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## Bob Dole, Quipping and Questing for the Tall Cotton

By Tony Kornheiser

Bob Dole hit the campaign trail limping.

There were at least five different managers, maybe as many as eight. People stopped counting. This is the presidency, not the Guinness Book of Records.

After his natural constituency of farmers gave him only 2 percent of the vote in Iowa, he decided not to be an active candidate in Puerto Rico and not even place his name on the ballot in his home state, Kansas.

Yet there he was last week, sitting in the Senate cafeteria, where the ceiling is so high not even his dreams could reach it, getting ready to grind it out for eight days in the snows of New Hampshire—where the polls showed him getting even less support than in Iowa—to test waters that were already freezing him out.

Maybe he was dead, but he wouldn't lie down.

"We're a longshot now," he said. "I know that."

There was a sliced chicken sandwich and a glass of milk in front of him. He was on a short break, having spent that whole day working on the windfall profits tax bill and staring at two or three hours more. His beard was the color of slate and there were thin red lines at the bottoms of his eyes. When he spoke he looked at the plate. The stunning, slashing wit of Senator Droll was sleeping.

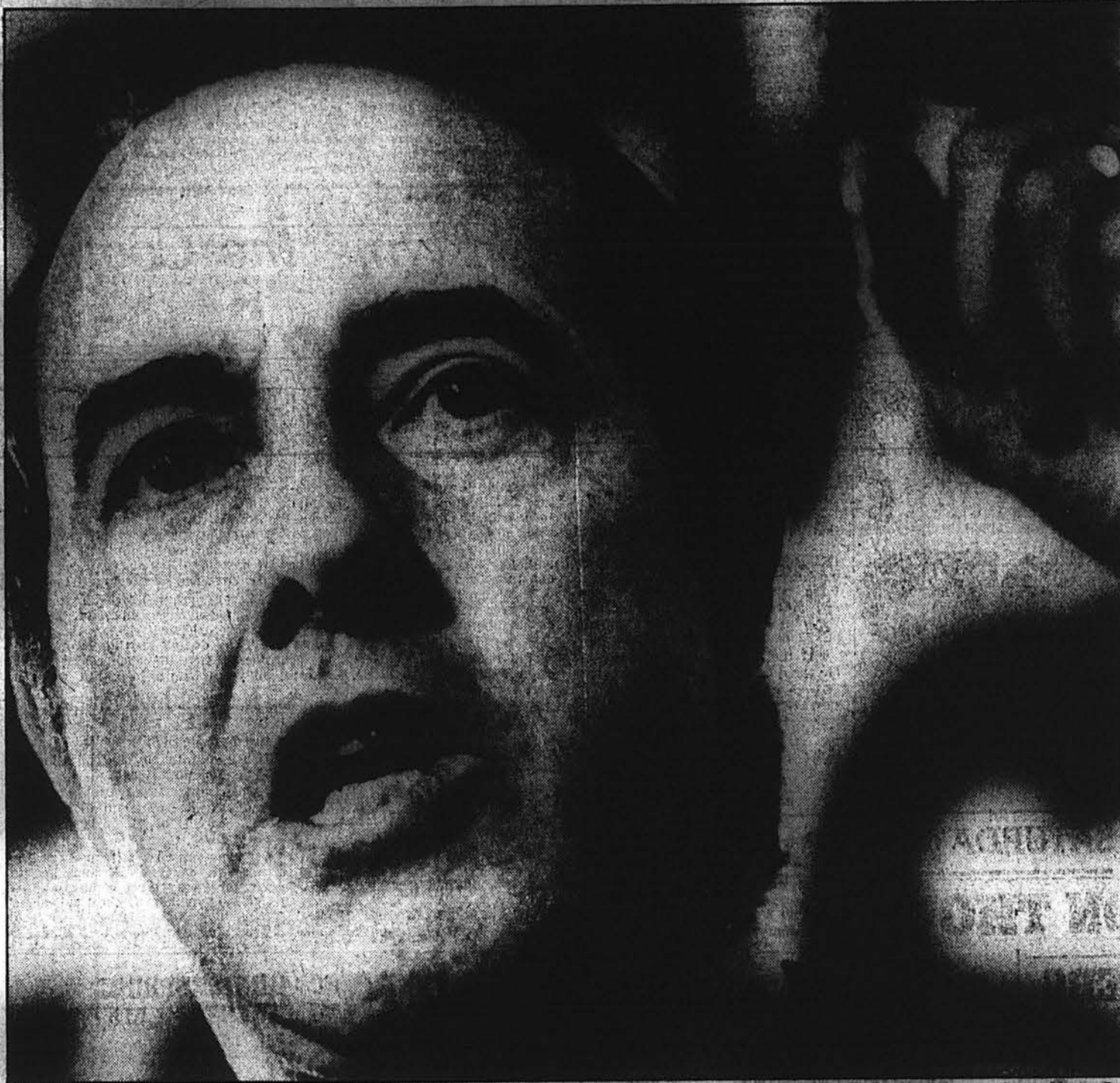
"Sometimes," he said, "when you come back on a Monday after leaving on Friday, and you haven't been anywhere because you've been everywhere, you wonder—Why am I doing it? What am I trying to prove? But there's this eternal hope out there for those of us in politics that you're going to make this work."

He snapped his fingers.

"... it's going to happen."

Snap. From down to up. He smiled quickly, like he was embarrassed at how suddenly he had changed gears. He lifted the glass to his lips, and perhaps it was the whiteness that brought him around to New Hampshire, and he started to ride again.

"I don't know what I've got up there. I don't want to be foolish. I didn't want to quit after the first thing, which Iowa was, but if you've given your best shot, spent all your money and you're not going anywhere—that's it, get away. If the house is on fire and about to collapse, you ought to at least get outside. I've got to do well in New Hampshire or it's the end



Bob Dole. By Larry Morris—The Washington Post

of the line. But if I can do well there—and a victory there for me would mean a first or a second: if I came in third it would be an immense victory—then I'm right back in the ball game."

Here he was, going from down to up again, like a roller coaster.

He would flirt with the plug, but just as he was about to pull it, he would breathe normally again. And now he was positively puffing.

"If Reagan doesn't win, it's curtains. So you have Reagan going down, Connally going down, Baker going down, and Dole coming up."

He lifted his eyes from his sandwich.

"I know, maybe I'm a dreamer."

He leaned forward.

"But you have to be a dreamer."

In 1976 the Republican Presidential ticket of Jerry Ford and Bob Dole got off 31 points down in the polls and lost by 2. But they lost. "After a while," Dole said, "people forget the score." Dole remembers the score. Dole remembers that the day of the election, "the Secret Service guy came up to me and said, 'You're gonna win. You're never gonna drive a car again. Well, we didn't win. And that night that Secret Service guy drove up home and said goodbye... The next few days on my way to work I'd go past the White House and I wouldn't look at it. I guess it was kind of childish, but I couldn't believe Carter had beaten Ford. I'd drive on Mass. Ave. and pass the vice president's house, and I must admit I felt a little sense of sadness, thinking what might have been, how close I came."

Those nine weeks on the national campaign trail were "heavy stuff."

Dole lusted for another shot.

In 1977, he started roaming the country, checking it out to see if enough people wanted him to go for it. He wanted to become "an issues guy." He wanted people to know he did more than crack jokes. He is proud that his colleagues in the Senate think he is one of their most effective legislators. He thought issues might get him into that tall cotton. Although his closest advisers in and out of Kansas told him not to run, that it was an impossible dream, that would only jeopardize his reelection to the Senate in 1980, Dole remained stubborn. At 56 years of age, he declared for the presidency on May 15, 1979.

"He looked around," said one reporter who covered him in '76, "and

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said, 'Nobody running is any smarter. Nobody's a better politician than I am. Do more for the party—no, why the hell not me?'

But there was this matter of his public image.

Asked about that Dole started with phrases like "partisan, from the Nixon days... commentators called me a hatchet-man" before settling on "fuzzy... people maybe have heard of the name, but they can't think of what I've done."

He didn't say "funny."

And he is. Very.

"Had he not been a politician, he could have played Las Vegas," said Sen. Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.). "He's not a serious inn. Life is a game to him." said a reporter who covered him in his 1976 run for the vice presidency. "My overwhelming impression is that he can't make up his mind whether he wants to be president or Bob Hope."

You simply cannot read a story on Dole without reading some of his one-liners followed by the key words, "Dole quipped."

"I've just been campaigning in Iowa—for no apparent reason."

"If Howard Baker loses, he can always open up a tall men's clothing store—in Japan."

"George Bush says he's never been part of the problem in the Senate—well, he tried to be, twice, but he lost both times in Texas."

"I once called Carter 'chicken-fried McGovern,' and I take that back—I've learned to respect McGovern."

"The vice presidency is a great job—it's all labor work and no heavy lifting."

"You had him in your fifth-grade class," said Christopher Lydon who covered Dole in '76 for The New York Times, and is now a newscaster in Boston. "He's the kid who was smart, combative, a little bit hostile, a little bit destructive. He was the one who'd say the nasty things about the other kids. He likes the risk of going into a joke without knowing if it'll go over. He likes the high wire."

There is an example of this. In '76, Dole was speaking at a Republican fundraiser in San Francisco. Best in mind that he was running for vice president and Jerry Ford was in the White House, someone got up and, quite angrily, demanded to know how it was that George Meany had gotten so powerful, how it came to be that Meany was running the country.

Dole didn't resist.

"Well, somebody has to," Dole quipped.

The humor has a vindictive side too. According to one reporter who was there, after defeating Dr. Bill Roy for the Senate in 1974—a particularly nasty campaign in which some of Roy's supporters tried to smear Dole with Watergate and some of Dole's supporters tried to cast Roy as an abortionist—Dole told his audience,

"He said that since my opponent

has a medical degree and a law degree that he was one in a million. Now he's one in 10 million—he's unemployed."

Though national political strategists agree that Dole is funny, they are not sure how much it helps him. "I'm not sure it's always effective," said Jim Baker, who worked on the Ford-Dole campaign and now works for George Bush. Said Lyn Norfziger, the former Reagan strategist: "I'm afraid the public sees him as a comedian."

Dole did not like hearing that.

But it wasn't the first time.

"I've had people tell me if they want a comedian they will vote for Jack Benny," he said. "Then too, people tell me if you let the critics get to you, you won't be Bob Dole. I only use humor when it's appropriate. I never tell dirty stories, and I think I have a good sense of self-deprecating humor. Okay, sometimes I use the needle. I once said that I got a standing ovation from John Tower and I didn't know the difference, but he's a friend. It just seems to me that you can take the issues seriously, but you shouldn't take yourself too seriously."

There was a grin that started behind his eyes.

One more time.

"Everyone who gets to the White House hires a funnyman. I can save money."

He said he was always funny.

"They even used to move me around the hospital to keep people cheered up," he said.

The hospital. Three and a half years there. First, total paralysis from a World War II wound. Then, through rehabilitation, complete recovery except for a useless right arm that even now he has to pick up like dead weight and place on the table when he sits to eat.

There are those who believe that everything Bob Dole is stems from that paralysis and that fight to recover. That his impatience with staff and intolerance with mediocrity stem from his protected, arduous struggle. That his pragmatism, his ability to compromise, his lack of a rigid philosophy—no global shorthand—stem from his having to take life one day at a time in the hospital. That his sense of absurdity and his compassion for the poor and the sick stem from his having been one of them for so long. That his continuing to run for the presidency, against all odds, stems from his drive to show that he is just as good, just as healthy, as everyone else.

"I never think of him as driven," said his wife, Elizabeth Hanford Dole.

"But I see real strength there. Strength and backbone, and I know that if he takes on a job, he won't give anything less than his best."

"I was always competitive," Dole said. "I do try harder. If I didn't, I'd be sitting in a rest home, in a rocker, drawing a disability pension."

He shot a look at his right hand. The fingers were bent around a pen. He has learned to hold a pen in public

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to avoid the visual dissonance of the injury.

"You know I've had people give me all sorts of ideas how to win. One guy told me I ought to wear a sling when I campaigned. Some guy in Iowa told me I ought to literally take off my shirt during the debates, hold up my arm to the crowd and say, 'You've got to vote for me. Here I am, a wounded war vet.'"

He grimaced at the thought of it.

His tone softened.

"But yes, I think you do try harder. You don't like to quit. No one worth his salt likes to quit. My wife keeps on telling me it's not the end of the line. I think I have the respect of my colleagues. That means a lot. For someone from a little town like Russell, Kansas, a poor kid, to become a United States senator, that's not too bad, is it? I hope the people of Kansas are proud of me, knowing I represent them, that I go over this country and talk of how much Kansas means to me."

And the sense of humor, how is it?

"Good. Haven't lost it. Hope I haven't lost it. You know I tell this story to myself. I'd just been elected to Congress and I was asked to go to Indiana and speak at some fund-raiser. I flew in and the county chairman said they'd only sold 10 tickets, and they'd had to drop the price to \$1 a ticket, and to hype the gate they were even giving away a color TV. So, to help I went to a radio station and gave them my bio. You know, born in Kansas, raised in Kansas, wounded in the war."

"So we get back into the car, and we tune in the radio, and this is what we hear: 'Congressman Bob DOYLE will speak tonight. Tickets have been cut to \$1, and they're giving away a color TV, but you have to wait until after DOYLE gets through speaking. Prior to the war he was a pre-med student. He was born in Kansas, raised in Kansas. He suffered a serious head injury in the war and then went into politics.'"

Dole's laughter was a carnival.

He got his first walk through what he calls "that tall cotton" in 1971, when Richard Nixon asked the freshman senator to be Republican national chairman. "Bob, you're the one man out there I can trust," Nixon told him, and Dole rewarded him with a fiercely partisan style that earned him the reputation as a hatchet-man. For his loyalty—his tireless campaigning for Republican candidates prompted Norfziger to say, "The Republican party owes Bob Dole more than it could ever repay"—Dole received the Order of the Arrow, which he believes was sunk deeply and twisted miserably by Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, the glow and doom twins of the Nixon White House.

In 1976, because Dole was accept-

able to the Reagan people and because it was thought that he could deliver the Grain Belt, Jerry Ford picked him as his running mate. Ford ran from the Rose Garden; Dole ran from the briar patch. No one who saw the debate with Walter Mondale could forget Dole's characterization of the wars of the 20th century as "Democratic."

George Will called Dole's campaign "harsh and negative." Evans and Novak wrote, "picking Dole was the one strategic blunder" and quoted a White House insider: "(Dole) cost us at least 2 percentage points, and that just might be the ballgame."

They talk of Dole as "thick-skinned," but that got through and hurt.

"It's a bad rap," said Baker. "We got Bob Dole to carry the farm states, and every one came in."

The farm states were key to Dole's 1980 strategy, too.

He and his campaign manager, Tom Bell—whose company has since filed suit against Dole, seeking \$238,338 in allegedly unpaid bills—planned to win big and win early with a coalition of the farmer, the vet and the handicapped.

"Obviously we never got it together," Dole said, five, six or seven managers later. "Sometimes I think we should've started earlier."

Others are not sure that's the problem.

"I don't think he's been successful in identifying a constituency," said Tully Plesser, who managed Dole to his '74 Senate win. "If you're unable to say, 'The reason you should vote for Dole is —,' or 'The kinds of people who vote for Dole are —,' you're in for rough sledding. The campaign hasn't answered those questions."

"I always sensed a hesitancy from him. He always seemed to have the Kansas race on the back of his mind."

said Gerry Murner, who quit as Dole's midwest coordinator. "I think he's presidential timber, but he didn't go out there when the people were ready to see a candidate. We had five different strategies in Iowa that could have beaten George Bush, but Dole didn't stick with any one. Dole has two tendencies that hurt him. One, he thinks he can close fast, and two, he doesn't follow the plan."

Dole talks of bad management, underfinancing and his role as minority floor manager of the windfall profits bill, which kept him away from Iowa.

No one disagrees that the combination did him in.

But

"It's impossible to plan for," said one man on Capitol Hill who has watched Dole for years. "I know he's never lost an election on his own, but this campaign has been a shambles. If he has this much trouble putting together the campaign staff, how on earth will he put together a Cabinet?"

Has the public spoken on you?

"Fardon?" Dole asked.

Has the public decided they don't want you as President?

"No, I don't think they know I'm out there."

Dole isn't kidding when he says, "This bill may be a windfall profit for some, but it's been a total loss for me. I spent so much time in the Senate with it, that when I got to Iowa, nobody was left." Unquestionably, doing his job in the Senate, the job he was elected to do, has hurt him as a presidential campaigner. He has become known as a very effective senator in recent years; he has been publicly praised for his ability to listen to all sides of an issue and then put things together by such diverse senate sources as Laxalt, Javits (R-N.Y.), Moynihan (D-N.Y.), McGovern (D-S.D.). None of them voted in Iowa.

"I guess it's hard to give two jobs 100 percent," Dole said. "Maybe I've been too cautious. You can't generate any money if you're not out there. Maybe I'm my own worst enemy. It's so strange, but my biggest asset seems to have become my biggest liability—my job."

Dole's wife, who has been on the trail in New Hampshire for weeks, said she has gotten "a positive feeling from many people about the way Bob has stayed in the Senate and done his job."

But Dole's critics say that by staying in the Senate, he has given himself an alibi for losing in the primaries and hasn't hurt himself for the Kansas run.

No one can look at a 96 percent voting record and accuse him of neglecting his responsibilities. But it is hardly the path to the tall cotton.

George Bush has worked it night and day for two years, the same way Jimmy Carter worked it last time around. When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose. George Bush. The mention of the name makes Dole wince. Bush was, after all, the man Nixon selected to replace Dole as national chairman. Dole says, an alliance Dole thinks the voters ought to ask more about. Bob Dole does not understand why Bush is winning. "He and Reagan are the weakest on the issues," Dole said.

George Bush.

"I guess he feels highly elated," Dole said, his voice as flat as the state he represents. "He must feel pretty good. He put it together."

Dole stared through his plate, into the floor.

"George Bush must be on a real high now," Dole said.

Dole is frustrated by this campaign. He thinks it should have been him, not Bush.

And New Hampshire may be Dole's last picture show.

"I get the feel of a lot of good will for Bob Dole up here," said Elizabeth Dole just the other day.

She has been there for the better part of a month. He has been there steadily since Saturday. The media blitz is based on the slogan—"Yes,

New Hampshire, there is a Bob Dole."

They are both excellent campaigners. According to Norfziger, "Bob Dole is such a good campaigner, you get the feeling sometimes he'd rather run for an office than win it." And according to Bob Dole, Elizabeth Hanford Dole, who have up a powerful job on the Federal Trade Commission to devote full time to her husband's campaign.

"It's a tiger. She's so into it."

But this has not been easy for them. Elizabeth Dole is a tremendous cheerleader, and she says not to make too much of this, but a couple of weeks ago she and her husband agreed not to talk about the campaign after 9 o'clock at night.

"I'm sure he was just kidding," she said.

But he didn't seem to be kidding.

"We agreed because it sort of got on our nerves when things didn't go right," he said. "It's not the way we do it. We ought to talk about the good things. You start complaining, you start finding bad in yourself, bad in everyone else. The campaign isn't everything—God, we're alive. We're here."

The Bob Dole for President national headquarters occupies two floors in a building in Alexandria. Last week the floors were quiet. Awfully quiet. A woman on the bottom floor sat by a switchboard that rarely lit up. Upstairs, in an office about the size of a tennis court, two women, their desks facing each other on one end of the room, sat and ate lunch. When a reporter wandered in and identified himself there was enough suspicion on those faces to film an episode of Columbo.

"Most everything going on is in Iowa," said John Crutcher, a Kansas. Crutcher wore a green shirt, open at the neck, and a cardigan. He had the cool look of someone who comes to check the condition of the rented furniture before ordering the repossession.

"Just some Indians around here he said. 'Everyone's in Iowa.'"

Iowa?

"Sorry, I mean New Hampshire."

He gave a quick tour. "Nobody here to talk to. Staffs in New Hampshire. Just some accountants here. Maybe you should have called first."

Why here? Why not have the office in Washington?

"Cheap. Ha-ha, we're not the John Connally campaign, you know. We have to walk, not take the elevator."

It was that night that Bob Dole sat in the Senate cafeteria and talked for nearly two hours about what was and what might have been. After an hour or so he rose when Sen. Birch Bayh (D-Ind.) came in to talk briefly about the windfall profits bill. A compromise, perhaps?

"Excuse me," Bayh said. "I don't mean to interrupt your interview... writing about you, Bob?"

Dole smiled.

"Yeah, but don't worry," Dole said, getting up to greet his good friend. "It's not my obituary."

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