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Six Inches from the Presidency: The Gary Hart Jokes as Public Opinion

Alan Dundes

Oral political jokes are relatively rare in the United States, rare that is, in comparison to the scores of political jokes which are rampant in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe (Banc and Dundes 1986). One reason for this is the existence of a more or less free press in America. U.S. citizens are free to write letters to the editors of their newspapers and to participate actively in radio call-in shows to express their dissatisfaction or criticism of local, national, or international politics. Generally speaking, it is possible to voice political opinion in a variety of public forums without fear of reprisal from individuals who enjoy political power. Oral political jokes are a kind of folklore which tends to thrive in areas of the world where one finds totalitarian regimes accompanied by strict censorship. The relationship seems to be one of inverse proportion: the more repressive the regime, the more political jokes there will be.

It should also be kept in mind that what is taboo in a society is frequently a favorite topic in the folklore of that society. This may help explain the nature of what few oral political jokes do circulate in the United States. Sexuality continues to be a major area of linguistic taboo in America. Although there has been some increase in the use of four letter words, the vast majority of these words will not be found in most family newspapers or on regular commercial radio and television. (Cable television, in marked contrast, permits the utterance of nearly any obscenity.) Because jokes about cunnilingus and fellatio remain one of the last bastions of taboo in America—Legman (1975:549) claims that oral-genital acts constitute the ultimate taboo in the English language and it is true that even Cable television transmits little or no allusion or depiction of such acts—such jokes remain the province of oral tradition where there is no means of imposing absolute censorship.

The relationship between the content of uncensored folklore and censored media (newspapers, radio, television, motion pictures) may change over time. To the extent that taboo topics of the past have become less sensitive or offensive, they may be discussed openly on public media. This suggests that the thematic scope of oral folklore may be becoming increasingly limited. That may indeed well be the case, but so long as there is any topic or theme which is deemed truly taboo by a majority of the members of a society, there

will always be a corresponding need for uncensored oral tradition to fill the gap. It is accordingly precisely in the oral folklore that one may expect to find the most accurate barometer of public opinion on a variety of subjects including some of a political nature.

There remains one additional issue which must be addressed before proceeding to a brief consideration of the Gary Hart joke cycle of 1987–1988. Inasmuch as uncensored obscene jokes flourish in oral tradition *because* their subject matter cannot appear easily if at all in the mass media, it is often difficult if not well nigh impossible to publish such oral data. The same factors which in part led to the wide diffusion of the jokes in oral tradition tend to militate against the appearance of such jokes in print. The translation from oral tradition to print is never an easy task—even without the matter of obscenity. Oral style differs from written style, and the history of folkloristics is marred by inadequate attempts to retain oral stylistic characteristics in published collections of folklore. Typically, editors and publishers are unable to resist the temptation of revising or expurgating oral texts to make them ‘presentable’ to the general public. Even scholarly publishing outlets are not immune from self-censorship tendencies. As a matter of fact, it is quite often academic publishers who prove to be more prudish than semi-popular periodicals. The reasons given for censorship among university presses or periodicals published by them often include fears about the possible loss of funding if university officials or alumnae should take offense. In the present instance, it is simply not feasible to discuss the nature of Gary Hart jokes without providing representative oral texts.

The role of the media in either communicating or causing the fall of Gary Hart from political grace remains the subject of some debate (Judis 1987). The question revolves around the issue of whether the press hounded Gary Hart, e.g., by placing reporter-observers outside his residences around the clock, or whether the press was simply fulfilling its responsibility to report on both the public and private activities of any major political figure. On Sunday, May 3rd, 1987, the *Miami Herald* released a story about Senator Gary Hart (1936-) of Colorado who had been by all accounts the front-runner for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination. According to the story, Senator Hart had had a rendezvous with a 29-year-old blonde sometime actress-model named Donna Rice. A married man, Hart in the face of photographic evidence was forced eventually to admit, for example, that he had taken an overnight boat trip with Ms. Rice from Miami to Bimini on a boat with the unlikely but apt name of “Monkey Business.”

It is not altogether clear whether it was the charge of adultery which abruptly and unceremoniously ended Hart’s presidential plans or whether it was his bumbling, fumbling and somewhat arrogant attempts to deny his involvement with Donna Rice. In any event, the combination of politics and sex proved too much for the American public to ignore. Starting within hours of the Sunday *Miami Herald* story’s publication and continuing for months afterward, a series of Gary Hart jokes was generated which circulated around the entire country in record time. The jokes were not always of very high quality—if one might be permitted a subjective aesthetic judgment—many of

them were little more than simple-minded puns on the word “rice”—but they were told and retold with gusto anyway.

In documenting Gary Hart’s tryst or liason with Donna Rice, the press could and did not give any actual details of specific sexual activity. There were no eye-witnesses to prove that any such activity occurred other than the two principals. The public, however, happily filled in this lacuna by inventing and reinventing countless jokes, the majority playing upon the name Rice. The pretend confusion of food and sex probably accounts for the greatest number of Gary Hart jokes. Folklorist Elliott Oring correctly noted that it is precisely the area of curiosity *not* covered by the press which inspires the subject matter of joke cycles (1987:283).

By Sunday, May 10th, 1987, one week after the initial story broke, one could hear such jokes as: “What’s Gary Hart’s favorite dish? Rice pilaf [peel off],” and “First we had Watergate, then Irangate, and now we’ve got Tailgate.” At the same time, fellatio jokes were also heard: “What do Donna Rice and Christa McAuliffe have in common? They both went down on the Challenger.” The Challenger disaster to be sure inspired its own cycle of sick jokes (cf. Simons 1986; Smyth 1986; Oring 1987). “When Hart was asked by reporters, ‘Did you commit adultery?’ his answer was: ‘Do blow-jobs count?’” Another common joke was “What do Gary Hart and the entire population of China have in common? They were all eating rice last Saturday night (last week).” “Do you know what ‘Hart’ stands for? *Had any rice today?*” “Have you heard about the Gary Hart diet? You eat rice three times a day and lose everything.”

Some of the jokes utilized the last name of the leading Republican presidential contender, Vice-President George Bush. “Hart’s aids told him afterward: ‘We said Bush was the opposition, not the goal.’” A version of the joke told at least as early as 11 May 1987: “Gary Hart was told to pursue (lick) Bush. He just misunderstood.” Occasionally the jokes involved some rather clever word-play: “When Donna Rice was asked who her favorite candidate was, she replied, “My heart belongs to Bush, but my bush belongs to Hart.”

By a coincidence which may not be all that curious, another scandal involving sexuality at the national level emerged at the same time as that of Gary Hart. This scandal mixed religion and sex rather than politics and sex, but it too produced a small joke cycle. Televangelist Jim Bakker, the promoter of the PTL (= Praise the Lord) television network, had some years earlier become involved with a young secretary named Jessica Hahn and news of this sexual adventure emerged around the same time as the Gary Hart affair. Acronymic jokes included: “What does PTL mean? Pass the Loot, or Pay the Lady”, referring to the considerable sum of hush-money Bakker had allegedly paid to Jessica Hahn. It was not surprising that the PTL and Gary Hart joke cycles occasionally merged: “Did you hear that Jim Bakker and Gary Hart are founding a new university in Utah? They’re calling it ‘Frig-em Young.’”

A more important linkage to an earlier scandal referred to Senator Ted Kennedy’s tragic incident at Chappaquiddick Island in Massachusetts in 1969. In that misadventure, Senator Kennedy’s own presidential aspirations

were permanently dampened by a car accident which claimed the life of his young companion Mary Jo Kopechne. The public, including those individuals favorably disposed towards Kennedy's political views and grateful for his praiseworthy legislative efforts in the U.S. Senate, has never forgiven him for the events which ended in Ms. Kopechne's sad death. One typical joke goes as follows: Senator Kennedy and Mary Jo Kopechne were driving along a road. She tries in vain to get his attention: "Ted, there is something we simply must discuss." "Later, later," he replies. "No, Ted, there is something important that we must discuss." "Later, later," he snaps. "Look, Ted, supposing that I'm pregnant." "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it." [The Chappaquiddick incident involved Senator Kennedy's driving his car off a small bridge.]

The most common Gary Hart joke linking the Hart and Kennedy womanizing was: "What was Gary Hart's greatest regret? He didn't ask Ted Kennedy to drive Donna Rice to the airport." But one of the more ingenious of the Gary Hart jokes alluding to the earlier Kennedy affair is a pretended reference to the names of partners in a law firm. "Did you hear about the new law firm: Richard Nixon, Gary Hart, and Ted Kennedy? It's called 'Trick'em, Dick'em, and Dunk'em'." This turns out to be an update of an earlier political joke which circulated not long after the original Kennedy episode at Chappaquiddick. "What law firm represented Ted Kennedy in the Chappaquiddick case? 'Weiner, Diner, Dicker and Dunker.'"

This raises an important point. In any political joke cycle, there will be almost inevitably some jokes which are updated or revised versions of older jokes. It is not always easy to document the existence of the older versions because often they were poorly or inadequately recorded, partly for the reasons mentioned earlier with respect to translating oral obscenity into print. For example, during the John F. Kennedy/Richard M. Nixon presidential campaign in 1960, the following joke was recorded (Dundes 1963): "Mrs. Nixon was talking to Mrs. Kennedy. Mrs. Nixon boasted, "You know, Jackie, last night I slept with the future president of the United States." Mrs. Kennedy replied, "That Jack will do anything for votes." In view of the revelation of President Kennedy's propensity for womanizing, the joke still has some bite. In any event, President Lincoln supposedly told the same joke approximately one hundred years earlier referring to a local election in Illinois (Dorson 1972:122) and in all likelihood the joke is much older than Lincoln's version of it.

Of course, the general public does not much care whether a given joke is old or new so long as it fits the current occasion. Old jokes updated are just as good if not better than brand new jokes. Consider the following joke told about President Nixon which was current in the early 1970s: "President Nixon wakes up one winter morning and is horrified when he looks outside his window and sees written in the snow on the White House lawn: "Fuck you, Tricky Dick!" Outraged, he summons the heads of the FBI, CIA, and other agencies. "This is a terrible insult and I want something done about it immediately. Find out who did this." A day or so later, the heads of the FBI and CIA report to the president. "We have good news and bad news." "What's the good news?" asked the president. 'The good news is that through sophisti-

cated laboratory work we've run an analysis of the urine and we have determined that it was Henry Kissinger who pissed in the snow." 'And the bad news?' 'The bad news is that the message is in Pat's handwriting.' (Cf. Preston 1975:240–241). It turns out that this tale is popular in the Ozarks and goes back at least to 1885 (and is the title tale of Vance Randolph's (1976) *Pissing in the Snow & Other Ozark Folktales*).

The age of individual political jokes can be quite striking in those few cases where the scholarship has provided the necessary documentation. For example, here is a Rumanian political joke collected in the early 1980s (Banc & Dundes 1986:33):

- A man is running in panic down a Bucharest street. A friend stops him.
 —Why are you running like this?
 —Didn't you hear? They have decided to shoot all camels.
 —But for heaven's sake, you're not a camel.
 —Yes, but these people shoot first, and then they realize you're not a camel!

During Nasser's rule in Egypt, the following variant was popular:

- A wolf saw the jackal running in great haste towards the border of the Sudan.
 'Why are you running so, my dear friend?'
 'They are short of meat and have decided to kill all buffaloes.'
 'But you are not a buffalo.'
 'No, but by the time I convince the soldiers that I am not a buffalo my skin would have already reached the tannery.' (Kishtainy 1985:174)

These and other twentieth century versions give little sign of the venerable nature of this political joke. In a 13th century Persian version, it is a fox who flees. When questioned, he explains that camels are being pressed into service. The questioner observes that the fox looks nothing like a camel. Answers that the fox, "Be silent, for if the malignant, out of evil design, should say, this is a camel, and I should be seized, who would be so solicitous for my relief as to order an inquiry into my case?" In an even earlier Persian text from the twelfth century, it is a fox who runs away because the king has ordered all donkeys to be captured and put into forced labor (Omidsalar 1987:122). There are differences in these versions, but the jokes are clearly cognate, belonging to a single genetic story-line.

The inference to be drawn from this example is that some political jokes are of a sufficiently general and not topical nature so as to be transferrable from one culture to another. Many of these same jokes can be and indeed are told about dictators in diverse cultural contexts, leftwing and rightwing (Hirche 1964). In the case of the Gary Hart joke cycle, the majority of the jokes are simply much too topical to be easily transferred to other political figures. They depend, as has been amply demonstrated, upon puns on the names of Hart and Rice. According as the cycle fades, many of the jokes may pass into oblivion. (This is yet another reason for recording them in print.) Certainly, it is difficult to imagine the following Gary Hart joke applied to someone else: "The Gary Harts decided to go through the whole wedding ceremony again to renew their marriage only this time without the rice." This

joke alludes to the custom of throwing rice at or on the newlywed couple as a thinly disguised wish for fertility (rice = semen). As the joke depends upon the last name of Donna Rice, it is extremely unlikely that it could be re-cycled. On the other hand, 'What do the Gary Harts do after sex? Speak to each other on the phone,' or 'What does Gary Hart do after sex? Calls up his wife on the telephone' could conceivably be re-utilized in the future if the situation were appropriate. The same holds for plays on the word "erection." 'Did you hear Gary Hart's latest slogan? Have an erection, lose an election.' Similarly, 'What did Gary Hart say to Donna Rice? "I told you to lick my erection, not wreck my election.'" In theory, these creations might possibly be used again in the future if deemed applicable.

It is obviously easier to see how old jokes have been adapted to fit the Gary Hart case than to speculate about how new jokes inspired by Gary Hart's actions might be re-cycled at some future indeterminate date. Here is an example of an old joke updated: President and Mrs. Reagan, President and Mrs. Carter, Richard Nixon and Gary Hart are on a plane. There is a crisis in the air, but there are only two parachutes. The question is: who should get the parachutes? President Reagan says, "Well, I'm president and Nancy is first lady, so we should get the parachutes." Jimmy Carter, always the gentleman, says, "Let's give them to the two women." Nixon says, "Screw the women!" and Gary Hart says, "Is there time?" In a variant of this joke, there is one more passenger heard from, namely, Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, who speaking right after Gary Hart says, "Is there time?" To understand the repeated punch line of this variant, one must remember that Biden's own 1988 presidential candidacy was abruptly terminated when documented charges revealed that he had borrowed without proper acknowledgment from political speeches made by other individuals including a prominent labor leader in England. The folk commentary on Biden's plagiaristic proclivities accounts for the repetition of Hart's punchline. In yet another variant, the final speaker is Michael Dukakis who says "Did you hear what Biden said?" referring to the fact that it was a member of Dukakis's staff who first brought Biden's plagiarism to the attention of the press and the public. Another joke commenting upon Biden was: "Did you hear Joe Biden was writing his autobiography? It's called *Iacocca* [referring to a best-selling autobiography by Chrysler chairman of the board Lee Iacocca]. The extreme topicality of these political jokes makes it virtually impossible for them to be transmitted from generation to generation with substantial change. From the Gary Hart joke cycle we may assume that the majority of political jokes are made for the moment and once enjoyed fall into near oblivion. Who knows how many ephemeral and brief political joke cycles in centuries past came and went without anyone thinking to record them for posterity.

The parachute joke, in contrast, will almost certainly be updated to refer to politicians yet unborn. It is a standard international joke sometimes told about a sinking ship with limited lifeboat capacity (Dundes 1987:101). For example, near the end of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, the following variant circulated in the United States: "Reagan, Gorbachev, and Marcos are on an airplane. There is engine trouble and only one parachute. Reagan says,

‘I am the leader of the Free World and I should have it.’ Gorbachev says, ‘I am the leader of the rest of the world and I should have it.’ Marcos says, ‘Let’s decide this in a fair, democratic way. Let’s take a vote, secret ballot.’ So they vote. The totals: Reagan 1, Gorbachev 1, Marcos 14.”

There appears to be no dearth of political histories, but few of these contain detailed accounts of anecdotes and jokes relevant to the period under consideration. One need only consult the various anthologies of political humor and compare their contents with the jokes reported here to see that obscene folk political humor is totally omitted from such anthologies (e.g., Dudden 1962; Lewis 1964; Schutz 1977; Larsen 1980; Gardner 1986). Yet in the case of Gary Hart, it seems quite probable that the rash of Gary Hart jokes helped seal this particular politician’s fate. Although helped by his stalwart but long-suffering wife Lee, Gary Hart did try to make a come-back in the 1988 presidential primaries, saying “Let the people decide,” the people had in fact already decided and they did so partly in the form of the political joke cycle here described. The former front-runner performed miserably and received virtually no significant percentage of the primary votes. Perhaps the only thing accomplished by Hart’s brief re-entry into the presidential race was to give further impetus to the joke cycle already in existence.

Once again there were the endless puns on the names Hart and Rice. “And who said Rice wasn’t good for the Hart?” “Have you heard? The Surgeon General has determined that rice causes heart burn.” But many just referred to womanizing. “Why does Gary Hart not want to talk about politics? He wants to skirt the issues.” “Gary Hart says that he loves this country only he is going to do it one citizen at a time.” More devastating though were the titles of books supposedly written by Gary Hart. “Have you heard about Gary Hart’s new book? It’s called *69 Ways to Eat Rice*. Here cunnilingus and fellatio are combined in one joke. More popular was another volume: “What’s the title of Gary Hart’s new book? *Six Inches from the Presidency (White House)*.”

Some readers may feel that the folk were too unremittingly cruel in their treatment of Gary Hart in the joke cycle; others may consider that he got just what he deserved. In either case, there can be no question that Gary Hart’s political future was not helped by the spate of Gary Hart jokes that seemed to appear almost instantaneously after his alleged sexual peccadilloes were revealed in the press. These jokes, remember, were not composed by campaign managers of political rivals, nor were they fabricated by professional comedy writers as far as we can determine. (Jokes about cunnilingus and fellatio are not to be found in Johnny Carson’s monologue on the *Tonight Show* on television!) These jokes came from the folk and were transmitted and enjoyed by the folk—they traveled by word of mouth, not by newspaper, magazine or radio. Right or wrong, these orally transmitted jokes constitute a vital source of public opinion about the political life and times of Gary Hart.

The jokes also serve to demonstrate the validity of the axiom which states that comedy often comes from tragedy. The personal tragedy of Gary Hart, even if self-inflicted and avoidable, still may have caused grief to him, his family, and his partisans, but it generated a short-lived but nonetheless powerful joke cycle which produced a great deal of mirth and merriment at his

expense. The joke cycle probably finished Gary Hart as a serious political force in the United States. The combination of sex and politics was just too tantalizing for the American public. The formula is time honored. One thinks of the English teacher who explained to her class that a good short story should have religion, high society, sex, and mystery. Moments later, a little boy put up his hand and announced that he was finished with his composition. The teacher, surprised at the speed with which the boy wrote his story asked him to read it aloud to the class: "My God," said the duchess, "I'm pregnant! Who did it?" In the case of Gary Hart jokes, there is little mystery and no religion. The mixture of political celebrity and sex was evidently more than sufficient to bring down to earth a high-riding front-runner. Six inches from the presidency, indeed! A miss is as good as a mile!

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Linguistic Play in Autograph Book Inscriptions

Thomas A. Green and Lisa Devaney

Autograph albums and the traditional texts which fill them have appeared in American adolescent culture since the early Twentieth century. The albums themselves, Meguido Zola argues, have an even more venerable history, being directly linked to the Renaissance scholar's *album amicorum*, the German *stammbuch* and the Victorian memory album (1980:185). Regardless of its lineage, the autograph album tradition in North America manifests an impressive range of adaptations within the general practice of inscribing words in a bound set of blank pages.

The present study limits its coverage to data obtained from autograph books solicited through a classified advertisement placed in the *Bryan* (Texas) *Eagle* in February 1988 and from students in Introductory Folklore courses at Texas A&M University during the Spring Semester of the same year. The locations by state and the dates of the inscriptions are as follows: Texas (1929, 1930, 1931, 1969, 1980, 1972, 1980, 1982, 1983), Hawaii (1964), New York (1969), Ohio (1973), and California (1961). Given this limited sample we cannot claim exhaustive coverage of the subject. Comparison with published collections, however, suggests that our data is both representative of and consistent with the genre as it has developed within the adolescent population of the United States.

Moreover, we do not intend the following comments to exhaust the range of aesthetic features employed by the authors of such inscriptions. The present analysis, rather, proposes several techniques used in autograph inscriptions to manipulate visual codes for the purposes of play at both aural and visual levels of communication.

Since the late 1940's a handful of articles have been published in scholarly journals treating the subject of autograph album inscriptions. The majority of these articles may be characterized as collections of texts from various regions of the United States rather than as analyses of the content, structure or function of the materials.