush notion that he's a closet leftist. Still, when asked whom he would call on for service or advice, he stiffly resists giving even a clue.

Stubborn, serious: in a President these can be valued virtues. In Mr. Dukakis, they may also be defects. President Reagan has restructured America in the power of the Bully Pulpit. Presidents need to inspire. Inspirational is not a word one associates with Michael Dukakis.

Applying the test of experience and personality yields a mixed verdict. It is one, in any case, overshadowed by the Quayle choice, a blunder that, for this test, forces a clear preference for Mr. Dukakis.

Where They Stand

Why has this been such a no-issue campaign? The public is as responsible as the candidates. When Americans care deeply about issues, like Vietnam, they know how to raise leaders to their shoulders overnight. But in this time of peace and prosperity, people don't much care about issues.

Both candidates have responded conscientiously to the rising need for early childhood intervention. Mr. Dukakis offers an imaginative college loan plan and speaks with feeling about extending his Massachusetts health insurance plan. In contrast to his opponent, he expresses admirable respect for the reproductive rights of women and the civil rights of minorities.

He also rates clear preference on the environment. A study last April of environmental efforts ranked Massachusetts first, with Wisconsin, among all the states. Mr. Bush's positions reflect a very recent conversion. Previously, he helped block or delay regulatory protections, like one to reduce lead in gasoline, and has failed to advance regulatory reforms that would lower cleanup costs.

On foreign relations, both men have had remarkably little to say. Mikhail Gorbachev turns the Communist world upside down, but neither candidate shows much appreciation of the opportunities and risks. Responding to foreign policy questions, the Governor sounds like someone taking oral exams. Vice President Bush, more confident and conversant, merits the edge. On defense, Governor Dukakis at least recognizes that national security depends on economic strength — and that raises the most important issue of all.

The Largest Sin

The Reagan Administration has committed an immense, overarching sin, one likely to be seen years from now as a colossal irresponsibility. In his new book, "Day of Reckoning," the economist Benjamin Friedman tries to shock readers into understanding the seismic effects of the towering Reagan deficits: "The sense of economic well-being that is so widespread today is an illusion, an illusion based on borrowed time and borrowed money. . . . since January 1981 our Government has simply borrowed more than \$20,000 on behalf of each family of four."

How much responsibility can fairly be attributed to Mr. Bush? It is said in his defense that he can't be blamed for the supply-side disaster; it was he, after all, who initially denounced it as "voodoo" economics. That might wash had Mr. Bush not gone further. But he has. At a time when responsible citizens in both parties struggle for ways to cut the deficit, what does Mr. Bush propose? A new supply-side fantasy. A Bush administration, he reiterated last week, would cut the tax on capital gains from the present 33 percent maximum to 15 percent. That, he says, as the supply-siders did eight years ago, will stimulate business — and taxes. No, says the Congressional Budget Office: over five years that will cost from \$20 billion to \$40 billion in lost taxes.

Voters can be tolerant about this year's ritual promises not to raise taxes. Governor Dukakis has made his, though leaving himself a more plausible (taxes only as a last resort) way out. The winner is likely, as they say coyly in Washington, to "do the right thing." But the capital gains proposal is worse than obligatory oratory. On the eve of struggle over which Americans must sacrifice to reduce the deficit, Mr. Bush proposes, needlessly and recklessly, to give away billions to the rich. People earning more than \$200,000 would get almost 75 percent of the benefit. Far from putting out the fire, Mr. Bush would pour on gasoline.

Here, then, is the final test. Getting America out of hock is, by far, the next President's most urgent job. Who's likely to do it better? The answer tips a closely balanced scale — to Michael Dukakis.