

## Clod Populism's Man of Change

Politics is hard work. Whenever elections are utterly unavoidable politicians have to conjure up new potions, regardless how lucrative their present swindles seem to be. Citizens are a finicky lot who demand from their politicians not only magic but variety. They can tolerate only so much of a politician's wizardry before they begin to snore or to play with their toes. Then it is time for what pundits are given to calling a New Politics. In the past our really superior politicians realized this and deftly stirred up the citizenry with New Deals and New Frontiers. In the last election Mr. Nixon even tested the winds with something called a New Federalism, and from time to time he has attempted to rouse his dozing majority with something he calls a New American Revolution.

This year the Barnum and Baileys of political science have had to whip up a new show. So they have rummaged through the fossils of American political theory and retrieved that pernicious old species of flimflammy: populism. It is an appalling choice in this Age of Idealism, for populism has never amounted to much more than the politicalization of baseness.

The clod populists of yesteryear promised to beat the bushes for hyphenates, Jews, Afro-Americans, and agents of the Pope. They would spin fanciful yarns about the mysterious puissance of eastern bankers and insist that there were dark schemes being hatched in the back rooms of Chinese restaurants. According to the populist intelligentsia most Framers of the Constitution spent their lives philosophizing with cows and shedding tears over the arrival of every shipload of "foreign borns." To hear them tell it, the only real Americans left dwelt out where the pollen blows freely and where all dignitaries wore Oshgosh overalls exuding a fragrance of fresh cow manure. Naturally the citizenry soon lost interest in such a preposterous act, and the clod populists gave way to sleep-inducing Republicans and unctuous Democrats.

Now, it is claimed, the New Clod Populists are about to have their day. I doubt this will happen, but their brief reappearance on center stage should be good for a laugh. As with the clod populism of the past, our present prodigies marshal the nation's pent-up envy and greed by bawling about the achievements of superior men, whom they deprecate as "the rich and the powerful." By "the rich" they mean those men whose numbers are so trivial that they can easily be ganged up on by a mob — especially a mob of legislative quacks. And "the powerful" seems to mean anyone else who has distinguished himself by attracting the lusts of the yokels and their keepers. Once again mean-spiritedness is being raised to the level of political

philosophy. And clod populism's traditional racism and bigotry is even being fitted out in a modern snakeskin called quotas or proportional representation — two tortured readings of democratic theory which commission a handful of scoundrels to dictate the value of every other citizen, both in matters of law and in matters of employment.

But to be a successful American politician these days, one must be something more than a bigot, a demagogue, a barbarian or a moron. And it is not even enough to be an adroit quick-change artist. As every clever political orator in America will tell you, that which separates the charismatic man of destiny from the general mob of wheezing tub thumpers is the ability to speak in elevated and even inspirational terms about a nullity, a platitude or an imbecility. A true masterpiece embraces all three. Accordingly, this century has had two titans. One was John Kennedy. The other was W.G. Harding. William Jennings Bryan would have made it, but for the reassuring fact that our illustrious ancestors in their wisdom boxed his ears every time he stalked the White House. Nevertheless, at this very hour, one clod populist sweats furiously to surpass these great men of the past, and he stakes his sublime ambition on the same contrivance which served him so well in last spring's primaries. I speak of Pious George from the Praires and the surprisingly potent, if not very original, issue of Change.

Last spring Change became clod populism's special appeal. So also was it a special proclamation, priority, belief, promise and magic wand. It was an oratorical hallucinogen, relied upon by every clod populist from Chisholm to Lindsay. But for Pious George, Ph.D. it became something more. It became the leitmotif of his crusade.

At one point he agglutinated all the razzle-dazzle change beheld for him into one gorgeous passage: "It is the people who have been passed by in American life and are frustrated that they have not had a voice in bringing about the changes that they think would improve their lives. This is a coalition of change, a coalition of conscience, a coalition of progress. It is against the status quo, and I think it represents a majority of the American people!" Now, of course, this is an example of practically unsurpassed campaign spoonery. Not only is it a tushery upon a tushery; it is also wrong-headed and deceitful. Surely not even George believes that the ominous forces opposing him are going to rescind change. As this spinning globe of some three billion passengers careens through the vast reaches of space we had all better hold on tightly and we had best expect some changes. Certain of these changes are bound to be benign, and others will multi-

ply our miseries. But no one with a dash of intelligence will seriously question the ceaselessness of change, not even a presidential candidate. What Pious George really means when he purrs on about change is that under his administration change will have a special character, ushering us into an era of milk and honey. Unlike Mr. Nixon, Mr. Pious feels he has a special relationship with history. He is riding its wave. He will keep America "on course." And somehow he will prevail, abreast with and at home with change. For intelligent thinking persons this would be the ancient sin of hubris, but for a prairie sphinx it is merely presumption refreshed by confusion. Poor George just is not bright enough to be guilty of sin.

Only a pedant or an ignoramus would overrate his intelligence. His dedication to change may bring blood to the cheeks of the moony-eyed in the press corps, and it may summon goose pimples amongst the intellectualoids now so abundant on college campuses and in suburbia. But for a moderately intelligent fellow it has no more impact than moon spots or television advertising. Golf caddies have learnt to treat such incantations with a snort.

Still George believes. For he is unique even amongst clod populists. When the rest of them declared their allegiance to change one suspects they all knew what they were about. Realizing that most voters are inherent grumblers, given to the gambler's blind optimism, the clod populists uttered the ritualistic assurances that they would bring change and change would be rosy. After all just possibly there will be a few dullards enfranchised and eager to vote for a candidate who promises to lighten their loads. The clods might be crude, but they are a savvy lot.

George really does believe. He thinks he is on to something wondrous. How excruciatingly he labors to express it in hues of quaint magniloquence, his face a curious surface of muscles and lumps, his big bovine eyes rolling in their sauce. Innocently he intones his promise and his covenant — change...and nowhere do we glimpse the vagrant grin, the saucy wink, that would indicate a knowing design.

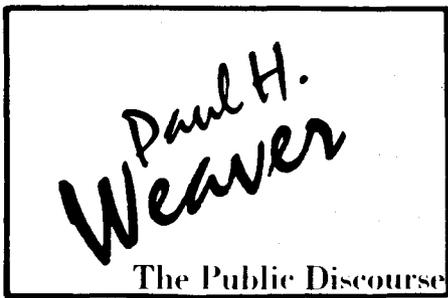
He actually believes that these frowzy sonorities about change mean something. Of course, he also seems to believe that by bolstering their budget the bureaucrats at HEW will be able to defend Israel and that his New Age economists need not be initiated into the mysteries of addition and subtraction and that the voters are going to elect a presidential nominee whose key argument is that if elected no one will take his proposals seriously, not even Congress! Yes he believes all this and more. Propositions so preposterous it would be an impropriety to mention them in this sophisticated journal. Fairy tales that would bounce off little children, and absurdities that would bring waves of glee to a man on his death bed. In the last analysis the most ridiculous thing about Pious George's crusade is not that he is a clod or that every sensible politician in the country left his phone off the hook when George thrashed about looking for a running mate or that he is not able to utter a complex sentence without

contradicting himself or that he believes that his advocacy of change really means something. (Actually his approaches to technology, ecology, economic growth and democratic process reveal a peculiar timidity toward change.)

It is rather that he *believes*. He really does believe the windy rhetoric which howls through a presidential campaign. He believes in his "agenda for change" with all of its contradictions. He believes in the canards his handlers prepare for

him to pin on Mr. Nixon. He believes that America rots without his leadership. No president in this century has ever been so gullible, and the only presidential candidate to match his gaping credulity was the remarkable Bryan. It is the horse laugh of the century. When Pious George kisses a baby he believes that it is because he has fallen in love. God bless George McGovern! □

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.



## Endless Liberalism

Few things in American politics are quite so dispensable as the platforms of our national political parties. In general, they are laborious unreadable compendiums of platitudes and nonsense. As soon as they appear they quietly fall off the edge of the world and are never heard of again. Nobody seems to object or even notice.

The extraordinary thing about the 1972 platform of the Democratic party is that it is no exception to this general rule. There was reason to expect that it might be different. The platform committee and its staff included several very talented experts on public policy and American politics. They had abundant time and information: the committee held twenty hearings in a dozen cities over a period of six weeks, after which there were further meetings for discussion. There seemed to be no limit constraining its end product; the final document contained over 20,000 words!

These resources were on hand at a moment of unusual opportunity. In 1972 there was no incumbent Democratic administration to defend. The political alliances and traditional programmatic commitments of the party were in disarray or disgrace after the shattering experience of the 1960s. The nation was clearly in need of a new political formula—and the 1972 platform committee was not in a bad position to create one. A majority of its members were McGovern delegates and felt no need to defend the approaches of earlier decades. They were also advocates of truth and honesty in politics, and presumably in platforms as well. They could admit errors of the past and profit from them. Indeed, they professed to be doing just that.

Now in all fairness, I must admit some parts of the platform do begin to live up to the promises of these circumstances. Most notable in this respect is the section on the environment. It actually admits that cleaning up pollu-

tion has cost — in reduced economic growth, in increased public expenditure, in higher unemployment levels—and that these must be balanced against the goal of clean environment! This must surely be a first for any party platform and is an admirable expression of competence and intellectual honesty in politics. This section makes no glowing promises, holds forth no utopian vision of an immaculate future and even manages to make no dishonest attack on the current administration. It even advocates what nearly every professional economist now holds to be the cornerstone of any serious and balanced attack on pollution — imposing a tax on each polluter's discharge into the environment—but which is now entirely absent from federal pollution policy which the Democrats have played the leading role in enacting.

A second part of the platform which reflects a degree of learning from the 1960s (and the election result of the 1970s) deals with crime. The Democratic party has finally begun to take crime seriously as a public problem in its own right, rather than as a nonphenomenon invented by demagogues or an epiphenomenon of poverty and injustice. Its principal recommendation is direct and sensible: improvement of the system of law enforcement, from police to court and prison, so that more criminals are caught and convicted. The rest of its recommendations, alas, are more dubious — there is no reason to think that better-paid and better-educated police are better police, and it seems profligate to propose huge expenditures on addict and criminal rehabilitation when nobody knows how to rehabilitate such people successfully, etc. Even so, this section is on balance a serious one.

The virtue of these two sections is that they are informed by a clear and realistic sense of purpose, state honestly

the problem and choices involved and make realistic policy proposals that are presumptively worth what they cost. The rest of the platform is almost wholly lacking in these characteristics — and that, in a nutshell, is what is wrong with it and with the convention that sired it.

I make no specific reference here to any one particular item in the platform's bulging arsenal of policy and program proposals. There is a serious case to be made for (and against) each, and only a mindless partisan would dismiss them out of hand. But this is not the pact to take them up. Neither do I propose to discuss the obsessive and often illiberal egalitarianism which forms a major motif of the platform; I myself do not find it attractive or justifiable, but I can see how others might. I even propose to ignore the astronomical — and conveniently unspecified — cost of the entire democratic program and the tax increases and socio-economic distortions it would surely engender.

For of all of its characteristics, what is most striking and dismaying about this document is not the specifics of its parts but the spirit or tone which suffuses the platform as a whole. One would be tempted to call this a spirit of demagoguery were it not for the fact that it is born of sincerity rather than cynicism. Thus, what one encounters in this document is the politics of fantasy—out of touch with reality, inchoate, reckless, surging with passionate anger and aflame with utopian hope.

This condition is reflected in the platform's abysmal level of discourse. There are whole sentences that are literally meaningless (e.g., "What do the people want?...They want a life that makes us all feel that life is worth living," or "We believe in hard work as a fair measure of our willingness to achieve.") — and others so blatantly ridiculous ("We must recognize and fulfill the social contracts that exist between the family-farm producers of food and the non-farm consumer.") or childishly sentimental ("We believe that war is a waste of human life.") that one can only wonder whether anyone was in charge at all.

This fantasy spirit is also reflected in an almost wilful disregard of our recent national experience. The document reads as if the 1960s had never occurred—as if experience and social science had never called traditional liberal social policy into the gravest question; as if overpromising and verbal hysteria had been shown to be a good thing; as if full employment and zero inflation and high growth and radically increased government spending were well within the demonstrated ability of modern economic management to attain simultaneously; as if the sharp limits on government's ability to improve society in chosen ways had not long since been demonstrated.

But these are only symptoms of a deeper and more serious disorder. For as one reads and re-reads this platform, one suddenly realizes that beneath and beyond the carload of programs, policies,

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