

A VIEW OF THE WORLD

Abraham Martin Murray

COME PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY TIME and the perennial debate is held about this very odd way for a great nation to choose its leadership. Surely, it is said, there must be a more sensible procedure. Here you have some of the great men of the land (no women yet), presumably among the most gifted, certainly among the most ambitious, spending years in search of the nomination. Jimmy Carter is charged with extending the campaign to ludicrous lengths. Barely had Nixon been elected in 1972 when Mr. Carter tossed suitbag over shoulder and set out to convince the nation that next time America deserved the best. This season it is George Bush who gets the gold medal, if not the nomination, for being the longest distance runner. Not doubting that he was better than the best elected in 1976, Mr. Bush has been trudging through snowstorms and under scorching sun, convincing people that he really might be president of the United States of America some day. A ten-year-old child in America cannot remember when George Bush was not running for the presidency. And, unlike Ronald Reagan, for example, this is his first time out. They laughed at Harold Stassen, but perhaps he was just a man before his time.

CLEARLY, RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT is becoming a life's work. Richard Nixon ran for at least twenty years. His career was cut short only by the misfortune (his and ours) of being elected. The notion that anybody can become president is no longer a vague patriotic sentiment or the consolation of politicians waiting for the lightning to strike. Soon kids will embark upon the presidential track at about age sixteen. They'll get good grades, pick up a little military service, keep their noses clean, make a modest success of something eminently respectable, preferably building a bit of a bankroll, hold a middling elective or appointive political office for a time, and then, at the constitutional age of thirty-five, launch their campaigns for president with a following of wife, two-and-a-half children, a boyhood buddy, and twenty Secret Service agents. (And of course there is no reason why the field could not be broadened by lowering the required age.) Unless elected, they're set for life. No doubt the recent moves toward public financing of campaigns could be expanded to include a pension plan for the candidates who stay the course.

THOSE WHO SAY that Mr. Bush, if he is not nominated and elected, has wasted four years of his life do not understand what is happening. The reward is in the process. Right from the start there is always a handful of people who

will turn up to listen to somebody who just might someday be president. As the election year approaches, even the last runner has a degree of national attention as a bona fide and bona funded presidential candidate. Certainly a John Anderson, for instance, should have no regrets. He would not have been discovered by the Democratic Left or been permitted to lead the ragtag re-run of Gene McCarthy's childrens' crusade if he had been content to attend to business in Congress. There are a lot of things to be won short of winning.

THE PUBLIC-SPIRITED SOUL who is eager to play a part in debating the great issues of the time could do a lot worse than be a presidential candidate. He could write books, scribble columns, teach college, or ride the lecture circuit. Or the candidate could be doing real damage by holding some other political office of consequence. These candidates--Brown, Crane, Connally, Baker, and Jones--are not wasting their time. They are riding the best lecture circuit of all, and they might be sparing us the harm they would do were they otherwise exercising the power appropriate to their calling. The real threat is that one candidate is almost sure to be elected.

FROM THE VIEWPOINT of the career candidate, there are undoubted ego satisfactions. The pace may be grueling, but that will be tempered as the profession of lifetime candidacy is more widely accepted and routinized. And after the plucky precedent established from Plains, Georgia, nobody need ever again feel silly about announcing for the presidency. Like being nominated for an Academy Award, it is no little thing even to be nominated to be nominated to be president--and any candidate will be able to find at least one person to do that, other than himself. If the candidate's career is derailed by victory, why then, he is president of the United States. Or, if he has second thoughts and decides for a mid-life career change, well, we haven't seen any former candidates on welfare.

IT'S NOT THE WORST WAY to spend one's life. And as for its being an odd way for a great nation to choose its leadership, it probably beats the alternatives. Except perhaps for a national lottery.

Abraham Martin Murray is the collective name of those who contribute to "A View of the World." The opinions expressed sometimes coincide with those of the editors.