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Mini-Essays

By William Safire

Midterm Exam

Nothing is up to date in Kansas City. Like generals who are always preparing to fight the previous war, Democrats at their midterm conference have focused on the issue that ruined their 1972 convention: quotas.

Despite the publicized anguish, quotas are a dead issue. Organized labor and organized minorities recognize that they need each other to win; by 1976, Democrats will have largely solved the problem that afflicted them last time out.

But the issue that could well divide the Democratic party in the future is slipping through relatively unnoticed: the "tidying up" of the hodgepodge of state primary elections by a stronger, more centralized party headquarters.

The first steps toward weakening local control of the Presidential nominating process came with public financing; now there is likely to be a trend toward national party domination of state committees. Then we can look for a modern version of the Hamilton-Jefferson federalism fight.

Kangaroo Ticket

In political terminology, a "kangaroo ticket" is one with the Vice-Presidential candidate a stronger vote-getter than the candidate for President. To avoid getting trapped in this pouch, President Ford is in the process of splitting domestic power; White House aides say that one force will be the Office of Management and Budget, probably under James Lynn, H.U.D. Secretary, who should take over after Roy Ash completes his work on January's budget. The other power base will be the Domestic Council, a good spot for the innovations of Nelson Rockefeller and his entourage.

Creative tension is thus intended to permeate the White House, which would then pepper the Congress with exciting ideas for health insurance, negative income taxes, and the like. During hard times, Messrs. Rockefeller and Lynn would help absorb the domestic punishment, as Mr. Ford assumes the mantle of peace. Might work, if there is a strong upturn in the economy a year from now.

Dumb Dynamite

In teen-age terminology, "dynamite" was turned into an adjective last year and became this year's favorite Madison Avenue descriptive expletive. Now its vogue-word antonym has arrived: "dumb," as in "shoplifting is dumb," or as an adjective on hair-coloring commercials: "I have this dumb hair. . ."

The use of "dumb" is exceeded only by "all about," as in "That's what democracy (or whatever) is all about,"

the tag line for a thousand advertisements and newspaper editorials, which has taken over for the outplayed "name of the game," the displaced "where it's at," and the bankrupt "net net" and "bottom line."

This year's language pollution award goes to the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, which won it a few years ago by forever blurring the distinction between "as" and "like" with "like a cigarette should." Now, a denim-halter model torpedoes language with: "If it wasn't for Winston, I wouldn't smoke." If it weren't for Winston's ads, we wouldn't be so dumb, but that's what some advertising is all about.

Gift Idea

Stretch a friend's mind this Christmas with a subscription to one of the little magazines that think. On the old left, *The New Republic* is showing new signs of life; on the new left, *The Progressive* is sprightly, and *New Times* has an adversary relationship with the world. In the center, quarterlies like *The Public Interest* and *Foreign Policy* put the reader ahead of the pundits.

On the right, *National Review* inveighs its way, and the quarterly *Modern Age* makes you stop and think. *The Alternative*, published monthly in Bloomington, Ind., by a talented bunch of iconoclasts who appear to enjoy their work, costs only five dollars a year as it tosses off piquant thoughts like this: "The Eastern press seemed to be telling Americans that the man whom it has for years extolled as the Republicans' choicest Presidential candidate is actually unworthy even to be Vice President. . ."

Among His Souvenirs

Some of the world's most interesting mail has been coming into San Clemente in the past few months. Among the million pieces of correspondence received by the former President was a long and thoughtful commentary by the Shah of Iran; a letter from King Hussein; a message brought personally by the wife of the President of the Philippines; and flowers along with a message from Chinese Premier Chou En-lai.

Mr. Nixon, certifiably too ill to testify, is not too ill to hope. With his leg elevated on a hospital bed in his bedroom at home, and painfully aware of the judgments made by former loyalists after the arsenal of smoking guns was revealed on tapes two weeks ago, he wonders if—after some years and passions have passed, and if he is alive then—perhaps there may be a way for him to do something for his country. Then he puts it out of his mind. He cannot get to work on a book yet. He sleeps a lot.