



'And If Elected, I Pledge ...'

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I have a new idea. This is not a declaration of candidacy, just an attempt to be helpful. I will tell you what my new idea is in a few moments, but first we need to take note of the far-from-new ideas—in fact, the truly grizzled practices—that have inspired it.

These practices are summed up in the suddenly heightened, intense and shrill competition among the Democratic candidates in recent days to outpromise each other vis-à-vis the party's ethnic and other constituencies. A serious-minded person—thank God, there are none around—would say that by last week the bidding had become not just shameless but actually disgusting. The commitments to do this or that were growing apace. And so, too, were the revisions of the historic record as the candidates tried to reconstruct their own pasts (favorably) and those of their competition (unfavorably) to reflect their lifelong devotion to whatever the cause at hand—and the other fellow's lifelong indifference if not actual hostility to it.

Competition: In New York, for example, where a big primary is soon to be held, Gary Hart was trying to remake Walter Mondale, a Zionist if ever there was one, as some kind of closet Arafat. And Mondale, provoked, was doing his best to return the favor. Both were trying to outdo each other in pledges. But this wasn't happening only in relation to and for the benefit of Jewish voters. Before each new group, it seems, the contenders get in a mad competition to show that they are more profeminist, say, or more pro nuclear freeze than the others, that they always have been and that they are more extreme in their devotion and that, importantly, the instant they get into office they will carry their particular audience's wishes further faster than any of the others will.

Several things about this situation (though surely not its newness: we have been through it a thousand times before) seem noteworthy to me. One is that it is testament to the fact that whatever they profess as candidates and however their nomination system may be arranged, Democratic politicians will manage to reduce their prospective electorate to its minutest subgroup special-interest parts, and pitch them all like crazy, never mind that some of the pitches conflict sharply with each other. I know that Republicans do this

too, and ardently, but generally speaking they are not nearly so good at it.

For the Democrats, of course, a reckoning of sorts regularly occurs at the convention when all their various groups inconveniently turn up at the same time demanding to be appeased. Republicans more often at such events are merely trying to reconcile the interests of their two main groups: the relatively sane and the absolutely lunatic. But the Democrats have the thing broken down much more finely, and this accounts in part for the superior fun and games they tend to produce at their nominating conventions as they try to get all the irreconcilables under one program and in one tent. Should their current three-man contest last till the

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convention, this year in San Francisco could be quite an example. For at some point, if this is still the situation, the Jackson program will need to be accepted in some part by a candidate who also will need the support of the many Jewish voters whom Jackson has totally alienated, just as the AFL-CIO's very hard-line foreign policy toward the Soviet Union will need somehow to be made compatible with the very different instincts of so many of the party's spokesmen and leading lights.

The promises that candidates make in the desperation of the quest to be nominated along with those that emerge from the chaotic convention bazaar have a special meaning, I believe, to the American people. They think these promises are bull. This, I submit, is one reason that people get so bored with those five-point plans that candidates are forever coming up with to solve whatever problem is bothering the particular group they are addressing that day. People know by now, in their infinite cynical wisdom, that even if this plan is any good, the poor guy probably won't be able to get it

through the Congress or even through his own administration and that maybe he won't even want to once elected.

As Ronald Reagan, of all people, gets ready to head off to China—the real one, I mean, not just Taiwan—and as the federal deficit under the ministrations of his economic managers and himself heads for a couple of hundred billion dollars, you do not have to look far to understand why people feel the way they do about campaign promises and positions. Some of the big ones, such as the attitude toward the two Chinas, get changed because of the overwhelming reasons for such change. Others, such as the deficit, get reversed because of an insistence on *holding on to* some campaign position that should be changed, in this case that regarding no raise in taxes.

Proposal: So what we have here are some campaign bids and pitches and pledges that routinely get reversed and others that probably should be. This leads me to my proposal. Gary Hart has recently identified one of his new ideas as that of establishing so-called training accounts for American workers, money set aside by them and their employers for a fund to retrain them should their jobs go down the chute. My new idea is the creation of "promise accounts" for presidential candidates—like various campaign-financing propositions, it could be extended to congressional and local races later. It would certainly solve the promise problem.

The thing would work this way. Each candidate would be allowed a given number of promises, be they ever so stupid or conflicting or implausible or—even—good. Of this fixed number, a fixed percentage, let us say 32 out of 85, would be stipulated to be revokable or, put differently, not serious. He would not have to say during the campaign which were those he planned to scrap or to dishonor. Everyone would be entitled to believe the pitch the candidate made to his particular group. All the candidate would have to do (with the help of the Federal Election Commission) would be to number his promises. Elected, he would be free to renege on 32 of them.

The numbers naturally are subject to negotiation. But I think the plan is sound. It could make honest men out of our promiscuously promising politicians. Despite themselves.