

WAKE ME WHEN IT'S OVER...

or

THE RHETORIC OF WALTER MONDALE  
IN SEEKING THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINATION

David Walker

The day after the Maine caucuses in which Gary Hart had unexpectedly won his second big victory, Walter Mondale spoke before a packed audience at Boston's Faneuil Hall. In a choked voice he said: "The message-sending is over. The posturing is over. Now we're coming down to picking a real, live person."<sup>1</sup> After watching the acceptance speech of Mondale before the Democratic convention, this writer is not sure one was picked. Dwayne Powell of the Raleigh News and Observer captured, perhaps best, the spirit of the 1984 Democratic party when, in a political cartoon, he drew the illustration of two people looking enthusiastically in one direction, exclaiming: "Look, there's Cuomo!!" A lady was fervently explaining to another delegate: "I saw Ferraro in person last night!!" Still another wild-eyed delegate was shouting: "Wow, It's Teddy!!!" Finally, one bored delegate was half-heartedly mentioning to another delegate; "I see Mondale just walked in."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the votes were cast, Mondale was chosen as the standard-bearer, thereby justifying the need for reluctant rhetoricians to sadly put their Cuomo, Jackson, and Kennedy tapes aside, and concentrate on the former Vice-President from Minnesota. As observations are made about his rhetoric, this paper will not be so

naive as to think that his speaking abilities, rather than party rules, his organization, his qualifying more people on time, and his greater name recognition, got him the nomination. Nevertheless, for what they may have added, or subtracted to his effort, certain elements of his rhetoric will be noticed. This paper will be limited to his efforts from the first of January, 1984, through his acceptance speech.

### THE ISSUES

To understate the case, the issues were really Ronald Reagan and Gary Hart. To be sure, there were certain substantive ideas and contentions, but most of Mondale's approach was centered around an effort to discredit the ethos of these two men. The various candidates for the nomination participated in at least twelve debates, seven of which were recorded verbatim in the New York Times. In the first several debates, Mondale was, as the "front-runner" on the defense from his Democratic rivals and, for the most part, instead of attacking them, indicted Reagan. In the debate at Dartmouth on January 15, he contended that "only justification for seeking the Presidency is to provide a contrast of Mr. Reagan, who is not dealing with the future at all."<sup>3</sup> After the Hart upsets in New Hampshire and Main, Mondale turned full blast upon Gary Hart as well as continuing his criticisms of Reagan.

If one had asked Mondale for a delineation of his major ideas as he sought to provide a Democratic alternative to Reagan, he would have answered, as he did in the Pittsburgh debate on April 5:

I see three central essential objectives in dealing with our nation's future. The first is to lead the world toward a safer world. This means policies that will get those God-awful nuclear weapons under control. I favor a freeze, I favor a broad range of initiatives that will move us toward arms control. It means electing a President who knows both the dangers and the complexities of the world -- who understands that American foreign policy must be undergirded by our values and by understanding and respect so that we have the leadership necessary in the world. Secondly, I think it is clear that America must have sound, effective, tough new economic policies that restore the competitive edge of our economy so that the jobs, the future and the prosperity are here and not elsewhere.

And finally, we must have a President who insists on restoring the fundamental fairness that's so basic to American values. That means the enforcement of laws against discrimination, the protection of our senior citizens, a fairness across the whole range of American life and a President who understands that he's been elected by the people to serve the people.<sup>4</sup>

Sounds like standard Democratic fare that any Democrat could run under? Mondale chose to describe himself as comparatively advantageous to Hart in at least three ways. In talking about foreign policy, he contended that he advocated the nuclear freeze long before Hart, and that Hart was inconsistent on foreign policy. In talking about the economy, he claimed that Hart's ideas lacked substance. In praising the virtues of fairness, he complained, probably unjustly, that Hart was weak on civil rights.

Another issue upon which Mondale chose to speak, when attacking Reagan, was the current administration's record in education. In Texas, he said:

Can you think of a single book that Mr. Reagan has ever talked about? Can you recall a single time he showed his respect for science or scholarship? This may be the most anti-intellectual Administration in modern history."

In issuing his "report card" on Reagan's education program, he charged: "He doesn't understand history, he doesn't do his homework, his arithmetic is a disaster. On his budget he can't tell the difference between addition and subtraction. He gets an A in dramatics but that's not enough for a pass. I'm sorry to say that, after nearly a full term, Mr. Reagan has flunked the course."<sup>5</sup>

What were the other strategies by which Mondale sought to support his case? Three seem to stand out.

#### WOULD YOU BUY A USED CAR FROM THIS MAN?

The first of these was his frequent use of statements playing up his experience in leadership, especially as a result of his being Vice-President. In the Dartmouth debate, he reminded his audience: "I sat through and participated in the Camp David accords....It was one of the great victories of the human spirit, and I was pleased to be a part of it."<sup>6</sup> In the debate of March 4 in Boston, in citing his experience, he declared: "I have a lifetime of dealing with the Soviets."<sup>7</sup> In the Chicago debate of March 18, he asked:

Who can get arms control, who can bring about a reduction in international tensions, who has the experience and the background to make a difference? Who will stand up and fight for that average American. I suggest that in the race for new ideas, I win with the experience: I've got the background to handle the toughest job on earth and I believe the American people are beginning to see that.<sup>8</sup>

In the New York debate of March 28, Mondale cleverly took the charge, used frequently by Gary Hart, that he was tied to the past, and instead showed his past experience had given him the experience necessary for leadership, rather than a commitment to past ideas. In the same debate, he quoted Menachem Begin with crediting him for being the "spirit of Camp David."<sup>9</sup> In the Pittsburgh debate, he reminded his audience: "I've been in that White House...."<sup>10</sup>

There is another type of experience which is, perhaps, unique to this campaign which Mondale very subtly used in many of his speeches. Ronald Reagan managed to portray himself as the defender and protector of religious ideals in this campaign; thus, if you're religious, you would vote for Reagan, was the implication. Mondale frequently, in many of his speeches, reminded his audience of his father, the minister, thus trying to show that Reagan did not have a corner on the market.

#### MEMORABLE CLICHES

What campaign has not come up with its contribution to political lore of sayings that help to typify what the candidate stands for and the directions in which he will go. During Mondale's drive for the nominations, five contributions were made in this area.

The first of these was in the first debate at Dartmouth during an exchange with John Glenn. Who can forget the crispness, the originality of his reply when he described Glenn's figures as "baloney."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps his best contribution came in New Hampshire when he accused Reagan of "leadership by amnesia." When asked what he meant by the remark, he replied that "there's a lot of forgetfulness in this Administration."<sup>12</sup>

Another frequent saying came as the result of a question asked Mondale in early March about the shifting nature of the campaign. After a lengthy response, Mondale concluded with: "With Mondale, what you see is what you get." The statement was written down by Martin Kaplan, Mondale's deputy campaign manager for policy and speechwriting, and used frequently in later speeches.

Another cliché, with apologies to Wendy's Hamburgers, was the immortal "Where's the beef?" On a Saturday afternoon in his hotel room in Georgia, Mondale's campaign manager, Robert Beckel, got on his knees and acted out the hamburger commercial. The suggestion for using the commercial came from Beckel's fiancée, Mary Goehring, who worked in the Mondale campaign. Mondale had never seen or heard the quip, but he used it the next day in his campaign debate to attack what he considered Gary Hart's lack of substance with his "new ideas."<sup>13</sup>

A fifth, and final contribution, came in San Francisco during the month of May. Mondale attacked Reagan's foreign policy by contending that, if re-elected, the President would "present the people with a 'December surprise.'" That surprise would involve "American boys... fighting and dying in Central America."<sup>14</sup>

An insightful saying, a memorable slogan--these help to capture the imagination of the public as a candidate pursues the top office in our country. Perhaps one reason Mondale did not achieve this is because his attempts at sloganry were trite, mediocre, forgettable.



## HOW PATHETIC!

Mondale did make some forays into the realms of emotional proof. In a number of his speeches, he made strong ethical-emotional appeals in an attempt to show that he is a "caring" person; he also appealed heavily to fairness. In the Atlanta debate, for instance, he made this plea:

We need a President who leads us toward justice, and I mean enforcing those civil rights acts, I mean ratifying that equal rights amendment, I mean standing up for Social Security and Medicare. This country must be fair, and the history of American is that when a President leads us toward fairness and toward our future, it can be done.<sup>15</sup>

Mondale closed the Chicago debate with this appeal:

A few days ago I toured the Belvedere and went through the Chrysler plant, and I had the privilege of driving out the millionth Omni car produced by Chrysler. It was a thrilling experience. And afterwards one of the workers came up to me and he said, "Mr. Mondale, thank you for helping us save our jobs." He said, "It saved my life, because I have worked here 19 years, and if Chrysler had gone down, so would I. My pension would be gone. I couldn't get another job--I've got gray hair, I know better than that. The plans for my children would be destroyed, and now thanks to the fact that we've saved this plant, life is great." He said everyone here feels the same way about it.

He also declared:

That is leadership, and it's based on two things. One, really caring about people. I do. And secondly, pulling people together to work for the best of our country. I'll do that. Give me your help.<sup>16</sup>

Mondale also utilized the fear appeal. In an emotional appeal closing out the New York debate, he recalled:

The night before I was sworn in as Vice President of the United States I had what they call "the briefing." It was in a secret -- top secret -- environment. A lot of it must remain classified, but I can say this. In that secret meeting they told me that I would be in the chain of command and had to be ready in case of a nuclear attack. They told me about the need to be close to someone within minutes who could help me if I needed to make the decision in the case of the incapacitation of the President. For four years that person was never more than minutes away except

in unusual circumstances. Even when I went fishing he was nearby. And the reason was, as they told me, that I might be called at any time in the middle of the night anytime--and told that Soviet missiles were coming in and I might have 10 minutes, eight minutes, maybe less to decide whether I would fire our missiles or not.

My whole life I fought to avoid the moment when the President, or someone in his behalf, would have to make that deadly choice. It could mean the end of the human species. On Tuesday ask which of us you think is best prepared and most committed to freeze these God-awful weapons, to press ahead for arms control and the reduction of those risks and lead us toward a safer world. Vote on Tuesday as though your life depends on it because it might.<sup>17</sup>

The television commercial considered by the Mondale staff as the most effective of the campaign used a strong fear appeal. It featured a ringing red telephone with a flashing light, and an announcer saying, "The most awesome powerful responsibility in the world lies in the hand that picks up this phone. The idea of an unsure, unsteady untested hand is something to really think about."<sup>18</sup>

In the acceptance speech, Mondale's pathos became so intense that, if it were not for certain key ideas, one would think he had come to the other convention. Let these excerpts speak for themselves as Mondale out-Reagans Reagan with patriotic and work-ethic appeals:

My dad was a preacher, and my mom taught music. We never had a dime. But we were rich in love and faith, and they taught me the values I've carried ever since....

In the last few weeks, I've deepened my admiration for someone who shares those values. Her immigrant father loved our country. Her widowed mother sacrificed for her family. And her own career is an American classic: Doing your work. Earning your way. Paying your dues. Rising on merit....



Tonight, we open a new door to the future. Mr. Reagan calls that "tokenism." We call it America...

We're fighting for the American future....

Mr. Reagan believes that the genius of America is in the boardrooms and exclusive country clubs. I believe that greatness can be found in the men and women who built out nation; do its work; and defend our freedom.

We will cut the deficit, reduce interest rates, make our exports affordable, and make America no. 1 again....

To countries that close their markets to us, my message is: We will not be pushed around any more. We will have a President who stands up for American workers and American businesses and American farmers....

By the start of the next decade, I want to walk into any store in America; pick up the best product, of the best quality, at the best price; turn it over; and read, "Made in the U.S.A."

In the acceptance speech, Mondale also sought to utilize a transfer device. After ending a harsh Democratic campaign, Mondale extended a conciliatory verbal olive branch as he attempted to gather in the backers of other candidates and leaders:

When we in this hall speak for America, it is America that is speaking. When we speak of family, the voice is Mario Cuomo's. When we speak of change, the words are Gary Hart's. When we speak of hope, the fire is Jesse Jackson's. When we speak of caring, the spirit is Ted Kennedy's. When we speak of patriotism, the strength is John Glenn's. When we speak of the future, the message is Geraldine Ferraro.

He also linked himself to past Democratic Presidents as he remembered Jimmy Carter as "an honest, caring man," and President Kennedy as one who was right when he said we "must never negotiate out of fear."<sup>19</sup>

AND THE BAND SNORED ON .....

Walter Mondale's stock of ideas is all right; his cliches had some impact, and at times, his emotional proof held promise. His ethical proof seemed solid. Why then, will the rhetoric of Walter Mondale be so easily forgotten? Besides some of the problems noticed

earlier in the paper, one final aspect of his rhetoric is an overriding negative one--his delivery has brought relief to thousands of insomniacs.

To understand his delivery, one must perhaps understand something about the private side of Walter Mondale. Bernard Weinraub describes the candidate as "a formal, private figure who refuses to be photographed with a cigar in his mouth or a drink in his hand, a politician who resists revealing himself to the public." Weinraub continues:

Privately, Mr. Mondale can be irreverent, self-deprecating, witty and engaging. But when he climbs off planes and faces television cameras to speak at rallies and in public forums, his voice turns reedy and his speeches ramble. He seems formal, even somewhat stiff.... "I'm not good on TV. It's just not a natural medium for me." ...What especially concerns the candidate's advisers is Mr. Mondale's difficulty selling himself and his message on television, a problem that makes his reticence a campaign liability.<sup>20</sup>

There were times when he could loosen up, but they were rare. He utilized an effective attempt at humor when he told this joke on himself in his acceptance speech:

I remember late one night, as I headed from a speech in one city to a hotel a thousand miles away, someone said to me, "Fritz, I saw you on TV. Are those bags under your eyes natural." And I said: "No, I got them the old-fashioned way. I earned them." <sup>21</sup>

Earlier in the campaign, he had said: "I'm not tired. But the Smithsonian called and wanted my eyeballs."<sup>22</sup>

John Seigenthaler, publisher of the Nashville Tennessean, assessed the candidate in this way:

Mondale's best can barely match the most mediocre performance by Ronald Reagan, the politician-actor whose experiences before a camera have made him the best communicator in television history.

Noting that Mondale's voice seemed tired at the convention, Seigenthaler added: "For some reason, it always is."<sup>23</sup>

This writer's observation of the Mondale acceptance speech confirms these comments. Mondale's delivery was too reserved, with little enthusiasm. His face was usually stiff, with a few moments in which he attempted to break into an uneasy smile. The speech, which lasted thirty-three minutes, on paper was not bad; the emotional proof was a little high as noticed earlier, but then this is typical for convention speeches. The delivery transformed what could have been a good effort into a rendezvous with dullness.

Perhaps part of the problem is an extremely low rate at which he allowed himself to speak--barely over 100 words a minute, even without polite applause. Sometimes at the end of a prepared point, as the audience starts to applaud, Mondale extemporizes and picks up the rate; he becomes more energetic and the response is better. Basically, however, he is too aloof, too reserved and does not come through to the television watcher as a personable communicator.

#### A FINAL WORD

These comments are limited to the rhetoric of Walter Mondale prior to the general campaign against President Ronald Reagan. They, no doubt, would be qualified by the outstanding performances he demonstrated in his television debates, and by the increased tempo witnessed in the final weeks of the campaign. By that time, however, the harm had been done. Mondale will be remembered as, for the most part, a communicator unable to overcome the tremendous lead the President had.

- <sup>1</sup>Bernard Weinraub, N.Y. Times, June 6, 1984
- <sup>2</sup>N.Y. Times, July 22, 1984
- <sup>3</sup>N.Y. Times, Jan. 16, 1984
- <sup>4</sup>N.Y. Times, April 6, 1984
- <sup>5</sup>N.Y. Times, April 27, 1984
- <sup>6</sup>N.Y. Times, Jan. 16, 1984
- <sup>7</sup>N.Y. Times, March 5, 1984
- <sup>8</sup>N.Y. Times, March 19, 1984
- <sup>9</sup>N.Y. Times, March 29, 1984
- <sup>10</sup>N.Y. Times, April 6, 1984
- <sup>11</sup>N.Y. Times, Jan. 6, 1984
- <sup>12</sup>Bernard Weinraub, N.Y. Times, Feb. 22, 1984
- <sup>13</sup>Bernard Weinraub, N.Y. Times, June 6, 1984
- <sup>14</sup>New York Times, May 16, 1984
- <sup>15</sup>N.Y. Times, March 12, 1984
- <sup>16</sup>N.Y. Times, March 19, 1984
- <sup>17</sup>N.Y. Times, March 30, 1984
- <sup>18</sup>Bernard Weinraub, N.Y. Times, June 8, 1984
- <sup>19</sup>N.Y. Times, July 20, 1984
- <sup>20</sup>N.Y. Times, April 5, 1984

## NOTES CON'T

<sup>21</sup>N.Y. Times, July 20, 1984

<sup>22</sup>Bernard Weinraub, N.Y. Times, May 20, 1984

<sup>23</sup>John Seigenthaler, Nashville Tennessean, July 22, 1984

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