

Political moderates dare to be dull

By Gordon Mehler

Pollsters and pundits are taking the national temperature again as the 1988 presidential campaign begins to heat up. What they are noticing (and complaining about) is how, with a few exceptions like Jesse Jackson on the left and Jack Kemp on the right, the candidates sound like knee-jerk moderates.

The campaign message goes something like this: Our government must act with compassion, but also with fiscal restraint. We must stand up for freedom abroad, but also recognize the limits of our power.

These themes are sober, practical and balanced, but a lot of party strategists believe they will not win the election. Instead, they are looking for a candidate with "vision" and "passion," someone who will cast aside reservations and hesitations and, like Ronald Reagan, inspire the electorate.

From an image standpoint, the candidates thus far have not generated much enthusiasm. Support for Gary Hart, the former Democratic front-runner, was so tentative that a yacht trip with a model knocked him out of the race in less than a week. Support for George Bush, the Republican front-runner, is not much deeper. He is being dismissed as a powdered milk politician—flat, lukewarm and fuzzy on the issues.

But those who hope that a candidate radically different from Hart or Bush will emerge to capture the presidency next year are apt to be disappointed. Unless things fall apart, the center will hold. Unless some domestic controversy or international crisis causes many voters to move away from the center, moderates will dictate the outcome of the '88 election.

At work is the rubber band nature of American politics. In the last 20 years, we have been stretched slightly to the left, when the crusade for civil rights and the war in Vietnam engaged our attention, and slightly to the right, when events in Iran and the excesses of '60s liberalism caused us to look for leadership and stability. But when, as now, the nation is at peace and the economy is improved, the elastic contracts and we are back in the center.

Our present quiescence is compounded by the fact that the political spectrum in this country is relatively narrow to begin with. In El Salvador, for example, extremes of right and left interact to create a volatile mix. Here, it is getting hard to tell the two major parties apart, and much has been written about America's middle-of-the-road pragmatism.

There is a twist, however. Centrist candidates and their supporters are uncomfortable about calling themselves plain old "moderates." So we hear about "neo-liberals" and "neo-conservatives," "enlightened realists" and, thanks to Mario Cuomo, "progressive pragmatists."

This concern about labels reflects the common gripe that it is hard to get excited about moderates. They lack ideological fervor. They are too drab, too boring, and their nuanced positions, unless packaged creatively, put voters to sleep. But beyond the perception of a gray exterior lies a deeper problem—the fear that moderates have no conviction, that they are fence-sitters who do not stand for anything. That fear is unfounded.

The dictionary defines a moderate as a person who avoids extreme political views. It is nonsense, however, to presume that this definition consigns moderates to a

safe midpoint on any given issue, or that it brands those who tend toward the middle as political Hamlets who can't make up their minds.

Moderation and indecisiveness are different things. To be decisive is to realize that there are costs attached to inaction, or half-hearted action, when swift and certain measures are required. Good presidents, like good judges and quarterbacks, must overcome paralyzing doubt and force themselves to move ahead after hard choices have been made.

To be moderate, on the other hand, is merely to acknowledge that no ideology has come up with effective solutions to all the difficult problems we face, and that balanced judgments are almost always preferable to those made from a single, isolated vantage point.

There is no correlation between moderation and decisiveness. A moderate can be decisive or indecisive, just as the hard choice finally made can turn out to be right or wrong.

So it is time for the moderates of 1988 to stop feeling sheepish. Moderates are not necessarily vacillating or neutral; they are simply independent. They are not less principled; they are just less reflexively partisan. They approach facts with fewer preconceptions, and their positions on the issues are refreshingly varied.

Moderates can support deregulation in the airline industry, but oppose it when applied to health and safety codes. They may favor strong sanctions against South Africa, yet vote to fund the Contras. They might be more liberal on social issues and more conservative on economic ones, or vice versa. And they can choose to have no position when they need additional facts.

Numerous surveys have shown that only a small minority of Americans is consistently liberal or conservative across a broad range of issues. This national trait has affected the governing style of presidents. Richard Nixon, for example, was elected in 1968 with a history of being a hawk and a cold warrior, but by the start of his second term he had ushered in détente with the Russians, opened the door to China and signed the SALT treaty.

Our system of government itself, with its checks and balances, can also force presidents into the mainstream. Even President Reagan has displayed greater moderation than his conservative reputation would suggest. Who in 1980 could have foreseen his involvement in removing poor people from the tax rolls, or withdrawing American support from right-wing dictators in Haiti and the Philippines, or encouraging AIDS research?

Of course, ideologues and extremists have their place. Taking an idea to its extreme can be a bold, if sometimes wrenching, way to test it. Moreover, moderates would agree that there are times when it is necessary to go to one extreme to insulate ourselves from another extreme that is worse. These are exceptions.

But 1988 is not likely to be a year of such exceptions. The much-touted conservative realignment has not taken place, and the Democrats, having lost four of the last five presidential contests, are not about to nominate a liberal. The next election will be a battle of the moderates.

In the meantime, candidates in the center will still be vulnerable to misguided complaints about moderates: that they are inconsistent, wishy-washy and bland. But careful observers will see something different—that the best moderates dare to be dull, and that we are better off as a result.

Gordon Mehler is a free-lance writer and a federal prosecutor in New York.