

NYTimes JAN 9 1976

# Who Said Vaudeville Is Dead?

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Jan. 8—It is easy to criticize the American primary election scramble and to scoff at all these Presidential yearners kissing babies on Pennsylvania Avenue and throwing snowballs in New Hampshire, but we're stuck with it for the rest of the winter, and will probably have to try to understand and make the best of it.

There is something to say for the primaries, but not much. Between the pro football Super Bowl and the opening of the baseball season in the spring, the primaries are the best spectator sport we have: intensely human, totally unpredictable, vaguely dangerous, often amusing, occasionally instructive. They are the last of the old Chautauqua circuit, of vaudeville, and the road shows of America.

The candidates or main players in this struggle are the real puzzle. What makes them run? It is a hellish life of ten stops a day in unfamiliar towns, of unprepared speeches in steaming halls, long bus rides with nosy reporters, and bumpy airplane flights in bad weather—with the candidate expected to bound down the ramp at every stop, fresh and cheery, with answers to all the intractable problems of inflation, unemployment, welfare, the C.I.A. and its dilemmas in Angola and Italy.

This is a serious point. We will never know the agonies of conflict all this causes between the professional ambitions and the private lives of these dreaming candidates. Teddy Kennedy pulled out because he could not explain or reconcile his personal and family problems with his political aspirations. Muriel Humphrey has gone through all this before, and has fled to Minnesota to protest against another try. But Hubert stays behind in Washington, not running but not withdrawing, just in case.

Vice President Nelson Rockefeller is another bitter-ender. He got the impression, to put it gently, that President Ford's eagerness to have him as a running mate in 1976 was not unbounded, so he withdrew from the Vice-Presidential race. But like Humphrey, he did not withdraw from the outside chance of the Presidency itself. He will lead the New York delegation to the Republican nominating convention at Kansas City, and it will be an "uncommitted" delegation—again, just in case Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan knock each other off in the primaries, and the convention has to turn to somebody else.

In short, old politicians never give up. Once hooked on the Presidency, it is an appetite more addictive than dope, booze or sex. It consumes men as physical as George Wallace of Alabama and as intellectual and promising as Gene McCarthy of Minnesota.

"Nowhere but in America," as Harry Golden says, could there be such a goofy but glorious political puzzle. It is so nutty that the best of our young Presidential hopefuls inside politics, like Fritz Mondale of Minnesota and Gov. Reubin Askew of Florida, won't touch it. And the best of our people outside politics, like Kingman Brewster, president of Yale, won't risk it.

But even so, we still have a battalion of candidates in 1976 and they are as good, if not better, than the Nixons, Agnews, McGovern, and Eagletons of 1972. Looking at the past, it's no wonder that a Ronald Reagan challenges a Jerry Ford, and a Scoop Jackson and Jimmy Carter try for the Democratic Presidential nomination.

For so many strange and even fantastic things have happened in American politics in the last generation—the murder of President Kennedy, the abdication of President Johnson, the spectacular rise and fall of Richard Nixon—that nothing seems preposterous and anything seems possible.

In a crazy world, everybody is sane and everything seems logical. Mr. Nixon could lose the Presidency to John Kennedy in 1960 by a whisker, and then lose the governorship of California to Pat Brown in 1962, and then abandon California and live in New York for many empty years before running and winning the Presidency. Accordingly we should not be surprised—though we are—that Mr. Rockefeller still hears "Hail to the Chief" in the night.

Even John Connally of Texas, whose enemies in the Democratic Party are almost as numerous as his enemies in the Republican Party, thinks he still just might get the call if Ford and Reagan knock each other off. Especially since—believe it or not—Richard Nixon is still operating in the Western wing, still thinks Connally would be a good idea, and even that he may have influence through his old buddies to produce the decision.

All this running around in the snows of New Hampshire and fiddling with delegates in Iowa seems remote from reality and depresses people who are looking for another Jefferson. But the record is that we get two or maybe three really outstanding Presidents every hundred years, and if the rest have energy, decency and common sense, we are lucky.

So the chances are that we'll get such a decent, competent, energetic character out of the primaries and the nominating conventions. The best won't run and the worst probably won't win, but the system in all likelihood will produce somebody who will make a new start and at least change the question. It won't be heroic, but it will be different, and maybe give us a chance for a new beginning.