



## THE KISS OF DEATH POLL

By Frank Bryan

Earlier this year in the summer's dark green, I was struck with two emotions that often recur with the luna moths and June bugs. One was elation: summer was only six weeks away. The other was depression: the days would soon start getting shorter. And oh yes, it is noticeable. By June 23rd night comes sooner. You can SEE winter coming. But in recent times (when you can divide the year by two), the masters of the universe have bestowed on us another reason to be grumpy in June: there was an election coming up in five months and already it had me bored to tears.

Understand: I am a political scientist by trade. I hold a Ph.D. in the subject of politics, write books about it. I get *paid* to be interested. Yet every even election year about the time winter begins (June 21st), I've about had it.

You know the feeling. The candidates bemoan campaign spending, long elections, lack of "straight talk" and "negative campaigning" as they all spend more and more money to innuendo each other for longer periods of time.

The parties used to have an unwritten commandment in Vermont: "Thou shalt not trash a member of thine own party." Now it reads "Thou shalt not trash a member of the other party either." Good Lord, have we gentrified campaigning too? What is politics without criticism? Have we precluded forever the possibility of any candidate (incumbent or otherwise) ever doing anything wrong that needs to be pointed out by a loyal opposition? Is our politics becoming quiche?

Besides we always reelect incumbents

anyway. In my book, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*, I said the door to the Congress "swings inward, not outward." We've never thrown out a Senator in this century and they damn seldom retire. Or take the Governorship. We elect a Governor every two years. Yet in this entire century, the number of times an incumbent has been defeated in a general election equals exactly one. Remember what the kids used to say a few years ago: BOORING!

Then there are the darker strategic designs one often hears about. This candidate is "really thinking about 1988." That one is running for Congress but "really wants to be Governor." Some are engaged in trial heats, others are "eyeing" some other office. It is like a game of musical chairs played by the same people again and again with special seats reserved for the incumbents.

But the most tedious thing of all is the polls. Media people like polls. They even hire people to take them, thereby creating their own news. Not even Superman was allowed to interfere with history. Polls also allow the media to use the language of horse racing: "catching up," "narrowing the gap," and so on. Forgive the newspeople. What would you do if you were assigned a task akin to making Mozart interesting to Daryl and his brother Daryl?

Some years ago elections were a bit more fun because of Vince Naramore's "Salisbury Poll." Salisbury was a "bellwether" town (it almost always voted for the winner). Remember the old saying "as Maine goes, so goes the

Nation"? In 1936 when only Maine and Vermont voted against FDR it was changed to "as Maine goes, so goes Vermont." Anyway, Naramore simply went to the town of Salisbury with a ballot box under his arm. Once he had determined the inclinations of the voters there, he'd report them with the observation that Salisbury was a town that knew how to pick a winner. Usually it worked out. The trouble was the candidates began to descend on Salisbury in great numbers searching for voters to influence before Naramore got there. For it seems candidates would rather win polls than elections. Salisbury became self-conscious. The Salisbury Poll disappeared. Vermont elections became more boring still.

In order to save my sanity and add a little zip to the electoral process, I have conceived of a new twist in polling. It is a Real Vermonter's Poll since it is based on obstinacy and independence rather than going along. After all, a bellwether is a ram with a bell around his neck and nothing between his legs — hardly an appealing image for a Real Vermonter. I call it the "maverick" or KISS OF DEATH POLL.

The concept is simple. Deep in the hills of Vermont there is a town (call it Clutsville Notch) that has a horrendous record in voting for winners. More than any other Vermont town they tend to rally behind the loser. I have polled that town and now know who is leading there in both the Governor's race and the Senatorial contest. This allows me to predict who the loser (I mean winner) will be. Two weeks before the election, I shall call a news conference and congratulate the

leading candidate in Clutsville Notch with a KISS OF DEATH proclamation that reads — “You will apparently carry Clutsville Notch: Our condolences to your family.”

Lest you think this is a frivolous exercise for someone who is piled high with degrees (Vermont knows what THAT means) in political science, consider the profound benefit this poll will have for the political system. First of all we will know who the winner (I mean loser) is two weeks before the election. This will put an end to the boredom that much sooner. More importantly the candidates (who will be desperate to win by losing) will learn to show up in Clutsville Notch early in the campaign to bad mouth themselves. When this is broadcast by the Press, the voters will finally get an accurate picture of the candidates. And that, no matter what else is not, is surely progress. There is no rule in Vermont against introspective negativism, after all.

Imagine the KISS OF DEATH poll in place this year, for instance. There would be Madeleine Kunin speaking from the back of a pickup truck. “Whatever Peter says about me is false. Despite what he says, I don’t deserve a second term. I’m really a wishy-washy liberal who has alienated both the developers and the environmentalists. My Governorship has been a directionless attempt to prove to Vermonters that I can be as good a governor as Dick Snelling. Hey, I was the FIRST WOMAN GOVERNOR OF VERMONT. That’s enough for me.”

On the next corner Peter Smith will be holding forth: “I know I can’t win anyway. I really am looking at 1988. The only reason I ran was because I’ve got time and money on my hands and I wanted to show the Party I had the courage to lose to Madeleine twice before I’m 42. Please don’t upset my schedule by voting for me. Besides who needs a rich, preppie banker’s son as Governor of Vermont? You people in Clutsville Notch know a loser (“winner”, he thinks evilly) when you see one. I’m it.”

Meanwhile on the lawn of the local bank, Mayor Sanders is holding a sign that reads: “It’s 10:00 A.M. Do you know where your money is?” His

speech is short and to the point.

“Anyone who would elect a Socialist Governor of Vermont is a damned fool. And what Mrs. Kunin says is ABSOLUTELY TRUE. If I’m elected, Danny Ortega has agreed to become Secretary of the Agency of Administration.” From the back of the crowd of five someone is heard to yell, “Power to the People. Hell. Power to Sanders.” “Right on,” says the Mayor.

Over at the country store Dick Snelling huffs: “It’s true, it’s true. I am an arrogant millionaire that can’t suffer fools. I’d be a disaster in the Senate. In the Senate you have to go along to get along. Leahy’s good at that. Everybody knows I’m firmly committed to not getting along with anyone. And, my friends, it hurts me deeply to admit this (since I’m so egotistical) but I’m NOT as bright as everyone says I am — even though I am the smartest person in Vermont. If I were as smart as Pat Leahy says I am, would I be standing here urging you to vote for him?”

Meanwhile down at the town cemetery (where he seems to fit in) Pat Leahy intones: “Blah, that’s what my twelve years have been, blah. I’ve skipped from issue to issue trying to find something to be interested in and I keep striking out. Heck (Leahy doesn’t say the H word in public) when you think about it, what’s incumbency worth anyway? A freshman Senator with a big mouth is worth more than a boring member of the minority party who’s favorite word is “outraged” and whose main concern in the Senate is building secret lists on ways to combat terrorism. Dick Snelling has been saying I’m a big spender. Wrong! My goal in life is to tax the LIVING HELL (oops) out of people to get the money to buy the means to tell them how to live their lives. Dick’s the one. It would be an outrage if he loses.”

This would be the real merit of the KISS OF DEATH POLL — getting each candidate to trash themselves individually since we don’t allow criticism from opposition candidates. Besides I don’t know anyone else with the moxie to do it. Do you?

I’m off to Clutsville Notch to find out who’s losing (I mean winning) up there.