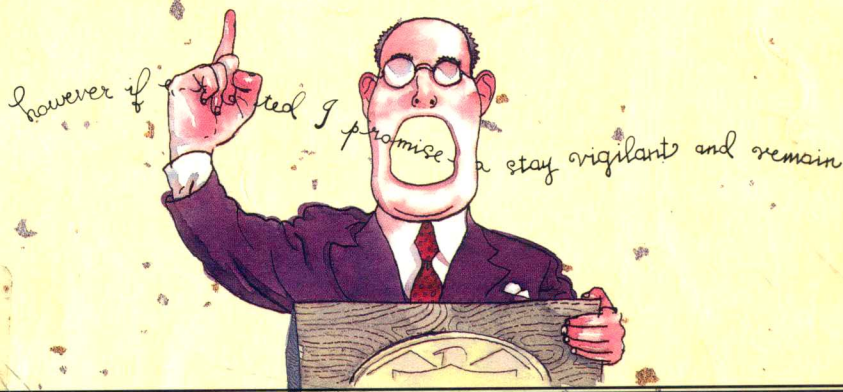


More Political Babble

*The Dumbest Things
Politicians Ever Said*



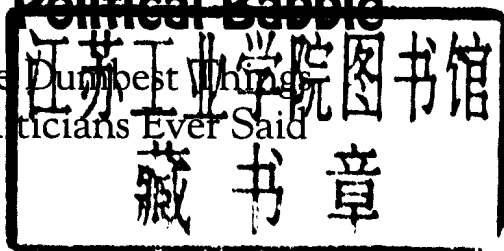
D A V I D O L I V E

Illustrated by Barry Blitt



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The Dumbest Things
Politicians Ever Said



DAVID OLIVE

Illustrated by Barry Blitt



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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To Adrian, boy wonder

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Preface

Politics is always in season, but never more so than in the run-up to a presidential election. This is when boastful and apocalyptic rhetoric floods the airwaves, and when coffee shop talk and the deliberations of earnest editorial writers alike turn on the hyperbole and hypocrisy of candidates whose shortcomings, real and perceived, are assessed with an even greater sense of urgency than usual.

This book is intended as a tour of all the important campaign stops, and of what happens between campaigns besides.

Thomas Jefferson said, "Whenever a man has cast a longing eye on offices, a rottenness begins in his conduct." His assessment, if broadened to include "inanity" along with rottenness, is borne out in Chapter 1, "On the Campaign Trail," where Texas gubernatorial candidate George W. Bush invites voters to "Read my ears"—echoing his father's "Read my lips, no new taxes" pledge; Virginia senator Charles Robb accuses his opponent Oliver North of being in bed with the Ayatollah; and obscure presidential candidate Lamar Alexander hopes someday to be as famous as Kato Kaelin, star witness in the O.J. Simpson trial.

In Chapter 2, "The Domestic Front," a president fond of naps, Calvin Coolidge, rouses himself periodically to ask, "Is the country still here?" Ronald Reagan asserts that you can tell a lot about a man by the color of jelly beans he eats. California governor Pete Wilson threatens, good-naturedly, to kneecap anyone who doesn't like what he has to say. North Carolina senator Jesse Helms threatens to sing Dixie to the

first African-American member of the United States Senate. And Senator Howell Heflin of Alabama vows never again to accidentally bring his wife's panties to the office in place of a handkerchief.

At center stage, meanwhile, the political superstars of the day vie for attention. Bill Clinton brushes up on his hog-calling skills, faults himself for being an "Eisenhower Republican," insists that McDonald's fare isn't necessarily junk food, and confesses that "I made my lowest grade in conduct, because I talked too much in school and the teachers were always telling me to stop." His humble sidekick, Al Gore, insists that the proper title for addressing the vice president is "Your Adequacy," but complains when Congressman Joe Kennedy attracts more admirers than he does at a public event, calling out, "Hey lady, what about me?"

If Bill Clinton, fighting his problem with the "stature gap," knows that "I've got to be more like John Wayne" and prays for divine intervention at every opportunity, Bob Dole knows that he is utterly capable of governing. He's certain of his qualifications to be president because, as he says, "There has never been a president named Bob," and the time for that has surely arrived. In contrast to the rumored spats between Bill and Hillary, Dole says, "I don't think I'm mean. . . . I don't throw things at my wife or the staff." He worries about the fate of the nation in the hands of his rivals, observing about publicity hound Phil Gramm, for instance, that "everybody says the most dangerous place in the Capitol is between Phil and a TV camera." Dole despairs that so many candidates for office trade on their supposed lives of youthful deprivation: "I listen to all these politicians. They were all born in a log cabin. Give me a break."

Newt Gingrich's sense of self-importance also is beyond measurable limits, and is even more baldly stated. "I have an enormous personal ambition," he has admitted. "I want to shift the entire planet. And I'm

doing it. . . . I represent real power.” Gingrich believes “people like me are what stand between us and Auschwitz” and that overthrowing the Democrats in Congress was a great victory for the nation because Democrats “get up every morning knowing that to survive they need to do only two things: They lie regularly and they cheat.” Newt is a futurist who anticipates the day when “people aboard space shuttles—the DC-3s of the future—will fly out to the Hiltons and Marriotts of the solar system”; and he’s a pragmatist who understands that “victory is the avoidance of being crushed.” He can’t help it if his critics are “fixated and pathologically disoriented.” Gingrich does fret, though, that if he doesn’t start exercising soon, he will be starring in a movie called *The Last Couch Potato*.

A man of remarkably numerous contradictions, even by the standards of modern public life, Gingrich is both “a moderate” and “essentially a revolutionary”; “not a strong believer in religion” and a man who has “a vision of an America in which a belief in the Creator is once again at the center of defining being an American”; a man who feels that “Democrats are the enemy of normal Americans” and also insists that “every Republican has much to learn from studying what Democrats did right”—notably the New Deal and racial integration.

Political life is full of things “Better Left Unsaid” (Chapter 11), “Invective and Ridicule” (Chapter 12), and “Explications” (Chapter 15), all of which reveal the true beliefs of political figures—and the political process—more fully than any press release or stump speech. Media Relations (Chapter 13) also bear out the essential love-hate relationship between politicians and the people. “Avoid this crowd like the plague,” Barbara Bush, pointing at a group of reporters, wisely counseled Hillary Clinton. In a faux angry moment, Al Gore unbraided David Letterman for his frequent Clinton put-downs: “That’s the president of the United States you’re talking about, pinhead.” Uncharitable

impressions are in no short supply on the other side as well. "He reminds every American woman of her first husband," columnist Art Buchwald said of George Bush. "He ate everything but the drapes," an astonished Tom Brokaw reported after a Bill Clinton luncheon at the White House with television news anchors. "He's a man who does like to put it down." President Clinton, it seems, is able to win the media's respect for only a few moments at a time. "He's turned the corner, mastered the job, bridged the stature gap," *Newsweek* said of Clinton's work in securing passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. "Until next week."

Happily, humor sometimes intrudes on the harsh machinations of political life. "Unlike the president," New Jersey governor Christine Todd Whitman said of her experiences with marijuana, "I inhaled. And then I threw up." An Indiana newspaper editor greets reports of a new Dan Quayle visitor center in his town by concluding, "I suppose it would be a little more interesting than an Ed McMahon museum." Bill Clinton favors a jogging T-shirt that reads, "Why yes, I am a rocket scientist," and an admiring Gingrich allows that Clinton would make a good frat president, somebody who'd be fun to have a beer with.

As the trumpets once again sound, calling fearless candidates to the arena to strut before a skeptical audience of voters, we're reminded of La Rochefoucauld's observation: "It is easier to appear worthy of a position one does not hold, than of the office which one fills." On that basis, one supposes, we should be charitable as we watch the show, thankful that our own character and track records are not on trial. Still, it's fair to wonder, after contemplating the bizarre comments to which political leaders are so often given, if Thomas More was on to something good when he set down a law in his *Utopia* that stipulated, "Anyone who deliberately tries to get himself elected to a public office is permanently disqualified from holding one."

For all their failings, our leaders probably deserve our sympathy, if not always our respect. On close inspection, we find some talented leaders among the mere attention-seekers and time-servers. The advice that freshman congressman Harry Truman received is as sobering today as it was when first offered in 1934. "Harry, don't start out with an inferiority complex," Truman was told by a fellow congressman. "For the first six months you'll wonder how the hell you got here, and after that you'll wonder how the hell the rest of us got here."

And we'll wonder why we voted to put them there. It must have something to do with our faith in the democratic process, which, judging from the alternatives, isn't *entirely* misplaced.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the staff of John Wiley & Sons, and in particular my editor, P. J. Dempsey, for their assistance in making this book possible. As inspirations I cite, and heartily recommend as delightful reading, William Manchester's *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932–1972* (Bantam Books, 1980); Paul F. Boller, Jr.'s, *Presidential Anecdotes* (Penguin Books, 1982); Paul Slansky's *The Clothes Have No Emperor: A Chronicle of the American 80s* (Simon & Schuster, 1989); Peggy Noonan's *What I Saw At The Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (Ballantine Books, 1990); and Richard Ben Cramer's *What It Takes: The Way to the White House* (Random House, 1992).



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On the Campaign Trail

Whenever a man has cast a longing eye on offices, a rottenness begins in his conduct.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

If you would know the depth of meanness of human nature, you have got to be a prime minister running a general election.

Canadian prime minister JOHN A. MACDONALD

God ordained that I should be the next president of the United States.
President WOODROW WILSON, *disabusing Democratic National Committee chairman William McCombs of any notion that he or the party deserved any credit for Wilson's victory at the polls*

I think the American public wants a solemn ass as president and I think I'll go along with them.

CALVIN COOLIDGE

America's future is still ahead of us.

New York governor THOMAS E. DEWEY, campaigning for the presidency in 1948, bowing to cautious advisers who counseled him not to say anything controversial. Other Deweyisms, a collection of which was made available for the press's amusement by the Truman campaign, include: "Ours is a magnificent land. Every part of it"; "The miners in our country are vital to our welfare"; "Everybody that rides in a car or bus uses gasoline and oil"; "Our streams abound with fish."

Reality Check

Isn't it harder in politics to defeat a fool, say, than an abler man?

THOMAS E. DEWEY in 1948, commenting to aides during his unsuccessful campaign to replace Harry Truman as president

[They] want two families in every garage.

HARRY TRUMAN, campaigning for reelection in 1948, on the Republicans

Ben Hogan for President. If We're Going to Have a Golfer For President, Let's Have a Good One.

Bumper sticker that appeared during the Eisenhower administration, criticizing the president for spending too much time on the links

Do you understand? I want to get from there [pointing to his allotted backbench seat] to there [Prime Minister Lester Pearson's seat] pretty quick.

JEAN CHRÉTIEN at age 29, a few days after first being elected a member of the Canadian Parliament, after the seating plan was explained to him. Chrétien achieved his goal in 1993, 30 years later, at age 59.

Throw the rascals in.

Campaign slogan of NORMAN MAILER when he and running mate Jimmy Breslin sought the New York mayoralty in 1969

Reality Check

Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser.

JIMMY CARTER in prepresidential days, unapologetic about his raw ambition to be a winner in politics

◆

Well, I've got a big family, and lots of friends.

GEORGE BUSH in 1978, when asked why he would make a good president

Introducing John Buchanan to this group is like introducing a dog to a fire hydrant.

CLARA JEFFERSON, head of a Tory women's group, introducing Tory premier John Buchanan of Nova Scotia at a party function in the 1980s

Reality Check

It is easier to appear worthy of a position one does not hold, than of the office which one fills.

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

The nation is in crying need of your moral vision!

Vice President and presidential candidate GEORGE BUSH in 1987, praising Jerry Falwell in a bid to secure the Christian Fundamentalist vote

He can stand eye-to-eye—with my daughter.

Representative RICHARD GEPHARDT (D-Mo.) in 1987, planning the podium arrangements for a debate with Michael Dukakis, his diminutive rival for the Democratic presidential nomination

The only thing I know I'm running for, as of this day, is the kingdom of heaven.

Senator JESSE HELMS (R-N.C.)

Vote for the Crook. It's Important.

Bumper sticker sported by supporters of Governor Edwin Edwards (D-La.) during his 1991 race against white supremacist David Duke. Edwards, who won the election, had endured a series of ethics-related investigations of his conduct in office.

Wennlund has an obscure, undistinguished record, and he's a poor dresser, too.

RAY HANANIA, candidate for the Illinois state assembly, in 1992, on incumbent Larry Wennlund, whom he challenged to a three-round boxing match

Well, now we've got the conservative crap out of the way.

TORIE CLARKE, a spokesperson for the Bush campaign, in 1992, after the speeches of Ronald Reagan and Patrick Buchanan at the Republican National Convention

Did he speak in complete sentences?

Senator AL GORE (D-Tenn.), vice-presidential candidate, in 1992, on George Bush's attack on Bill Clinton's health-care plan

Reality Check

I don't dare ask how many hundreds of George Bush cards you have to trade to get one Michael Jordan.

President GEORGE BUSH in 1992, on a new set of presidential trading cards

Well, whose else's—who else's—could it be?

GEORGE BUSH in 1992, saying abortion is ultimately a woman's own decision. Bush was understood to be opposed to abortion.

I've referred occasionally to my opponent—"the other guy" and even "the governor of a certain state with a profitable chicken industry on the Mississippi River located somewhere between Texas and Oklahoma."

GEORGE BUSH, *campaigning for reelection in 1992, on Bill Clinton, whom he rarely mentioned by name. There are no states between Texas and Oklahoma.*

What the heck [is Bill Clinton] talking about when he describes a President's—quote—here's what he called it: "A President's powerless moments when countries are invaded, friends are threatened, Americans are held hostage, and our nation's interests are on the line." . . . Well, let me say, Governor Clinton: If America is powerless when our nation's interests are on the line, who else do you suppose is going to take care of us? My America is not powerless.

GEORGE BUSH, *campaigning for reelection in September 1992. In the August speech to which Bush referred, Clinton spoke of "perilous," not "powerless" moments.*

I'll put this as delicately as I possibly can: Fecal coliform bacteria.

GEORGE BUSH in 1992, *citing one of the environmental problems in Bill Clinton's Arkansas*

I don't want to run the risk of ruining what is a lovely recession.

GEORGE BUSH in 1992, *during a campaign stop in Ridgewood, New Jersey. He meant to say "reception."*

I'm just waiting for one of you to come up with a robot that can give a public speech. I'm sure it will make my life easier and also yours.

GEORGE BUSH in 1992, to scientists at the Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico

Would you please shut up and sit down!

GEORGE BUSH in 1992, to a group of POW-MIA families protesting a campaign speech in Crystal City, Virginia

Sit down and shut up.

BILL CLINTON in 1992, to a heckler in Chicago yelling at him about adultery

Actually, I'm a little envious of Murphy Brown. At least she's guaranteed of coming back this fall.

DAN QUAYLE in 1992, in an aside to Candice Bergen, the actress who played the TV sitcom character Murphy Brown, during a campaign speech

We raised taxes on the American people and put this country right into recession.

DAN QUAYLE in 1992, inadvertently apologizing for President Bush's broken "no new taxes" pledge in a renewed call for tax relief