

Top of My Head

by Goodman Ace

Reading Between the Lies

There is a widely held contention that because of the recent Washington scandals, voters have lost so much respect for the Presidency and for government in general that they are taking anything a politician says in the current primaries with a grain of aspirin.

And it didn't help dissipate their apathy when, a few days before the first primary, there was a headline on the front page of *The New York Times*, a local newspaper: NIXON TO VISIT CHINA; FORD REPORTED IRRITATED. The story went on to report that on the birth date of George Washington, father of our country, a trip to Peking would be made by Richard Nixon, father of Julie and Tricia.

That electrified the electorate, who through the past four years had developed the highly sensitive art of reading between the lies. Why this trip just before the first primary? If he was going there only to eat a Chinese dinner, don't we all know that an hour later he would be hungry again? For power?

Even the Republicans in Congress were asking questions. Couldn't he take a slow boat to China and return on the first Wednesday following the first Tuesday in November? Barry Goldwater was more kindly disposed. "I wish," he said, "he would stay there."

Only one man kept his cool. President Ford, despite the *Times* report that he was irritated, pardoned the ex-President out of force of habit, saying Mr. Nixon is a private citizen, and as far as Ford was concerned, he could go to wherever.

The *Times* covered every day of Nixon's visit, with photographs showing so many toasts being hoisted that it became difficult to read a damp paragraph without an olive and a twist of lemon.

The electorate lapped it up. This was the kind of sleazy politicizing to which they had been programmed to react. When the Nixon diversion had run its course, voters turned a jaundiced eye on the early primaries, where a dozen self-anointed candidates were hustling the hustings explaining to anyone who would listen why they would make a better President than you or I would.

Things didn't get any better when the

political analysts began raining on our parade with their predictions that if Jackson won in Massachusetts, that would be good for Humphrey; and if Carter won in Florida, that would be bad for Wallace; and if Ford won in Vermont, that would be good for Ron Nessen.

Citizens were further irritated when their favorite TV programs were interrupted by such bulletins as Carter and Wallace are running neck and neck somewhere. When you're watching gorgeous policewoman Angie Dickinson in a tight sweater and slacks, who cares about watching Carter and Wallace necking?

THINGS BEGAN getting a bit nastier when Ronald Reagan came down Mount Sinai bearing a set of stone tablets with a new and improved eleventh commandment: "No Republican shall speak ill of a fellow Republican." Overlooking the fact that by his very announcement of running against Ford, Reagan was speaking ill of a fellow Republican.

After Ford had won the first four primaries, it became apparent to the voters that Reagan was miscast. They all knew that the part of Moses is always played by Charlton Heston.

Besides, the symmetry of the Ten Commandments had been destroyed. As I dimly remember, there were always five of the shalt-nots in column A, and the other five, on coveting and false witnessing, in column B. But now there was this eleventh commandment hanging awkwardly off the left side. Excuse me, Mr. Reagan, off the right side.

When Ford won his fifth primary, he jauntily suggested that Reagan quit the race. Then Reagan politely said, Oh, yeah? Let Ford quit the race. This philosophic colloquy, while not one of your better Lincoln-Douglas debates, led suspicious voters to wonder whether if either of them became President he would appoint the other his Vice-President.

Things got so bad that Henry Kissinger entered the fray, attacking the Democratic candidates, challenging them to explain how *they* would handle Russia or the Middle East or Cuba or the United Nations or Angola or Jane Fonda.

The *Times* reported that it was a fighting speech and described Kissinger as a belligerent man who had taken off the gloves. But doubting voters read between the lies, noting that Mr. Kissinger had not taken off his glasses. And everybody knows that nobody hits a man wearing glasses.

Then suddenly Reagan won a primary. He at least was now President of North Carolina. But President Ford responded to that the very next morning on television. He gave his candidacy a shot in the arm by promising flu shots to all 212 million Americans to combat an expected epidemic.

The President didn't go so far as to threaten to veto flu, but he seemed to be promising that if his administration couldn't cut unemployment, reduce inflation, and provide more housing, quality education, and clean air, by next winter he would see to it that we would at least suffer in good health.

Personally, if you're interested, I'm so busy reading between the lies that I'm still undecided. But I have one hope—that Congress will pass a bill stating that no matter who wins, Betty Ford stays on as First Lady. □



"I really hate the idea of the physical universe winding down, don't you?"