

UNDER COVER

The Pangloss-BTFSTLK Election

President Reagan, in the manner of *Candide's* fatuously optimistic tutor, Dr. Pangloss, has proclaimed this the best of all possible worlds and urges us on November 6 to extend its life for four years. He has, at the same time, hung upon Walter Mondale the mantle of prophet of doom, making the Democratic party's candidate appear like Joe BTFSTLK, the lugubrious little character in "Lil Abner" who walked around with a thundercloud over his head muttering imprecations and jeremiads. The leitmotiv that weaves in and out of Republican oratory is: Why would any American want to be associated with this bunch of losers? But losers are what the Democratic party is all about. This would work to the advantage of the party if the losers were in the majority of the electorate, but poll after poll shows that the vast majority of Americans are happy with their economic lot; and in normal times it is dollars-and-cents issues that decide elections.

The Democrats are placed in the difficult position of arguing that the prosperity of the past two years has not been uniform and that, indeed, the very economic policies that seem to have benefited everyone else have caused the poor to become more firmly entrenched than ever in their poverty. The number of these real losers, however, amounts to no more than 20 per cent of the population and a considerably smaller part of the electorate. Even when such traditionally nonpoor groups as farmers are added to the inventory of economic losers, the ranks of those with a real economic stake in ousting Reagan look pathetically thin.

Prophesying hard times in 1985 or beyond and raising the specter of future tax increases is the type of tactic that has yielded little in American presidential elections: No one ever got elected by forecasting doom, even if such predictions were well grounded. William Seward's "irrepressible conflict" did indeed take place, but voters—both in 1860 and today—act on events in the present and do not seem much concerned with the lessons of Christmas Past or easily terrified by the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come.

This same principle applies to the way voters consider foreign policy. Reasonably prescient people can size up what would happen if Reagan were reelected. Now he is bending every effort to keep Central America out of the headlines. After November 6, Reagan will seek to leave a mark on hemispheric affairs as lasting as his imprint on domestic politics. He will not want to leave office without

having administered a more decisive setback to the Marxists in Latin America than can be accomplished by the pinpricks delivered by the *Contras* to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. But those events are in the future and unlikely to cloud Reagan's reelection prospects.

As for the sorry state of U.S.-Soviet relations, the Russians' storming out of negotiations and the apocalyptic utterances—aside from Reagan's macabre one-liner on a supposedly closed microphone—took place months before the formal kick-off of the campaign. So add another small group of losers to the Democratic column: those people who regard Ronald Reagan as an untrustworthy steward of this nation's awesome military might. These were the people U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick derided as the "blame America first" crowd in her speech at the Dallas convention.

Maybe there is something wrong with those who discern clouds on the horizon or at least refuse to give themselves over to the relentlessly upbeat "Up With People" view of the future that currently passes for Republican political advertising. If Reagan has moved far in the direction of undoing the New Deal, this seems to be accepted, albeit grudgingly, in some circles. Perhaps in the fullness of time, a rising economic tide will lift all boats, even though it seems to have succeeded thus far in lifting more yachts than rafts. This is not, after all, an economic system in which a handful of families oppress a vast impoverished peasantry; and the president, for all his truculent tendencies, is not totally mad.

It is possible, then, that some of the clouds on the horizon are but figments of a loser's imagination. One, however, is dark and discernible. A doctrinaire president has a right-wing wish list and only four more years to consolidate his revolution. After an almost two-decade-long effort to reach the White House and set into motion his momentous conservative counterrevolution, Reagan will be less disposed than ever to compromise and more disposed to go for the quick kill, convinced that no successor will be as committed a votary as he to the right-wing sacraments.

What casts a darker shadow over this election is that, if successful a second time, he will also attempt to undo Yalta and Potsdam and the Good Neighbor Policy as well. The consequences of that effort would be far more dire for humanity than Reagan's efforts to exorcise FDR's ghost in domestic affairs. If such prospects give the Democrats the jitters, they can hardly be blamed. There is, however, one reassuring note: There is no record in American history of a depression and a war occurring simultaneously. Perhaps that is the source of the president's infectious optimism.

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