

Parties feed us what we deserve: diet of mediocrity

by ARNOLD SAWISLAK United Press International

WASHINGTON — A comment from the 1972 presidential election: "The people chose the evil of two lessers."

In 1976, some people were calling the major party candidates "Bozo" and "The Peanut."

A 1980 joke: A holdup man pulls a gun and demands, "Who are you for, Carter or Reagan?" "Shoot," says the victim.

Is all this just part of the American trait of irreverence for the high and mighty, or widespread dissatisfaction with the presidential choices provided by the Democratic and Republican parties in recent years?

The public opinion polls suggest it is unhappiness with the two men who seem sure to be the 1980 candidates. One poll, in fact, said fully half of the people in the country find both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan unacceptable.

There was some speculation that the increased turnouts for the early primaries may have been the signal for a change in the long-term trend toward voter apathy, but the enthusiasm of the winter and early spring faded as the weather grew warmer.

Yet both political parties, not altogether willingly, have significantly changed their candidate selection processes in recent years to give the public a bigger voice in the choice of the presidential nominees.

The number of presidential primaries, which all but eliminate political bosses and machines from candidate selection, have doubled in the last decade. A number of states have continued to hold primaries that permit

voters to cross party lines, which also opens up the system.

Both parties, but particularly the Democrats, have made real efforts in recent years to involve minorities, women and other groups traditionally left out in the cold.

Furthermore, the distorting effect of big money as the potentially undue influence of big contributors has been lessened in the candidate selection process by strict limits on donations and spending.

So why should the 1980 selections be so unpopular? Some people — including former President Gerald R. Ford — blame the system, claiming the reforms of the last decade have hurt the process of bringing forward the best presidential candidates.

That could be, but it is hard to believe that the country would be well served or would really want to return to the selection of presidential candidates by political bosses in smoke-filled rooms (Warren Harding) or trading the vice presidency for delegates (Franklin D. Roosevelt).

It may just be that the problem is not the machinery but the raw material being fed into it, and that it is a broader issue than nominating attractive presidential candidates.

Finding and developing good men and women for candidates at all levels certainly is a problem for the political parties. But good people are not likely to be drawn to occupations regarded as inherently sleazy and corrupt and as long as the public expects politicians to be clowns and crooks, they probably will get what they expect.

Iran's parliamentary ping-pong looks like imitation of Congress

by DICK WEST United Press International

WASHINGTON — The new Iranian Parliament has been in existence only about two weeks but already has exhibited a well-developed knack of juggling hot potatoes.

It being bad form in Tehran to admit American influence, the Iranians probably would deny having taken digression lessons from the U.S. Congress.

But the way they have been dawdling on the hostage issue looks very imitative indeed.

All the world had been waiting for the Parliament to be formed, the world having been told the Parliament would make the ultimate decision on the fate of the 53 American hostages.

Then, once the session finally began, parliamentary leaders let it be known it probably would be at least another six weeks before they came to grips with the issue. Or maybe six months. Depending.

As an exercise in creative loitering, it compares favorably with the number Congress did on President Carter's energy program.

Bear in mind, however, that Congress has had about two centuries in which to sharpen its dilatory techniques.

What we have in Iran, apparently, is important new evidence that a legislative body is born with certain instincts that do more to govern its behavior than acquired traits.

Up to now, experts who have studied the development of legislative bodies have been pretty much divided on the instinct vs. experience question.

One group holds that all legislative bodies go through a rudimentary learning process that determines the reaction to hot potatoes. According to this thesis, the first time a hot potato is dumped in its lap, a legislative body grabs it and burns itself. Because of that learning experience, the next time it will know how to protect itself.

The other group argues that a legislative body is born knowing how to juggle hot potatoes and will instinctively do so the moment one is at hand.

"The hot potato-juggling instinct is part of a legislative body's survival mechanism," I was told by a leading exponent of the latter school. "There doesn't have to be a warning label on the jacket for a legislative body to know a hot potato may be hazardous."

I asked how long the Iranian Parliament might procrastinate.

He declined to predict an exact date for final action on the Parliament. But if they play their cards right, he said, by the time they get around to resolving the issue "the hostages will have died of old age."

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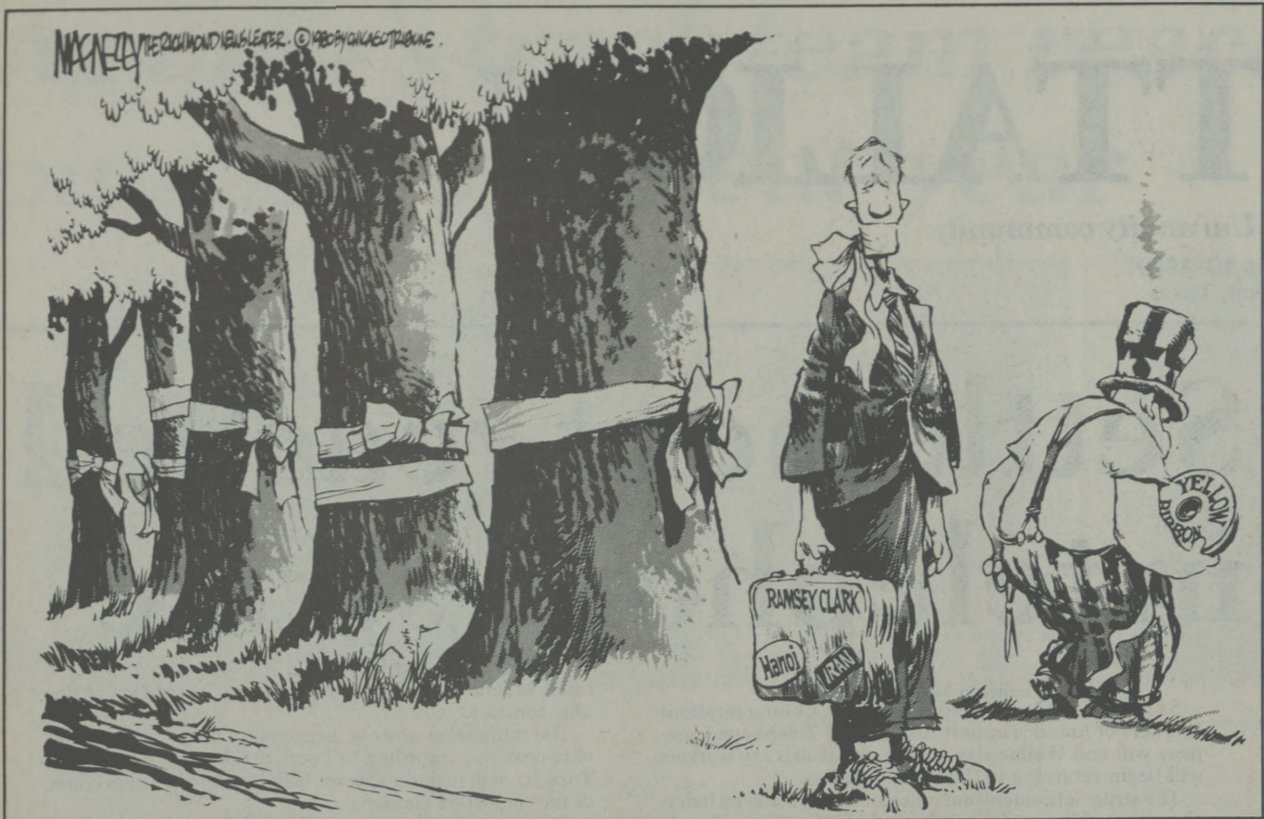
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Myopic, musical gadfly sets 'Federal Budget Revue'

by VERNON SCOTT United Press International

HOLLYWOOD — The rarest of all television fare, political satire, will blossom briefly the week of July 4th with "Stan Freberg Presents The Federal Budget Revue, or The \$600 Billion Misunderstanding."

Network executives and Federal Communications Commission bureaucrats quaver with terror at the specter of political satire — using the public airways to poke fun at sacrosanct individuals and institutions.

If a network comic makes fun of President Carter, he must poke equal fun at challenger Ronald Reagan; that sort of thing.

Should a program spoof the Republicans, then it must also take some shots at the Democrats.

Because the networks shy away from such controversy, Freberg's hour-long special will be aired via the Public Broadcasting System, relatively free of intimidation by bureaucrats and altogether disassociated from network zombies.

Freberg, as usual, will be seen as a myopic gadfly examining bureaucratic waste, political maneuvering, squandered taxes and congressional idiocy.

Scrupulously bipartisan, he weaves allegory and fable into a delightful musical melange in which the taxpayers are innocents at the mercy of imbecilic bureaucrats.

Music and lyrics for the eight major production numbers were written by Freberg, much as he did for his hit comedy record, "The United States of America," which has become a collector's item.

He also wrote all the dialogue in addition to producing and directing the lavish musical hour.

In the opening number Freberg, made up to look like Chrysler president Lee Iacocca, arrives riding atop a Chrysler tank and offers a two-tank-for-the-price-of-one sale.

The most colorful number is played in front of a mock-up of the Capitol. Freberg points to the building with pride and says:

"Well, it's just about that time of day when all of the people in our great federal establishment get off work — you know, all the White House, Senate, House of Representatives and all those agencies otherwise known as The Great Bureaucracy of the United States Government."

"Hark! I think I hear them now!"

Out of the Capitol and down the broad steps tumble a phalanx of clowns who break into song and dance to the strains and lyrics of "The Great Bureaucracy Song."

The clowns stretch rubber dollars and exchange the contents of their attache cases in capering joy.

Later in the show a blizzard of genuine tax forms buries a group of taxpayers to their chins.

Freberg, his blond hair a mass of tight ringlets which look as if General Electric had styled it, and with horn-rimmed glasses, gives the appearance of an endearing wombat.

His nasal voice, pitched in a register that resists classification, would pierce lead.

"I think definitely this show could not have been done with the same freedom at a network," Freberg said. "I'm not sure why there is so little political satire on the tube."

"Maybe networks are afraid of offending people and the pressure of commercial advertisers. I've known the trembling of many standards and practices men at the networks, believe me."

"My satire doesn't take sides. I've gone to great lengths not to grind my own ax. I don't mention Kennedy or Carter or Reagan, but I do say the whole system of electing a President has to be overhauled."

"The only answer is to invoke the New Improved Freberg Plan."

"First you build a balcony, the kind the Pope or the Queen likes to come out on. And you put the balcony out on some great open flat place like Omaha."

"Then you line up all 37 presidential candidates while the voters stand below in the great open space. Then someone like Ted Mack walks behind the candidates and holds his hands over their heads, one at a time."

"The great applause meter in the sky would give us the people's choice in no time at all. What could be more democratic than that?"

"I haven't worked out the logistics about getting all the people to Omaha yet. But you can't really examine the idea too carefully."

Freberg describes presidential elections as a kind of political neutron bomb.

"Every four years the election blows away the previous administration but leaves the federal budget standing," he said.

"This is The Freberg Political Neutron Bomb Theory. The new President comes in and, despite good intentions, sees the budget he's inherited as if it were a giant Leggo set. He adds bits and pieces until he's built the budget even bigger than it was."

"Although he knows that on next election day he may be blown away, he takes comfort in the knowledge that his budget will be left standing for the next President to build upon."

Primary system 'recklessly haphazard'

Presidential qualifies not emphasized

by DAVID S. BRODER

LOS ANGELES — Defenders of the presidential primary system point out that without it, John F. Kennedy could not have demonstrated that Protestants would vote for a Catholic, and Jimmy Carter could not have proved that Northerners and blacks would support a Southern white man.

The usefulness of primaries is that they give lesser-known candidates, and those fighting regional, religious or other bias, a way to compete for presidency.

But Kennedy in 1960 ran in only four contested primaries, while Carter in 1976 competed in 26 — and that is a world of difference.

After Kennedy had won key primaries in Wisconsin and West Virginia, he still had to convince party leaders and elected officials in the non-primary states that he was fit to carry the party banner. Without them, he would not have had the votes to be the nominee.

That process forced Kennedy to build alliances with other leading Democrats — alliances which served him well as President. Carter, by contrast, gained virtually all the votes he needed from the primaries and entered the presidency without the allies who might have helped him succeed in the job.

Between 1960 and 1976, there was a revolution in the nominating process — a revolution which continued in 1980 when the number of primaries reached three dozen.

The revolution had its origins in the 1968 Democratic Convention, when the "insiders" rejected Eugene J. McCarthy, the survivor of the primaries, and chose Hubert H. Humphrey instead. The perceived injustices of that outcome were probably more the result of the murder of Robert F. Kennedy than any failure of the system. But it led to a complete revision of the Democratic delegate-selection procedures. And those new rules, in turn, led to a doubling of the number of primaries. By 1976, 80 percent of the delegates came out of the primaries — and that was the ball game.

With more primaries, and less money to spend under new federal laws, candidates learned that the biggest rewards came in winning early contests and letting the mass-media magnification of those narrow plurality victories build momentum for the later and larger states.

The result is perpetual candidacy. George McGovern, the first non-incumbent to test this new system, announced an unprecedented 18 months before the 1972 convention — and won.

Carter started just as far in advance of the 1976 convention. But while McGovern was burdened with being a senator, Carter had no public responsibilities after leaving the Georgia governorship and was able to spend 260 days campaigning in 1975.

Observing Carter's success, George Bush applied the same time-table and tactics to the 1980 Republican nomination. He would have won, too, except that he

had an opponent in Reagan who has had no other full-time occupation for the last six years (six years!) than running for the President nomination.

In the present nominating system, the determinants of success are the size of the candidate's ambitions, the extent of his leisure time, and the tolerance of his family, his budget and his job for almost unlimited travel.

Those characteristics have almost nothing to do with the qualities that make an effective President — as the results show. It is a recklessly haphazard way to choose the candidates for that demanding office.

It is too late to go back to 1960, when four primaries were sufficient for Kennedy, but there are practical remedies available for the excesses of the present system. And the parties have the power to put them into effect themselves.

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