

# Editorial

## Political style conquers substance

**T**he show goes on. At the end of Sunday night's debate, the experts were at it again. Debate coaches, forensics experts and politicos came to the consensus that President Reagan looked and sounded much better in the second debate...and they agreed that because Mondale did not win decisively, he lost the election. Mondale has been behind in the polls for quite some time. His strong showing in the first debate trimmed a few points off Reagan's big lead in the polls. And although most experts said Mondale won the debate in substance, they said Reagan won in style. In other words, Reagan was funny, witty and "burned" Mondale a

couple of times. Mondale handled the facts, but came off a little stuffy and slow. In politics, style counts over substance. Reagan was his old self-assured, confident self. He effectively rebutted a question about his age by saying: "I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." Reagan's most devastating blow came when he ridiculed a Mondale ad in which he is shown admiring the take-off of some F-15s on the aircraft carrier Nimitz. Reagan pointed out that if Mondale's votes in the Senate would have been in the majority, the F-15 never would have been built and neither would the Nimitz.

Mondale would have been left standing 2,000 leagues under the sea. Mondale left himself open to that kind of attack when he decided to try out-right-winging an old right winger. Mondale ads for a stronger defense will alienate many of his dovish supporters. In the debate, Mondale made efforts to "flank" Reagan's conservatism, as ABC analyst George Will put it. Mondale probably hoped his conservative rhetoric would sway the moderate "swing" Democrats and those who believe he is a wimp. That he believed sounding conservative would help his cause is reasonable. But liberal voters won't like it. Mondale did make some valid points

about faults in Reagan's foreign policy. He pointed out Reagan's foolish policy in Lebanon. He pointed out Reagan's failure to make any progress with the Soviets in the area of arms talks. Mondale came away the winner in facts and figures, and logic. But he looked bad. The bags under his eyes made him look old and tired. His whiny voice irritated listeners. Reagan's eye gleamed. He spoke of the sparkling ocean and the shining mountains...and of a vision of America in one hundred years. That gleaming eye and dreamy voice will win him the election. Facts couldn't have.

### Political jock jargon strikes out in election

**I**t did not start with the Gipper. The description of politics as the great American sport began the first time a campaign was described as a race and the candidate as a winner.

#### Ellen Goodman

But this year, the sports metaphors have nearly crowded out the political dialogue. In two days on the campaign trail, I heard the Mondale-Ferraro ticket compared to every championship team that ever came from behind. They were like a basketball team in North Carolina, a football team in Tennessee, and the Cubs in Illinois. (This was before the Great Disappointment.) That was nothing compared to what has been going on since the debates. The early metaphor-makers turned to the ring for inspiration. First, Ferraro introduced "at a feisty 170 pounds, the new heavyweight debator of the world, fighting Fritz Mondale." Six days later, Mondale returned the phrase, calling her "the fighter from Philly." The Republicans have been even more obsessed with fans. After the first debate, Ronald Reagan challenged his younger opponent to arm-wrestling. After the second, George Bush was pho-

tographed with boxing gloves, and was recorded jock-ularly speaking his locker room language. The party regulars in the Democratic and Republican dugouts, as they were called, sound like refugees from Wide World of Sports. One Democrat said, "I think Mondale won everything from the coin toss to the helmet slapping." A Republican responded: "Mondale should have gone for a touchdown pass, but he ran right up the middle into some of the best strength of the Republican Party." At the White House, we heard of the "Monday morning quarterbacking" of the people who had "coached" the president. The media metaphor-makers were playing in the same ball game, or running the same horse race if you prefer. The all-male stuff of television political commentators — there are more women in the Reagan Cabinet than women commentators on the networks — didn't do analysis, they did play-by-play. No less devout a wordsmith than New York Timesman William Safire fell to mixing his metaphors. In a single column Reagan was "an old fighter on the ropes" who had been "freezing the ball," and "afflicted with the arrogance of front-running," while Mondale was "Silky Sullivan, the late starting horse" who had "touched all the bases." You get the idea. I don't know why we have



been subject to this plague of sports metaphors this year. Robert Squiers, a Democratic media consultant, is convinced that the politicians are making a serious play, you might say, for certain voters. In the past, he says, Democrats have tended to use sports metaphors while Republicans used war metaphors. "The fact that they are going after our voters is best demonstrated by the fact that they've switched to our metaphors." It is also part of the pitch, urp, to male voters. Women do not speak the language of sports as fluently as men. They do not drop back and punt, take a seventh-inning stretch or come out swinging in their day-to-day lives. The sports metaphor is a macho metaphor whether it is used to con-

vince voters that Ferraro is one of the boys or that Reagan still has the old one-two. The not-too-subliminal message is that politics is just another game men play. In the vice-presidential debate, for example, we saw George Bush oozing testosterone from every pore. He even passed up his chance to ask Ferraro a question, saying "I have none I'd like to ask of her, but I'd sure like to use the time, to talk about the World Series, or something of that nature." Consider as well, Bush's explanation of his "kick-ass" comment: an old Texas football expression. When Ferraro's campaign manager, John Sasso bristled, Bush's spokesman naa-naed back, "Sasso probably never played sports." John-ny is a sis-sy.

The athletic mode of political speech grates on me as I am unwillingly put in my place. As a voter, I am forced to sit in a grandstand seat here at the top of the ninth, waiting to see if the challenger can score another clean punch, get a touchdown pass over the head of the champion, and sprint into the home-stretch. At the risk of seeming a spoilsport, this is not the World Series, the Superbowl, the Stanley Cup, the NBA Crown, the Kentucky Derby, or the Heavyweight Championship of the World. We are voting for President of the United States. How about that, sports fans? ©1984, The Boston Globe Newspaper Company/Washington Post Writers Group

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### Letters

#### Nuclear war threat leads to suicidal message

I am a member of the Brown University group, "Students for Suicide Tablets." Much of the publicity has distorted our message, by emphasizing the word, "suicide." For example, a New York Times headline read, "Students to Vote on Suicide." It is important that our ideas be understood. Our referendum, which passed by a 60 percent majority, but is not binding on the university, requests that "suicide tablets be stocked at Brown's Health Services, for optional student use, in the event of a nuclear war." This is not a suicidal or defeatist approach to the threat of nuclear war. It is aimed at dispelling the notion that we could survive such a holocaust. Suicide pills negate civil defense. In a nuclear war, there is no defense (unless, perhaps, you are a general or a president, with access to deep underground shelters). Hoping for survival is dangerous, because it makes the idea of nuclear war more acceptable, and thus increases the chances that it could occur. Many Brown students voted for the referendum to express their fear and despair, in a purely symbolic way. Others actually want Brown to stockpile the pills, because they consider the threat of nuclear war a very real one. Would the idea of suicide seem so bizarre, if you were dying a slow, painful death from radiation sick-

ness? It would be more akin to euthanasia. Would it be dangerous to stockpile poison on a college campus? Well, the chemistry building at Brown is already chock-full of deadly substances, including cyanide, that could be used by some unbalanced person to harm himself or others. Suicide pills could be secured in a vault, and would pose no danger. By stockpiling real pills, we would emphasize that nuclear war is a real threat. The missiles sure are real. Is stockpiling suicide pills tantamount to accepting nuclear war? Hardly, who wants to kill themselves? Most of us don't. By equating nuclear war with suicide, we are urging people to stop it from happening. What can be done? Well, a mutual, verifiable freeze on the production of nuclear weapons would be a start. President Reagan's strategy of "negotiation from strength" has accomplished nothing. If we increase our stockpile of nuclear weapons, why would the Soviet Union want to decrease theirs? Reagan claims that he has brought America back from a position of weakness to one of strength. This is misleading. The United States has never been strategically weaker than the Soviet Union. We have been at parity with each other since the '50s, when we lost our strategic superiority. What Reagan

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