

Running on Empty

Where Did All The Issues Go?

By RICHARD L. BERKE

WASHINGTON
NOT since the studio script doctors on "Casablanca" cranked out daily rewrites at breakneck speed has the story line of a major production changed so much so fast.

Consider the unplanned twists in the 1994 campaign. First, political reform would be the driving theme. Then it was the North American Free Trade Agreement. Then came the economy. Then welfare. Finally, the politicians had it all settled. Health care would be the make-or-break issue on Nov. 8.

They never got it right. Not only was the script dated, so was its premise, for the expected litany of issues this season has been reduced to mere scribbles in the margins.

There are no real issues at all this year, at least in the traditional sense. The burning economic and social

Cutting the substance from the campaign script.

concerns that were central to the campaign dialogue only two years ago — from the deficit to abortion to health care — have all but vanished. And the issues that were so debated in campaigns for years before that, like flag desecration and military preparedness, are non-starters. No longer are most candidates advocating specific reforms that they say would make Government work better; this year, they say Government is not the answer.

Even the archetypal issue of American political campaigns — the economy — does not count.

The subjects that come up most are less economic and more ideological, like crime, welfare and tax cuts. But they hardly can be considered major issues of contention because, conservative as they sound, candidates of both parties and all ideological stripes are prescribing the same remedies.

So all that the politicians have left to talk about is themselves.

"The issues the pundits said six

months ago would determine the outcome of these races could hardly be more irrelevant," said Mark Mellman, a Democratic pollster.

A leading Republican colleague agreed. "When you look back, this is not going to be the campaign that debated health care or foreign policy or taxes or recession," said Robert Teeter, who was President Bush's pollster. "It's none of them. What underlies this is the sense the Government and the Congressional process don't work."

Even the campaign's one big issue doesn't look and sound much like a campaign issue. It may be that some Americans would cheerfully tolerate a few more potholes on the Interstate highways, or drastic cuts in Social Security, for the cause of shrinking the Government. No one can tell, because no one is asking. Instead, politicians are crafting broad anti-Government sound bites to capitalize on public disaffection without discussing the proper role of the Government they seek to reform.

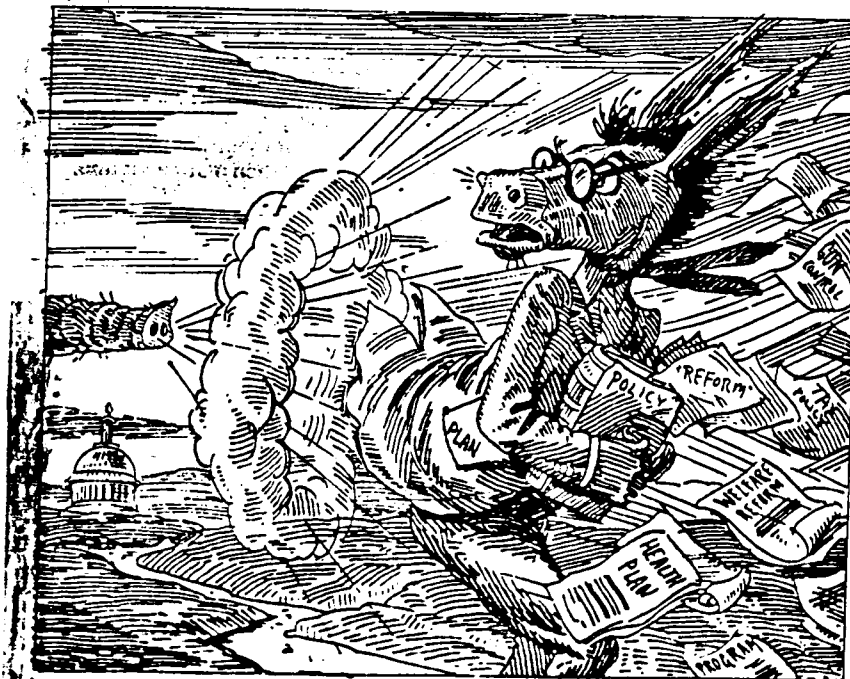
With little impetus to raise specifics, the candidates are sounding alike. House Speaker Tom Foley, a 30-year Congressional veteran who could smother his rival with the details of his legislative accomplishments, is instead running television commercials that could just as easily be made for a Republican challenger who had never set foot in the capital. In one, Mr. Foley makes his clearest break with conventional liberalism when he is unapologetic about advocating the death penalty: "We have to deal with the root causes of crime, but justice today demands more than social justice."

In the commercials of Gov. Pete Wilson of California, a Republican, there is little clue that he has been in office for four years and was in the Senate for eight. Rather than list his accomplishments as the career politician that he is, Mr. Wilson focuses his commercials on crime and immigration. The same subjects figure heavily in the advertisements of Kathleen Brown, Mr. Wilson's Democratic challenger.

The distaste for issues is striking because it has been only a few months since Americans were telling pollsters they wanted more issue-oriented political dialogue. After polls showed the public was put off by the lack of substance in the 1988

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campaign, Presidential candidates in 1992 sought to out-wonk one another with policy booklets.

Maybe it was too much. Maybe some voters over the years have fooled the pollsters, and themselves, about how much serious discussion they really want. Maybe their hopes were raised with the resurgence of issues in the 1992 campaign, only to be dashed when they saw that even a White House and Congress controlled by the same party could not do many of the things they set out to accomplish. Polls show that public anxieties have grown far deeper than simple concern about how their representative voted on a bill; they are worried about things that they do not think any politician can remedy, like moral decay of society, their safety and their financial security.

Politicians do not boast about their successes. Polls show that most people are not aware of recent accomplishments like the successful efforts to cut the growth of the deficit. "Candidates running campaigns are always pure opportunists in terms of what they talk about," said Gary Jacobson, a political science professor at the University of California at San Diego. "This year, they read the electorate as being unpersuaded by

talk of policy and talks of delivering benefits. The only thing that's moving them is their dislike of professional politicians."

This dislike is good news for Republicans. They are fielding the most challengers, and they note with pride that they are not steeped in policy. "There's not a lot of need to be creative," said David S. Johnson, executive director of the Virginia Republican Party. "'Congressman X voted with Clinton X percent of the time.' Boom. There's your message. It is not rocket science."

It's Not My Job

When they catch their breath from hounding President Clinton, Republicans like to boast about what they will not do, or what they will dismantle. The bare issue papers put out by the campaign of Representative Michael Huffington, a California Republican running for the Senate, did not, until recently, tackle staples like health care, foreign policy or education.

At an issues forum last week in Fort Walton Beach, Fla., Joe Scarborough, a Republican House candidate, offered one answer for every question about policy. Welfare reform? "I personally don't believe the Federal Government should be involved in welfare."

Health care? "That's an issue for the states." Crime? "The Federal Government shouldn't be involved."

It is not a matter of candidates' not caring about issues, so much as their sense that the public does not want to hear about them. Many Republicans linked to the Christian right were drawn to politics because of their opposition to abortion and homosexual rights. But such candidates do not dare raise those issues out of fear of alienating voters.

Touchy, perhaps, about the criticism that their party does not stand for anything, more than 300 Republican House candidates last month signed a "Contract with America," an agenda of issues they would pursue if elected. It includes such old standards as the line-item veto and a balanced budget.

But on the campaign trail, Republicans are much more eager to talk about Mr. Clinton than about the contract, and polls show that most voters do not even know what it is. Maybe that is why Professor Jacobson has second thoughts about his decision to set up a computer file on gun control, trade, the budget and other votes before Congress to see how they influence who gets elected. "My guess is when I run the numbers I'm not going to come up with much," he said. "These votes won't have any effect in any state."