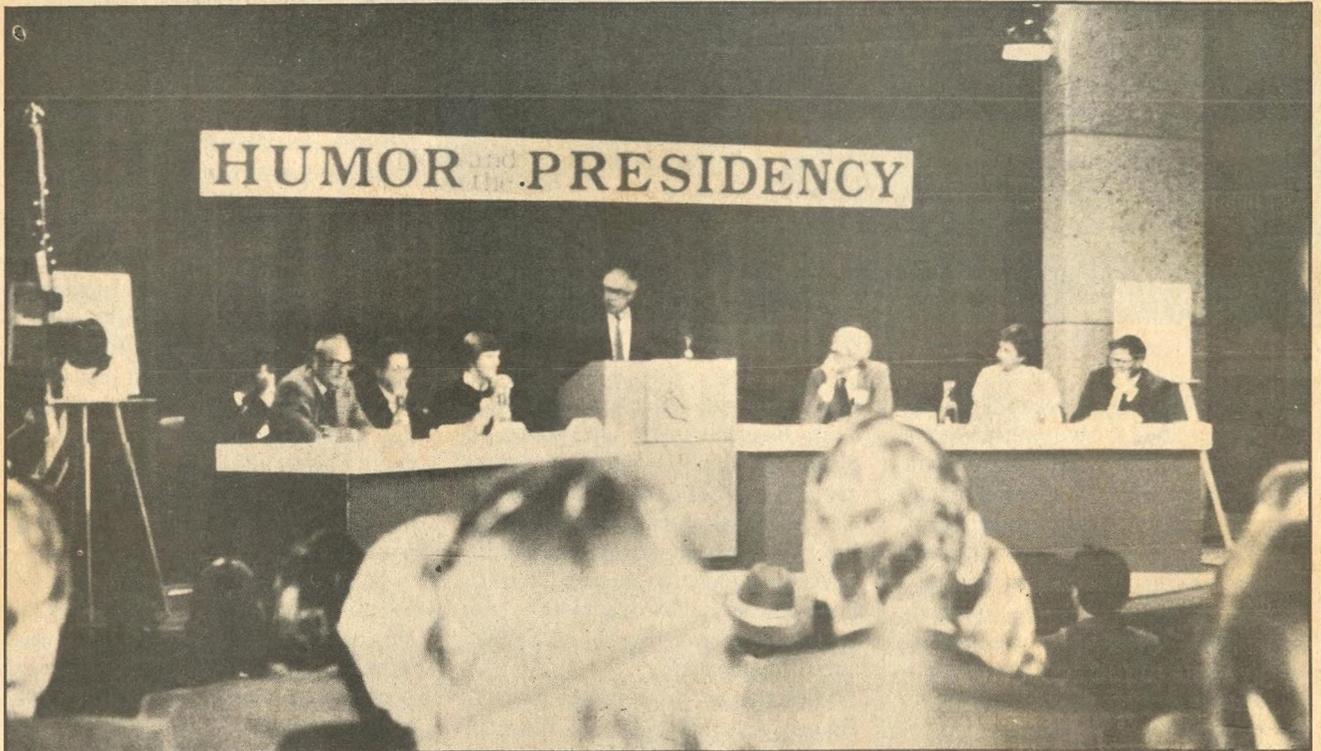


# HUMOUR AND THE PRESIDENCY

*A recent conference takes a serious look at how funny US presidents have always tried to be.*



**H**ENRY KISSINGER, as US Secretary of State, once asked his security guard what he would do if someone tried to kidnap him. "Don't worry," the guard replied, "we won't let them take you alive."

President Nixon, on his historic visit to China, was asked what he thought of the Great Wall. "It is truly a great wall," he answered, with his characteristically inadvertent humour.

These and other jokes were rattled off with gun-fire rapidity at the Gerald R Ford museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, recently, where the former

US President was host to a three-day conference on Humour And The Presidency (or humor, as the Americans will have it). Several of the nation's satirists and politicians descended on Ford's home town, a conservative and religious city that was sardonically referred to as the humour capital of the world. The conference received much unexpected media attention, and took a serious look at how funny US presidents have always tried to be.

Take Gerald Ford himself. Primarily known for slapstick comedy, he often obliged by tripping over airplane steps and slugging spectators with

*Rohini Nilekani, a frequent contributor to Imprint, now lives in New York.*



*Ronald Reagan : star of the conference.*

golf balls, and helped rehabilitate the presidency after the humourless years of Nixon. He is the only president on record to have his presidential limousine run into by a group of teenagers. But Gerald Ford was never known for his sparkling wit. And so this conference came as a surprise to stand-up comic and one-time presidential candidate, Pat Paulsen. "Attending a Gerald Ford conference on humour is like attending a Khomeini conference on the sexual revolution," he said drily.

Why would President Ford host an apparently masochistic conference that raked up the slippery ghosts of his presidential past? Ostensibly, the gala was in celebration of the Ford museum's fifth anniversary and a fund-raiser for its future activities. Also, as Ford himself explained, "I thought a look at the lighter side of politics may help us to realise that perhaps sometimes we take ourselves too seriously." In the main, however, the Humor And The Presidency symposium was a palliative for the neglect ex-presidents inevitably have to suffer. As one humorist put it, "This is the closest Ford will ever get to a summit."

All efforts were made to turn it

into a star-studded event. But Presidents Reagan, Carter and Nixon declined their invitations. And conspicuous by his absence was cartoonist Gary Trudeau, who thrives on making presidents singularly uncomfortable. Eventually, it became a Republican Party conference, with a few Democrats thrown in for an appearance of neutrality.

Yet, the people who did attend — House Speaker Tip O'Neill, columnist Art Buchwald, Hollywood funnyman Chevy Chase and satirist Mark Russell, among many others — delved into their memorabilia and served notice on the humour of many recent presidencies, especially Gerald Ford's. To his credit, however, he good-naturedly suffered pot-shots made at his expense and laughed through Chevy Chase's imitations and a cartoonist's description of his head as a football helmet with hair on it. Of course, he more than got his revenge when the humorists got down to the serious business of lampooning other presidents.

One conclusion arrived at, at the conference: nobody loves Jimmy Carter. Few of the satirists, columnists or presidential insiders gathered could remember anything funny that

Carter had said or done. Except for the time he arrived inexcusably late for a black Urban League meeting. Seeking to diffuse the palpable tension, he joked: "It really wasn't my fault. I ran into Alex Haley (author of *Roots*) and made the mistake of asking him how his family was." It was no coincidence that Carter was the butt of so much ridicule. After all, as Democrat, he was fair game.

Yet, there was general agreement that it was John F Kennedy who had the best flair for humour among presidents. He often used spontaneous repartee to deflect a question or ward off a controversy. For instance, accused of nepotism for hiring brother Robert Kennedy as Attorney-General, he quipped, "Well, Bobby wants to practise law, and I thought he should get a little experience first." And when criticised for using his father's wealth to bankroll his campaign for senator, he replied, "I just had a telegram from my generous daddy: 'Dear Jack. Don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide.'"

In a sense, Ronald Reagan, though absent, was the star of the conference. His joviality is legendary, and he was an easy target for the conference participants. There was much joking about Reagan's 'working naps', his two-day weeks and about how the Libyan crisis gave him some sleepless afternoons. Yet, it was widely acknowledged that Reagan is skilled at using humour to win over and influence crowds. Even when he is unsure of the subject of his speeches, he is able to throw in one-liners to make up any lost edge. Under severe grilling about the budget deficit at a Washington press club once, he said, "I'm not worried about the deficit. It's big enough to take care of itself." And then there is his famous one on the question of age. In the televised debates with opponent Walter Mondale in the re-election campaign of 1984, it was clear that Mondale was ahead in his knowledge of the issues. But it was Ronald Reagan's deflecting humour that won the day. "I will not

make age an issue in this campaign," he told the American public. "I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience."

Many of his one-liners are written for him, of course, by a team of speech-writers. But he is quite capable of making them up on the spur of the moment. After he had been shot by John Hinckley in 1981, and was being wheeled into the operation theatre, he looked at all the doctors standing around and joked, "I hope you are all Republicans." Reportedly, that did more to restore the public's confidence in that hour of crisis than all the press releases combined.

Yet, Reagan is prone to make gaffes, to the embarrassment of his staff, which works hard to shield a president not known for his mental acuity. Once, he relayed an ethnic joke that could be potentially offensive to a significant constituency. Worse, he tried unsuccessfully to reduce the damage done by later explaining that it was only meant as an example of the kind of joke one must not tell.

Reagan humour has become such a staple that *The Washington Post* has a column for the Reaganism Of The Week. Lou Cannon, inventor of that column, admits that if one were to read all the 50-odd Reaganisms of the year, the President would look like an imbecile. "Yet," he says, "lots of things about Reagan that look funny in print are part of the bond he has with people."

**WHY DO PRESIDENTS** need to be funny? Bob Orwen, speech-writer for Gerald Ford, put it this way: "The chance to be seen as warm and relaxed, with a twinkle-in-the-eye approach, is just too good an opportunity to be missed. The idea is, 'If we can laugh together, we can vote together.'" Added Gerald Gardner, author of *All The Presidents' Wits - The Power Of Presidential Humour*, "Humour is a wonderful device for presidents to employ, to communicate, and to laugh away issues that one doesn't want to confront." Self-



*Gerald Ford: prone to making gaffes.*

deprecating humour, it was agreed, is always the most effective. According to a White House aide, one reason why Jimmy Carter became unpopular was that his idea of self-deprecating humour was to insult his staff.

Gerald Ford's humour was somewhat more genial. He recites a story of a reception held for him after a campaign speech in Omaha, Nebraska. A 'little old lady' came up to him and said, "I hear you spoke here tonight." "Oh, it was nothing," demurred Ford. "Yes, that's what I heard," retorted the old woman.

Ronald Reagan uses humour to ingratiate a confused electorate. As Mark Russell, one of Washington's most enduring satirists, describes it, Reagan was swept back into power on a landslide of disapproval. No doubt his personality projection, a skill acquired in years of Hollywood training, has helped Reagan's candidacy on both occasions. And humour, both rehearsed and spontaneous, has had a lot to do with it.

However, as one humorist cautioned, there is a distinct line between humour and ridicule. And when that line is crossed, it has a world-wide impact on the US presidency. Humour, according to him, hurt Jimmy Carter

when they began to laugh at the president, instead of with him.

Yet, in the age of television, when political campaigns are sometimes ruled by the dictates of a movie box-office, presidents have almost no option but to use humour in their addresses. And many of them feel especially compelled to display their prowess at the annual dinners hosted by the Gridiron Club, a very influential Washington press club that sponsors political satirists. Said Club historian James Free with amused recollection, "All 17 presidents who addressed the Club were convinced of their endowment of a sense of humour."

Some presidential humour is had at the expense of other presidential candidates. Lyndon Johnson, whose humour was often of questionable taste, was asked what he thought of Gerald Ford, who was once a star football athlete. "He played too many games without a helmet," replied Johnson, caustically. And one Kennedy aide recalled that whenever they wished to dissuade Kennedy from some action they thought inadvisable, they would say to him, "That's exactly the way Richard Nixon would handle it."

Another favourite target is the



*Ronald Reagan: why do presidents need to be funny?*

press. Said Jimmy Carter of newshounds, "Lord forgive them, for they know not what they doeth." And once, when Lyndon Johnson was in hospital and they had to turn the psychiatric ward into a temporary press room, he, perhaps in anticipation of a good joke, asked what had happened to the patients. "We gave them all press cards," replied an aide, right on cue.

The press more than gets its own back, no doubt. Yet, as Art Buchwald put it, "Whatever we do, Mr President, it goes with the territory." He joked that the press had done such a good job on President Nixon, in fact, that Gerald Ford became President, and this conference was his way of thanking them.

The conference was a perfect chance for the members of the press present there, to once more sink their teeth into presidential flesh. Yet, they seemed to restrict themselves to a few playful pecks. In part, this may be due to the forbidding irony, that the conference was hosted by a former

president. In a way, the fragile boundaries that keep the relationship between the satirists and the White House necessarily adversarial, were transgressed. After all, as Malcolm Muggeridge, Editor of *Punch*, once said, "Humour is in essence anarchistic, and must occasionally be offensive to remind us of the grotesque disparity between intent and performance." Realising this anomaly, one young cartoonist admitted, "I am dismayed at the apparent warmth expressed towards cartoonists by Gerald Ford." He added that a satirist's secret dream was to have the president himself see his work, and be angry or frustrated enough to flush it down the presidential toilet.

Some attempts were made at the conference to move away from the merely anecdotal, to an analysis of the importance and history of humour in the presidency. In keeping with the unabashed patriotism of the Reagan era, much chest-thumping was heard, about how fortunate the United States was to have the freedom of

expression to laugh at presidents and the ability to laugh also at itself. Most analysts lamented, however, that to define humour was to attempt brain surgery. When you dissect it, the patient dies. It was recognised that many presidents, from Abraham Lincoln to Ronald Reagan have used humour to their advantage and those who took themselves too seriously, such as Herbert Hoover and even Richard Nixon, suffered for it. Satirists have always thrived best on controversial or unconfident presidencies. Said Art Buchwald in confession, "Watergate was our Camelot."

All the humorists and presidential staffers gathered in Grand Rapids agreed that the style for wit is set by the man at the top, and that working with a jovial president made their jobs a whole lot easier. It is said that when President Franklin Roosevelt's wife was once asked by a visitor to the White House where the President was, she replied: "Where the laughter is."

That is what humour in the presidency can be, at its best. ♦