

Fourteen: Postscript

Campaign News You Didn't Hear



When he was a candidate for President and I was still the editorial page cartoonist for *The Greenville News*, I saw Governor Ronald Reagan fall into one of his birthday cakes. It happened during the 1980 campaign, in front of a slicked-up Chamber of Commerce crowd at Vince Perone's Restaurant in Greenville, SC. I wasn't supposed to be there, but my friend Carol got me in. She was the local news producer for the ABC affiliate out of Asheville, NC. She had insisted that I accompany her to get Secret Service clearance for the 1980 campaign, because she had an exclusive interview with Reagan after the speech, and other candidates to cover at a later time.

Carol and I had been friends for so long that she knew that, as a caricaturist, I wanted—and needed—to draw from life whenever possible. This was a chance no caricaturist could pass up.

By the time Ronald Reagan hit Greenville, he had the '80 GOP nomination pretty well sewed up. Carol was under his spell already—almost as giddy as the Chamber of Commerce. My attitude was more one of skepticism, if not scorn. For one thing, we political cartoonists like to think that, as a group, we are pretty resistant to the charm of politicians (though to be on the safe side, we usually try to avoid meeting them face to face). Secondly, I am personally allergic to conservative Republican charisma.

Vince Perone's restaurant was crazy with excitement the evening of the Reagan address. It caused alarming heart-lurches just to breathe the adrenalin in the air. The Chamber of Com-

merce, a rainbow of “steppin’-out” clothes, was seated at banquet tables. Everybody’s aura was all fluffed for the occasion.



Carol and I flashed our press credentials as we lugged her equipment to the small platform where the TV press was setting up. The platform was about fifteen or twenty feet from the stage area, where local and state GOP dignitaries perched at a head table. Two empty places at the head table awaited Ronald and Nancy Reagan. The TV press jostled for position in its designated space, networks and local stations snarling at one another over territorial rights. There was no doubt that Carol would win. She once “accidentally” dug a high-heel into the sneaker-shod foot of a national network cameraman who was trying to move her out of position.

I joined the “writing press” at a table directly beneath the stage—next to the steps that led to the head table. The writing press—seven or eight puffy, rumped white men, fresh off the “Zoo Plane,” no doubt—sat staring into the cosmos behind a clutter of coffee cups, cigarette butts, ashtrays, notebooks, and wadded-up napkins on the table.

They barely noticed when I took the last empty chair. The Zoo Plane is the plane of reporters that follows Air Force One or the plane carrying major candidates from stop to stop. They take turns riding in the candidate’s or the President’s plane.

The excited crowd shushed itself to whispers and rustles as one of the dignitaries on stage arose to speak. He introduced Republican Congressman (later SC Governor) Carroll Campbell, who, in turn, made a few opening remarks before introducing the candidate of his dreams—Ronald Reagan, there with his wife, Nancy.

The applause was enthusiastic as Secret Service escorts hacked a path through the Chamber of Commerce for the couple’s slow progress through the crowd. They slowed as they approached the steps where we stood. I was backed up against the press table and stuck in position there. Before climbing to the head table, the Reagans stopped and turned to face the crowd. Stopped right in front of me, close enough for me to have touched the candidate’s coattail had I been so tempted—which I was not. A dark-suited forest of tall secret service agents surrounded us.

There was some sort of fanfare, and someone at the head table spoke. Nancy Reagan’s red outfit shone through the suits. Large men around me seemed to be talking into their coat sleeves.

Then, as the familiar “Happy Birthday” arose from the multitude, a giant cake with white icing and burning candles was wheeled on a cart towards Reagan. This was the week of his sixty-ninth birthday, and the candidate was meeting the age issue head on. At every campaign stop there was a birthday celebration. “Mamma Perone” had ordered up a special cake for this one. Ronald Reagan, the Good Sport, leaned over to blow out the candles on the tall fluffy cake. Flashbulbs went off to catch the lighthearted moment. Reagan “overbalanced”, as we say in South Carolina, and fell front-first into that cake.

He recovered beautifully. I was impressed. White cake icing covered him from his lapels to his zipper, and he was laughing. Gingerly, he removed his suit jacket. Turning with the self-assurance of a man for whom disaster is only an adventure you haven't met, he handed it off behind him with an apologetic smile. Then he forgot about it.

I couldn't forget about it. The only people standing behind Reagan at the time of the Great Jacket Hand-Off were secret service agents and me. All the dark suits between me and Reagan's icing-covered jacket leaned out of the way. Several pairs of dark glasses cast cold attention on me. I won the jacket by default. Turning, I held it out in appeal to the now-alert writing press across the table. They shrugged. I had visions of attempting to clean it myself, messing it up even worse, and being roughly interrogated for hours—maybe even detained until some responsible family member or friend could vouch for me. As I have mentioned before, cartoonists have this—uh—problem with authority. As I continued to stand there, dazed by the responsibility placed in my hands, a young man dressed in the mustard-yellow vest, black trousers and bow-tie of the waiters at Perone's reached me through the confusion with an offer to take the jacket away and have it cleaned. Gratefully, I gave it to him.

By this time the Governor's trousers and tie had been wiped almost spotless as he continued to laugh and wave to the crowd. While others hovered over her husband's flawed wardrobe, Nancy Reagan began to look about frantically. Catching me in a sharp glare, she croaked, "What did you do with his jacket?"

"Er—I gave it to someone who promised to clean it." I replied, praying that that was the right answer.

Mrs. Reagan sucked in a horrified breath. "His index cards are in the pocket!"

The writers behind me chuckled. "Talk about spontaneous!" said one.

"Yeah," whispered another. "He's given that speech eighty times at least. He ought to know it by now."

If Ronald Reagan was concerned about the loss of his index cards, he gave no sign of it that I could see. Mrs. Reagan was frantic, although she hid it well. I am something of an expert on frantic women who hide it well, and I know one when I see one. Mrs. Reagan kept the corners of her mouth turned up in a simulated smile, but she held hurried, whisper-conferences with one campaign official after another. As the couple turned to mount the stairs to the stage, the Governor appeared to be having a jolly time. His wife looked stricken.

During the dinner which followed, the Reagans chatted with the other occupants of the head table. Mrs. Reagan's eyes darted every so often to the side entrance, and she intermittently lost that smile. I was on my fourth or fifth drawing of Congressman Campbell and the Reagans—near the end of their meal—when a young man hurriedly mounted the steps to the stage and handed a packet of cards to Candidate Reagan. He accepted them with gratitude. His wife almost fainted with relief.

The speech Governor Reagan gave that night brought forth the now-familiar themes of cutting taxes and attacking waste, fraud, and mismanagement in social programs; urged the rearming of America; called for a





renewal of national pride; trotted out numerous questionable anecdotes to support his positions—all without his appearing to glance at the infamous index cards. Nancy Reagan gazed at her husband with naked adoration. So did Congressman Campbell. I drew all three of them several times with little hearts and cupids all around them. The Chamber of Commerce whipped itself into a froth of nationalistic chauvinism—stomping, cheering, weeping, pounding the tables, waving little American flags. I hadn't heard that much noise since Clemson played Notre Dame at Death Valley.

If the cake incident made the national news, I didn't see it. I didn't even see it on the local news programs, although Carol said her station reported it—with video.

It wasn't mentioned in my own newspaper. I asked our political reporter some weeks later about the incident. He said that he had included it in a photo "cut-line," or caption, and someone had edited it out.

He was grateful to me for bringing it up; he was beginning to think he had imagined it all, he said.

Looking back, I realize that what happened that night was nothing less than a harbinger of the Teflon Presidency. If Gerald Ford had fallen into one of his birthday cakes, he'd have icing stuck to him for all eternity. And the hapless, dour, crisis-ridden Jimmy Carter—sitting up there in the White House with John Anderson and Teddy Kennedy breathing down his neck, and all my colleagues starting to draw him the size of a peanut—well, the country, it seems, was ready for a president it could love. Embarrassing Presidential mishaps or misstatements would either go unreported or ignored by the public for the next six or seven years.

What a wretched time for me to have been a political cartoonist.