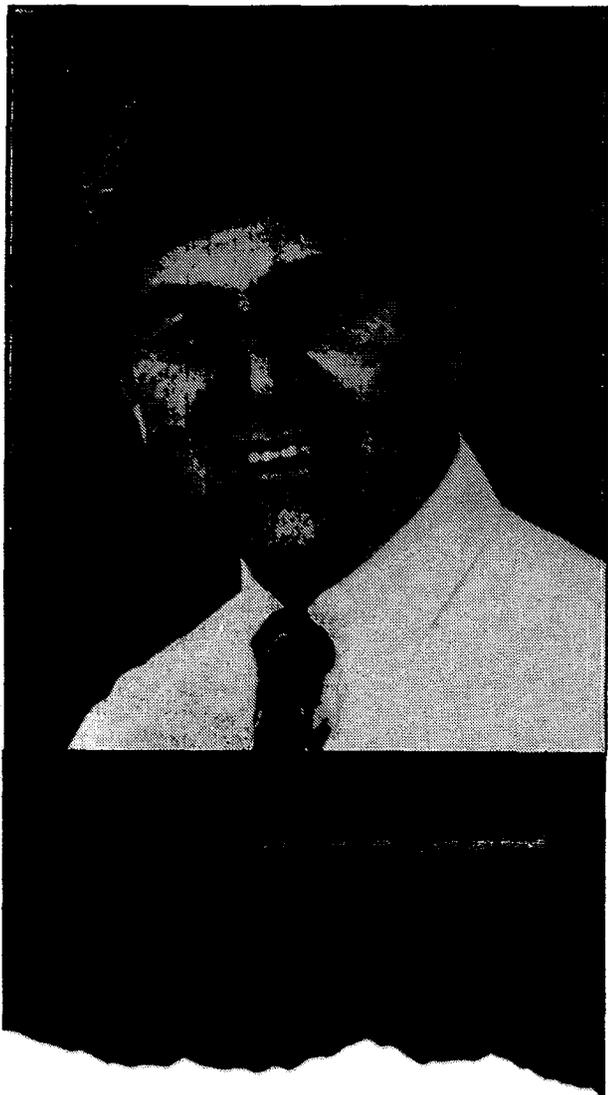


From front-runner to back burner

By Dean Baker



We've all heard the story by now about the Democratic presidential race. Bill Clinton had it all wrapped up. He was smart, a Rhodes scholar and a graduate of Yale Law School. He had experience as a governor. He was known as an innovator in Arkansas, and he wanted to do for the rest of the country what he'd done for Arkansas. He apparently dealt with the media well; it seems they had a great deal of respect for Clinton. Most of all, he positioned himself as a non-ideological pragmatist. This made him far more electable than those "liberals" challenging him for the nomination.

I was willing to accept this story as the truth. I was all set to sign up for the campaign and get my Clinton button and bumper sticker, but for some reason I hesitated. Something didn't seem right, something didn't add up. I recounted the story again and again in my head, and while I couldn't put my finger on it, I knew there was something wrong. Finally I realized the problem: I had heard it all before.

A pragmatic, non-ideological governor, solid record, electable; that's right, it's Michael Dukakis. I quickly ran through some old clippings from the 1988 campaign. I found a *New Republic* from the fall of 1987. It had an article by Morton Kondracke praising Dukakis' simple "I can win" message, contrasting it with the grandiose promises of the other candidates to effect change. Kondracke said that, first and foremost, the Democrats needed a winner.

He went on: "Besides the message, Dukakis has money, brains, a talented staff, a successful record as governor of Massachusetts (though not quite as spectacularly successful as he claims), a confident television style, the attention and respect of the political press and professional politicians, and the ardent backing of his state and fellow Greek-Americans, an esteemed ethnic group." Somewhat later the article points out that Dukakis "was Phi Beta Kappa at Swarthmore, cum laude at Harvard Law."

BACK FROM THE PASTURE: In my *New Republic* from last fall, Kondracke spoke of Clinton in almost identical terms. Kondracke commented that Clinton can boast of "a national reputation for innovation in state government, especially in education. He has chaired national governors' task forces on education, welfare and health-care reform. More important, he is urging a post-liberal agenda for the Democrats, conceived by the Democratic Leadership Council that he formally headed and designed to win back middle-class white voters who have fled to the Republicans. He's also good looking, affable and smart, and though he grew up in Hope, Ark., he has access to what George Bush derides as the famed Harvard Boutique: His advisers include the economist (and *TNR* contributing editor) Robert B. Reich, and Representatives Stephen Solarz [D-NY] and Les Aspin [D-WI]. He is a former Rhodes scholar and a Yale Law School graduate."

This sounded suspicious; I decided to look further. I found an old *Time* magazine article on the 1988 presidential race. The article talked about how Dukakis was in a battle with Richard Gephardt to define the "post-liberal soul of the Democratic Party." Now I knew I was on to something—Kondracke's piece on Clinton was sub-titled "post-liberal man."

Coincidence? Then how do you explain the rest of the article, including the sentence, "Dukakis is an exemplar of the new-breed Democratic governors who was forced to develop innovative programs in the face of fiscal constraints and a restive electorate." I checked further and found that one of the Clinton advisers mentioned by Kondracke, Robert B. Reich, had also been an adviser for Michael Dukakis.

There is too much here for it all to be a coincidence. Clearly, there was some extraordinary connection between Bill Clinton and Michael Dukakis. I remembered

that Bill Clinton had given the nominating speech for Dukakis at the 1988 convention (a speech famous for the line that drew loud applause, "in conclusion"). I went and checked the videotapes of that speech. After examining the tape carefully in slow motion, and producing several still photos of the climactic moments, I realized that Bill Clinton and Michael Dukakis were never on stage at the same time. When Clinton finished his speech, he left the stage for at least 54 seconds before Michael Dukakis came on. At no point were they filmed together.

QUICK CHANGE OR NO CHANGE? I decided to consult an expert. I asked Mr. X (since he fears for his safety, I agreed not to use his name), "Suppose the unthinkable is true—suppose Bill Clinton really is Michael Dukakis—would it be possible to change personas that quickly?" To determine the answer to this question, he conducted a series of tests in which he had an actor change suits, remove a set of shoulder pads, take off a hair piece and put on a fake nose. After allowing him some time to practice the procedure, Mr. X found that he could regularly perform the switch in less than 43 seconds; ample time to leave a stage as Bill Clinton and return 54 seconds later as Michael Dukakis. Clinton's Southern drawl turned out to be a relatively simple affectation for 90 percent of the subjects tested.

Now there was evidence, and there was also opportunity, but the question of motive still remained unanswered. Who would be behind this Dukakis-Clinton candidate and how could they get all the media pundits to sell him to the public? Mr. X told me to "follow the money," but left me to proceed alone, saying, "It's too dangerous for me to go any further." While I trusted Mr. X's advice, the effort to follow the money just left me stumped. Who stood to gain financially from having another presidential race with Michael Dukakis as the Democratic nominee? I thought about all the special interest groups that might gain from a Dukakis victory. I even checked over his list of campaign contributors. There was no one who stood to gain enough in any obvious way to justify such an elaborate conspiracy.

Then it all came together. I had been looking at it from entirely the wrong angle. They didn't stand to gain by Dukakis winning; they stood to gain by him running. Suddenly it became clear, the television networks were behind it all. By running their Dukakis-Clinton candidate again, there would be another presidential election that no one would care about. There would be nothing to distract people from the networks' newest set of prime-time offerings.

This explains how they could be so sure that the Clinton-Dukakis changeover at the 1988 convention would take place well out of the view of the cameras. (Apparently, the camera crews were given strict instructions to remain focused on the podium, no matter what they saw going on behind the stage.) The other media conglomerates were probably in on it, too. A boring campaign will mean more people have to go to the movies for entertainment. Also, by bringing Time-Warner and the other heavy hitters on board, they could assure their Dukakis-Clinton candidate of lots of good coverage through the primary campaign.

So there it is. The democratic process is being subverted again by those who would bore us into watching their sitcoms and Schwarzenegger films. I know that by exposing this conspiracy I am putting my own reputation and life in jeopardy. These people are ruthless; they will do anything to discredit me and might even resort to murder if it would serve their ends. I have to speak the truth, though. We can't let them get away with it again. ■

Dean Baker is a writer living in Winfield, Pa.