

Politics' Jekyll & Hyde

EDITOR'S NOTE: As a reporter and editor with this newspaper and in Kalamazoo, Tim Richard has covered Zolton Ferency, retiring Democratic state chairman, and 1966 gubernatorial candidate, many times. These are his personal views on Ferency the man and do not reflect any political opinions.

By TIM RICHARD
Sunday Editor

The last time I covered Zolton Ferency, it was a snowy February evening in Farmington, and whoever was supposed to have a key for the bank building where the local Democratic Club was meeting didn't have it, so we had to stand around in the cold for awhile. Ferency and I sat down in a car, and I asked him the usual reporter's questions about the usual topics of the moment and got the usual answers.

THEN WE GOT to shooting the breeze about the parliamentary system versus the independent executive system. The parliamentary system is where the legislative body picks the chief of government, and you know ahead of time that that chief can get along with the legislators and doesn't have to promote a demagogic image to stay in office.

We talked about the television star type of politics practiced in America for a few years now, and the lack of attention people pay to what a guy stands for. Any criticism of personalities was made irrespective of party lines.

I couldn't imagine holding that kind of a conversation with George Romney, G. Mennen Williams, John Swanson, the late Albert E. Cobo, or most of the politicians who have run for high office in Michigan in the last decade. Possibly Neil Staebler, more possibly Paul Hagwell.

The point is that the Ferency mind was able to leap beyond the immediate "public" issues and savor a more cosmic idea.

AND NOW Zolton Ferency is cutting as Democratic state chairman and will practice law (ugh) in Flint (double-ugh). The top Democrats who dumped him had their reasons-- Ferency's attack on the Democratic President's handling of the Viet war along with the party's internal operations-- and that's their business. But the intellectual caliber of political conversation will be lower with Zolton gone.

The standard journalistic analysis of Ferency is that he was glib and acid-tongued. That's not quite the truth.

THE TRUTH is that Ferency is a Jekyll-Hyde sort of split personality.

The Hyde side was best known to the public, for in his political speeches Ferency was a name-caller. He threw around complimentary names, feigning shock and infinite disgust at a Romney proposal that wasn't very far from what Democrats wanted. Some of those names were pretty funny, like when he referred to Gov. Romney and Sen. Griffin as "Batman and Robin," but the majority were low-level prose intended for consumption by the groundlings.

In an informal talk to a small group, Ferency would open with a name-calling standard line, and then a button would go click in his mind, and he'd stop it. He'd let down his hair and talk about ideas and history and plain people.

I saw this kind of performance the first time I covered him, at a Young Democrats Club meeting at Western Michigan University. He recited his canned, name-calling speech, the last of which was available to the press, and then reminisced about being poor in the Hungarian neighborhood when he was a kid, and how the Communists used to try and recruit, and how people felt about it.

IT WASN'T JUST a recollection of bygone days, but a high-level analysis of ethnic groups, politics, economics and history. It wasn't the kind of oration that made anyone cheer. Rather, it was fascinating, whether you agreed with Zolton's brand of flaming liberalism or not, and the speaker got as much intellectual respect out of those students as most of the best members of the faculty.

About the only person you can compare him to is perhaps Wm. F. Buckley Jr., the professional conservative. A lot of people who don't buy Buckley's brand of politics will listen to him or read him just to keep on their toes and have their mental faculties challenged.

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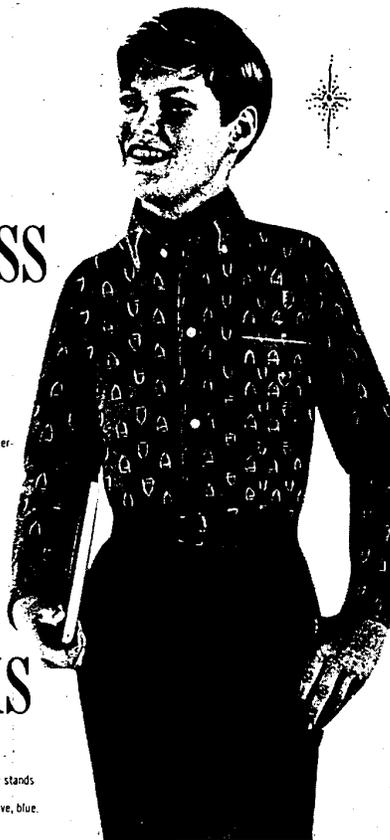
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