

Wit Sees Humorless Race

Bill Adler is America's foremost expert on the wit (or lack of it) among politicians and Presidents. And this week he was feeling sorry for himself, and the nation, because: "We're going to have a very humorless campaign summer . . ."

"When John Lindsay was forced to drop out of the race, we lost our slim chance of having a witty President," Adler said. "Not that Lindsay was my choice or that he would have won — I think Nixon has the election locked up — but Lindsay was the only genuinely witty man in the race.

"Now we're left, on the Democratic side, with candidates who are rarely capable of being amusing, no matter how good their script-writers.

Humphrey isn't great at being witty, but he's the best of the pack. Muskie and McGovern won't give us any laughs. Nixon has been too busy trying to make the grade all of his life to develop a good sense of humor. As for George Wallace — I draw a blank on him. A lot of people think he's funny, but not because of anything he says."

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ADLER IS EDITOR of such best-selling books as "The Kennedy Wit," "The Stevenson Wit," "Presidential Wit," "The Churchill Wit" and "The Washington Wits."

He also compiled "The Johnson Humor," which bombed because, "Although Lyndon Johnson has a nice, earthy way of kidding around, he just isn't that genuinely witty."

"I also wrote a volume on Nixon's wit," grinned Adler. "What I did was take a few lines from Lincoln — our last witty Republican President — and give them to Nixon."

Adler believes Democratic candidates have almost invariably been more humorous than Republicans. "Why? It's hard to say. The last two Republican Presidents, for example, have not been men of the people. Perhaps that's the reason. Eisenhower spent most of his life in the Army, which isn't very funny. And Nixon was too busy driving to take time for humor."

The Democrats, on the other hand, have been extremely witty.

"Adlai Stevenson was a great, intellectual wit, but he ran ahead of his time. Truman had a marvelous sense of humor. FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) was the greatest wit ever to sit in the White House; his was a sort of keen, slightly sadistic humor."

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THE NEXT WITTIEST President in history, as seen by Adler, was John F. Kennedy. "The key to wit is being able to turn your humor on yourself, and Kennedy was the master of that. He had several things going against him: Inexperience, a rich father and Catholicism. If you read his campaign speeches, you'll find he kidded himself in these areas before the opposition could get at him. He was brilliant.

"My contribution to literature," said Adler, "is that, with one book, 'The Kennedy Wit,' I made it acceptable and even desirable for presidential candidates to use humor for getting votes.

"Now everybody has a funnyman script-writer. But not everybody sounds funny. It's not the fault of their writers. It's because some of the candidates just can't carry off their material successfully. You have to have a good inherent wit, in order to handle a good joke."