

# The Presidency's No Joke,

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**T**HE FUNNIEST LINE about "Nixon humor" here is just to mention it. The popular view is that the President finds life too serious for laughter except for a heavy-handed pun every so often.

At his last news conference a reporter said he wanted to ask an "in-house question" (about press conferences) when Mr. Nixon interrupted, a la Mr. Interlocutor:

"You wouldn't ask an out-house question, would you?"

There has always been the minority view, however, built largely around his personal and official family, which holds that the President has a warm and engaging sense of humor in private.

On his first flight in the Presidential aircraft, Mr. Nixon entered his flying office, sat in its chair, pressed a button which raised and expanded a coffee table into a conference table. He took a deep, satisfied breath and quipped:

"It beats losing."

Or when he ordered the motorized window in his White House bedroom taken out: "I'm afraid I'll press the wrong button."

Perhaps with the confidence of almost four years in office, Mr. Nixon's brand of humor seems to be surfacing more often these days. It is usually more effective at delivery, perhaps because it is so unexpected, than may appear in print.

At a pre-summit session with newsmen in May, for example, after seriously advising them to visit the Moscow market and the government department store, Mr. Nixon joked;

"I don't have stock in either one — neither do they."

He joshes himself for making things "perfectly clear" and for what he called his "overblown rhetoric" about the Peking summit. In Moscow, he told reporters, he would have



Would his "Wit and Wisdom" fill a volume thick or thin?



... earthy



... dry



... quick



... bawdy

## But They Try

"very sober objectives.

"I intend to be very sober," he said. "But you don't have to be."

His wit is not as sharp as John F. Kennedys. But neither is it as bawdy as Lyndon B. Johnson's nor as earthy as Harry S Truman's.

Mrs. Truman's friends once complained that the President should refer to the fertilizer he favored for his rose garden, not the manure, if he had to discuss it at all. Bess's counter, according to Mr. Truman, was:

"But you don't know how long it's taken me to get Harry to say manure."

Mr. Johnson tended to jokes that even Playboy might reject. One of the possibly printable stories was when, trying to persuade a newsman to cover him full-time as Vice-President, he promised: "I'll leak to you like a dog on a fire-hydrant."

EVERY politician attempts humor by necessity. It oils the turbulent waters of partisan argument and tends to disarm his critics. But some U. S. Presidents apparently preferred embroidering to knitting when they tried to be funny.

The first entry in Bill Adler's "Presidential Wit" has this sparkling contribution from G. Washington:

"As I have heard since my arrival at this place a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first and of assuring you

that I have not, as yet, composed the latter."

Mark Twain said it better later: "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

In the same way, Adlai Stevenson in 1952 refined for the modern palate Abraham Lincoln's longer reaction to losing an election: It reminded him, said Lincoln, of the barefoot boy who stubbed a toe running to his girl but was "too big to cry and far too hurt to laugh."

A President's humor must be seen in the context of his times. Style and taste change markedly. Presidential wit, moreover, is highly perishable because it so often dealt with contemporary politics. Very little of Thomas Jefferson's humor comes through today, brilliant as he was.

On the other hand, the Humor of some Presidents is better remembered than their achievements. Thus:

Buchanan, on a political defeat: "We have met the enemy and we are theirs."

Benjamin Harrison, having pasted statements by his opponent in a notebook, failed to find them: "It simply goes to show that not a thing he says will stick."

Taft, as a cabbage flung at him rolled to a stop at his feet: "I see that one of my adversaries has lost his head."

Coolidge, when his wife complained that his famous taciturnity made her bet he would say more than two words that day: "You lose."

SOMETIMES THE BEST REMEMBERED joke is at the expense of a president rather than by him. Theodore Roosevelt tried to counter-punch a drunk who kept shouting he was a Democrat like all his forefathers. He asked what the heckler would be if his grandfather and father had been jackasses.

"A Republican," the drunk shot back.

Lincoln joked about his height, his plain looks and social change for his wit but, as William Safire notes in the "New Language of politics," he has been appreciated primarily since the 1950's when the self-deprecating style of Adlai Stevenson became vogue.

Lincoln joked about his height his plain looks and even his jokes:

"Here I am and here's Mrs. Lincoln. That's the long and short of it."

"The Lord prefers common-looking people. That's the reason he makes so many of us."

He told about two ladies arguing about which side would win the Civil War. One said the South, because Jefferson Davis was "a praying man." The other objected that Lincoln also prays.

"Yes, retorted the first," but the Lord thinks Abraham is joking."

But Lincoln's wit was also other-directed. One of his opponents, he cracked, "can compress the most words into the smallest ideas better than any man I ever met." and when

Gen. Grant's whiskey-drinking was criticized, he retorted:

"Find out his brand. I'd like to furnish the same to my other generals.."

Woodrow Wilson was also quick on the repartee. When a frustrated politician shouted at him "You're no gentleman," Wilson retorted: "You're no judge."

Another office-seeker asked to "take the place" of a man who had died just minutes earlier. "That's perfectly agreeable to me," Wilson said frigidly, "if it's agreeable to the undertaker."

Franklin Roosevelt, too, was fast on the draw and seemed to take particular pleasure in ridiculing the pretentious. His first words to a convention of the Daughters of the American Revolution were: "Fello immigrants . . ." and he likened politicians who switched positions to the chameleon who "died a tragic death when put on scotch plaid."

KENNEDY USED HIS WIT to disarm critics and neutralize the political drawbacks of his wealth, religion and nepotism.

"Don't buy a single vote more than necessary," he said his father cabled. "I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide."

His education bill would pass the courts, he said, because "It's clearly constitutional—it hasn't got a prayer."

About appointing his younger brother to the

Cabinet: "I see nothing wrong in giving Robert some legal experience before he goes out to practice law." (and Robert Kennedy, in his time, introduced Adlai Stevenson III with: "If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a fellow running on his family name.")

President Nixon, perhaps because he resembles Ed Sullivan, seldom gets credit even for similar wit, as when he introduced David Eisenhower on a platform: "I always run better with an Eisenhower," he said.

But at least until recently, his humor has been restricted to his family. In a new book of photographs, "Eye on Nixon," edited by Julie Nixon Eisenhower, a caption tells of a prepared schedule for Mr. Nixon's visit to Paris that called for his remarks to be "translated into English."

"I knew I had trouble communicating," Mr. Nixon said, "but I didn't realize it was that bad."

The President is pleased when he can exercise. He once entered a room with the proud announcement that he'd scored 130. Henry Kissinger said he was glad the President enjoyed golf.

"I was bowling, Henry," Mr. Nixon growled.

Sometimes he is witty but gives the impression he didn't mean to be, as at his last press conference. "The (Supreme) Court is as balanced as I have had an opportunity to make it." and sometimes he overkills, as when he followed his quip about neither he nor Russians owning stock in the Soviet Union with the unnecessary explanation: "It's a different sys-

tem."

If he's not the funniest President, he's not the dourest, either as for the election, those who vote their funny-bone might think twice about George McGovern, whose best known contribution so far followed his sweep of the primaries: "I can't believe I won the whole thing."