

THE NATION'S PULSE



THE MAKING OF A VICE PRESIDENT

by Kevin J. McNamara

George Bush's recent brush with mortality showed yet again that everyone has an opinion about the man who sits an irregular heartbeat away from the presidency. Unfortunately for Dan Quayle, the prevailing opinion is not a kindly one. Yet most people believe Quayle is not qualified for the position he holds because that is what newspapers and television have been telling them ever since his nomination to the vice presidency in August 1988.

Ideological considerations aside, the negative coverage probably originated with reporters' having been caught off-guard when Bush made his choice in New Orleans. Far from their Washington sources, they had to start from scratch in their assessments of Quayle, focusing not on his record in government and politics but on his personality and private life, specifically: (1) his age—41—and alleged lack of experience; (2) his brush eight years earlier with lobbyist and *Playboy* model Paula Parkinson, and (3) his Vietnam War-era enlistment in the Indiana National Guard. To a lesser extent, they examined his undergraduate academic performance and his family's wealth.

Any mention of Quayle's public record was buried under an avalanche of personal trivia. After one month and a hundred stories devoted to Quayle, for instance, the *Washington Post* ran an article with a headline that indicated the newspaper had perhaps failed to convey much of substance about Quayle: "Still a New Quantity to Many Voters, Quayle Works to Help Fill in the Blanks." The rival *Washington Times* admitted the press was in the dark, headlining one story "Surprised Television Newsmen Query: 'Who is Dan Quayle?'" At the height of the 1988 campaign, Ted Koppel of "Nightline" asked ABC News correspondent Jackie Judd whether she had ever reported on the substance of Quayle's views, "rather than the image of Dan Quayle."

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"Give me a minute to think about that," she said, and hesitated. "I have to tell you I think not."

The sorry portrait of Quayle that emerged from this kind of coverage—and the sheer volume of it—left an indelible imprint on public opinion.

Yet the news media once described Quayle very differently. Until his nomination to the vice presidency, Washington correspondents praised Quayle with the kind of superlatives that inevitably brought him to the attention of people like, well, George Bush. If Quayle was not a household name as a senator, neither was he obscure. According to *The Ultimate Insider: U.S. Senators in the National Media*, by Stephen Hess, Quayle received virtually the same level of press coverage as Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, against whose "stature" his own would be unfavorably compared.

Moreover, journalists' assessments of Quayle during this period were consistently laudatory. A few examples:

- Early in his first term as the junior senator from Indiana (1981-87), the *Chicago Tribune* put Quayle among an elite group of six "rising stars" in the United States Congress.
- In 1984, veteran *New York Times* reporter Hedrick Smith said in a front-page article that Quayle "has emerged as a leader of the 16 Republicans elected in 1980."
- In 1985, *Congressional Quarterly* said Quayle "has built a reputation as a pragmatic, thoughtful senator with an interest in finding ways to make the Senate work more efficiently." In addition, *CQ* said, he had created "a smoothly running constituent service operation."
- In 1985, the *New York Times* reported on a study listing Quayle among "the twelve most underrated members of Congress." The twelve senators were chosen, the *Times* said, because "they are unpretentious, rarely partisan legislative professionals who are candid, well-informed, and not prone to self-promotion."

- In 1986, *National Journal* credited Quayle with a "deft performance" in office. "Contrary to the predictions made in 1981, Quayle has been a Senate success story," the *Journal* continued. "He may not yet be in the top rank of senators in power or skill, but he has clearly made himself a force to be reckoned with. Some who have watched him believe that his potential is unbounded." The article listed only three senators as "potential Senate leaders." Quayle was one of them.

- In 1988, *Politics in America* said: "Quayle today is seen as a diligent senator willing to work on complicated defense issues and interested in reforming Senate procedures to make the chamber function more efficiently."

- In 1988, *The Almanac of American Politics* said: "In the Senate, Quayle has been one of the most active and successful members of the Republican class of 1980. . . . Dan Quayle brings to the Senate sunny good looks, a cheerful temperament, and an inclination that many observers found surprising to dig into issues, do his homework, and come up with workmanlike legislative solutions to problems of government." The write-up concluded that "Quayle is not a political accident, but a fortunate young man with good political instincts."

- National newspapers continued to report on Quayle's work in the Senate right up until Bush introduced him in New Orleans. The *Wall Street Journal* followed Quayle's successful effort to clarify the INF treaty well into 1988, featuring prominent articles about—and also by—Quayle. Eleven days before Bush announced his vice presidential choice, Quayle's photograph appeared in the *New York Times*, with mention of his role as leader of Republican opposition to a pending defense bill.

What had Quayle done to deserve such coverage? For one thing, there was his legislative record, a brief summary of which would include the following: he played a key role in securing Senate approval of the sale of AWACS

surveillance aircraft to Saudi Arabia; introduced a comprehensive tax-reform plan in 1982, before Bill Bradley unveiled similar legislation; authored and won approval of a bill that he and others would later view as his finest legislative accomplishment—the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982; headed a panel to study Senate procedural problems in 1984 and developed reforms which, though ultimately rejected, were said by the *Almanac of American Politics* to "address genuine problems sensibly"; secured enactment of two key defense procurement reforms; won Senate approval of a measure that required American and Soviet negotiators to close a loophole in the INF treaty; and was chosen to lead Republican opposition in the Senate to major trade and defense legislation.

Moreover, there was his political record, which included two House races and two Senate campaigns—all victorious. Quayle was recruited in 1976, according to *The Making of a Senator: Dan Quayle*, by Richard F. Fenno, Jr., only after "all the obvious, experienced candidates had declined to run" against a "very popular" eight-term congressman, Ed Roush. Quayle was 29, had no electoral experience, trailed in the polls 61-27, and "almost no one believed he could win." He won.

In 1980, he challenged Birch Bayh, an 18-year Senate veteran and one-time presidential contender whose polls showed him forty points ahead of Quayle. "Very few people thought [Quayle] could win," Fenno writes. He won again. When re-elected in 1986, Quayle received a higher percentage of votes than any previous candidate for the U.S. Senate from Indiana.

This was the Quayle that George Bush selected as his running mate, and in introducing him in New Orleans, Bush stressed the praise that had been heaped on Quayle in the media: "Senator Quayle is one of the rising stars in the Republican Party. In fact, the *National Journal* called him a Senate success story."

The rest, as they say, is history. □