

The Sir Oracles who are unable to speak

By Garrison Keillor

As a public attraction, the Minnesota politician rates a little lower than the alligator woman, trained seals or geeks who eat live chickens, and a little higher than a beginning evangelist, an amateur soprano or an insurance salesman. He may be honest, experienced, strong, fiscally responsible, capable and concerned, but very few people would care to get into their cars and go hear him.

Not even Walter Mondale, who, in a delicate way, is running for the office of Loneliest And Most Powerful Man In The World. I dare say, if Mondale's friends hired the Minneapolis Auditorium for Friday night and simply announced that their man would speak in it, as one would announce a band concert or a poetry reading, they wouldn't gross enough to pay the senator's air fare.

To be seen by crowds of people, politicians have to

leech. They ride in parades and stand around at fairs, to be looked at by people who've really come to see queens and breeder cattle. Now and then, the party faithful can be summoned to attend a rally or an appreciation dinner, but only now and then and only if the speeches are kept short.

Hubert Humphrey is probably the last one who is capable of giving you a real speech, and nobody wants him to do it. He is the last Boy Orator of the Plains, the last living heir of Ignatius Donnelly, and after 20 minutes, the audience starts to cough.

Ignatius Donnelly was a Radical Republican candidate for Congress when he visited Red Wing in Sept. 23, 1868. "About 200 ladies and gentlemen escorted him into the city," reported the St. Paul Daily Press, a Democratic paper. For his speech that night, Music Hall was jammed and crammed, and at least 200 failed to get in at all. Had the room been large

enough, the audience would have been over a thousand." This in a city of less than 4,000, the home of Donnelly's conservative opponent.

"When Mr. Donnelly arose to speak, it was like opening a safety valve of a steam boiler overcharged with steam. For at least five continuous minutes, you could not have heard a keen clap of thunder. . . . As soon as he could, Mr. D. opened and spoke about two hours."

A two-hour speech was what the Red Wing Donnellyites had come to hear. People wept and cheered, the Press reported, and when it was over, they led the Sage of Nininger through the streets in a torchlight procession, gave "nine cheers and a tiger" in front of his hotel, and sent him to bed.

A hundred years later, similar political rallies occurred here, called "demonstrations," but a curious change had come over our people. Such mass gatherings were now considered "unconstructive" if not actually illegal. A few politicians defended the right of assembly while condemning its exercise; it was not, they said with the wisdom of men whose speeches would draw fewer spectators than a good dogfight, the way to solve problems.

I remember seeing, four years ago this month, thousands of men and women standing and sitting in front of Coffman Union at the university, patiently listening to hours of speeches denouncing the American invasion of Cambodia. It

'... it's something new I'm trying... we call it the un-encounter group... we just sit and don't bother anyone... each of us lost in our own private, delicious thoughts and excursions...'



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was an awesome sight. The speakers were mostly tedious and self-conscious — it was the crowd, its patience, that inspired awe. The speakers didn't know how to speak to such a crowd, how to address so many people who believe that we live in a democracy.

In our time, the political event has become pure ceremony. The speakers are cool. They recite their "philosophy," which is tame and placid, and list their "positions" on issues. People applaud politely. The fine tradition of heckling is now considered to be in poor taste. Politicians have interpreted freedom of speech to mean their right to speak without interruption. As Shakespeare wrote:

*I am Sir Oracle
And when I ope my lips,
Let no dog bark.*

But our Sir Oracles cannot speak. A few are capable of making five or 10 minutes of pleasant remarks, and the others are sleepwalkers. They have learned to hedge so well, to cut and fill, that the words rumble out of their mouths like a long freight train of empty boxcars. To them, language is only a kind of insulation, the straw that's heaped around the rose in those cold election months.

The worst of it is that ordinary people come to accept this as meaningful speech. At our precinct caucus, the candidates for district delegate stood up and gave their "posi-

tions": e.g., "I'm for impeachment, I'm for equal rights, I'm for abortion and I'm against increased defense spending." This, in front of their own neighbors.

I'll make one suggestion to this fall's candidates, from the governor on down. We could use less exhortation and a little more straight reporting. Tell us about yourself, what you've been up to lately and what's happening in the world. Resist the urge to preach, as I am preaching now. Practice a little narrative journalism. It will be strange, I know, and even subversive, and people will want to hear it.

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"And if after I'm elected you change your minds about any of our policies, I promise to bend with the prevailing wind."