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The Nowhere Man

When the “Miracle” Turned to Mush

David Nyhan

He didn't steal money, go to jail, become embroiled in a personal scandal, or appoint a pack of thieves to high office, as other Massachusetts politicians have on occasion. But his fall was as dramatic as if he had done any or all of the above. From winning reelection in 1986 with 69 percent of the vote, then capturing the Democrats' presidential nomination, his fortunes sank like a stone.

Michael Stanley Dukakis, the stoic son of Greek immigrants, became a figure of ridicule in his third term. Thanks to the regional economy's sharp recession and the lingering effects of the negative radiation he absorbed in the presidential campaign, Dukakis plummeted in public esteem.

From the wand-waver of the “Massachusetts Miracle” to the dehumanized and demonized Nowhere Man of 1990, the governor and his travails are traced by a newspaper columnist who has chronicled his career.

This saga of sadness and remorse says something about Dukakis, the defining figure of Massachusetts politics over the past two decades. But it says something more about the state we are in, and the state it is in. And that, by and large, is not very complimentary.

The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest. Only aim to do your duty, and mankind will give you credit where you fail.¹

— Thomas Jefferson

This election isn't about ideology. It's about competence.”

That was all he asked: judge me on my performance. It was the standard he raised in accepting the Democrats' 1988 presidential nomination, in just those words. And competence was the flag he'd flown in winning three races for governor in Massachusetts.

Michael Stanley Dukakis built a remarkable political career on the plainest of foundations. “What you see is what you get” is how he explained himself a thousand times to the citizens of states far from where he'd been three times elected governor. Short, slim, polite, friendly, but all business: You may not find me particularly warm and cuddly. You may not like my philosophy of activist, do-something-about-it government. I'm not your

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basic song-and-dance man; no smile-and-a-shoeshine politician. But if you want your government competently run, I'm your man.

That was his pitch. It went over big with the homefolks, sleek with pride in the economic gains that made Massachusetts the go-go state of the mid-1980s. The voters purred as good times crested in the high-tech, defense, banking, insurance, and service sectors that flourished in Boston and its suburbs.

The voters who'd elected him over incumbent Francis Sargent in 1974, then dumped him for maverick Democrat Edward King in 1978, brought him back in 1982, then gave him the keys a third time. Dukakis was reelected in 1986 with 69 percent of the vote, crushing Republican George Kariotis in the most lopsided gubernatorial election in Massachusetts for more than a century. He wrote, in a 1988 book with economist Rosabeth Moss Kanter,

When I began my first term as governor in 1975, Massachusetts, like so many other industrial states, was in its worst economic condition since the Great Depression. We were called the New Appalachia . . . Statewide unemployment hit a high of 12.3 percent, and over 330,000 workingwomen and workingmen were without jobs . . . Since then, Massachusetts has not only bounced back a second time [the 1983 recession] but achieved a level of economic success that stands as an example of what is possible for America . . . Employment in Massachusetts rose from 2.27 million in 1975 to 3 million in 1987.²

This was the meat and gravy of politics, extolling the "Massachusetts Miracle." That juicy little tidbit of alliterative sloganeering eventually made him gag. Mouthing off about some kind of miracle came back to haunt the Duke. But as late as 1988, using all the optimistic, can-do catchwords that came to serve as the shorthand vocabulary of his successful presidential primary campaign — "diversity . . . fiscal health . . . private-public partnership . . . infrastructure . . . investing in people" — Dukakis promoted his economic competence far and wide.

True, he occasionally dismissed the "miracle" label as showy, exaggerated, non-lawyerly, even *un-Duke-like*. But in their book published just before the 1988 campaign, *Dukakis: An American Odyssey*, two of my *Boston Globe* colleagues, Charles Kenney and Robert L. Turner, went over the "miracle" claims in exquisite detail.

He does not shy away from taking at least some credit, and has not been reticent about describing the situation as "the most extraordinary economic turnaround of any state, maybe, in the history of the United States" . . . Perhaps the closest he has come to taking primary credit for having made the miracle happen was when he said in August 1987 that "the first question I'm asked wherever I go is, 'Can you do it for us here?' And my answer is, 'Yes, we can.'"³

So what happened?

Dukakis got himself nominated for president by running a shrewd and skillful primary election campaign. He impressed everyone, and shook the Republican Party to its roots, by stage-managing the Democrats' most successful national convention since 1976 (the year Jimmy Carter captured for the Democrats the only national election they have won in the last six). Then he ran a disorganized, largely themeless campaign for the general election. And got himself clocked.

He lost forty of the fifty states. The most richly detailed and relentlessly documented account of his defeat is contained in a book written by two more of my *Boston Globe* colleagues, Christine Black and Thomas Oliphant, *All by Myself*. Their bottom line:

He was in most respects an ideal candidate for the long grind in the primaries: disciplined, steady, the safest of bets. Dukakis failed to realize that in presidential politics the hurdles get higher as you go down the track. Trapped within his self-sufficiency, he never prepared himself to clear them . . . With the hopes of millions of Americans riding on him by then, however, he had no right not to be ready for that frenzy, no right especially after having been told what he would face . . .

In the final phase of a presidential election, however, there is no time for retailing; you either make the grand gesture, you either fight for the prize, or you are almost certain to lose, especially to the determined cynicism in a crusade of vilification. We believe that when the crunch came, Dukakis was overwhelmed.⁴

So. He ran. He lost. And he came home as if nothing had changed, and he still had command of all the weapons in his arsenal, with all their potency, that were his before he lost the presidency. Wrong, wrong, wrong, Michael.

Next, for a combination of personal, public, and political reasons, he decided to finish out the remaining two years of his third term as governor. Some advisers suggested he resign the governorship in the summer of 1988 and chuck the problems of running the state: dedicate yourself totally to the presidential campaign. Others felt that after the crushing loss in November 1988, the wiser course was to say: Thanks, it's been great, but my heart is no longer in it. I want more time with my family, so I resign as governor. Let Evelyn Murphy, the lieutenant governor, take over for the last two years of our term.

Dukakis, as he did everything else, did it his way: he would persevere. Continue to govern. Keep on keeping on. And run the state with his customary dignity and dedication till his time was up. That decision proved disastrous for his political fortunes. Much of the reputation he'd erected over three decades of public life was flattened by a hurricane of opprobrium unleashed by the ensuing fiscal collapse.

Proclaiming himself a lame duck in the January 1989 State of the State message was a decision that was to emasculate his initiatives in the legislature. But even more devastating to his final two years in office was the steep economic decline that made a mockery of his administration's revenue projections and precipitated the fiscal crisis that shredded Dukakis's reputation.

All through the mid-1980s Massachusetts unemployment was the lowest of any industrial state, dipping to 2.7 percent in 1988. But two years later it was climbing steeply, to 6.1 percent in July 1990. Massachusetts exceeded the national rate of 5.5 percent for the first time in a decade, and jobs were evaporating in manufacturing, construction, computers, and defense. In that month the commonwealth lost 57,000 jobs, a rate of more than 1,800 jobs per day. By late September 1990, the administration was looking at a job loss that had reached 100,000 for the year and projected another 80,000 loss for the ensuing year that would put unemployment over 8 percent.

All the New England states were hard hit by the downturn, but it was Massachusetts that drove the region's economy, Massachusetts workers whose wages had gone up as much as 10 percent per year. And it was the politicians on duty in Massachusetts who caught the most flak when the downturn came.

Of those, by far the most inviting target was the governor. Beyond the complexities of a downwardly spiraling economy lay the implacable resentment of the electorate. Dukakis somehow came to serve as the emotional catch basin, the totem for everything bad that happened. If you lost your job, couldn't sell your house, suffered cuts in services, had to pay more in taxes, a handy little scapegoat was right at hand: Dukakis. Forget the sins of bankers, computer executives, developers, entrepreneurs. It was all the Duke's fault. His

hallmark over decades in Massachusetts politics had been his integrity. Now he suddenly became a liar who'd touted the nation on the virtues of the Massachusetts Miracle only to come home to a state economy that rapidly descended into shambles.

Never mind that every other state in the Northeast, from Virginia to Maine, soon followed Massachusetts on the path to red ink. Their governors had not run for president — and lost. His greatest political burden was the widely shared perception that Dukakis had misled Massachusetts voters about their fiscal plight to increase his chances of winning the White House.

Two weeks before Dukakis was nominated for president, the following warning was spread wide upon the front page of the *Boston Globe*: “The chaos surrounding the Massachusetts budget, both for the current fiscal year and the one just ended, has moved beyond eye-glazing home-state financial arcana and has emerged as a national political issue that could significantly undermine Gov. Dukakis’ preferred image as a competent manager and economic wizard.”⁵

Later Dukakis would claim that he tried to trim the state’s economic sails. “I vetoed \$200 million in spending approved by the Legislature on the day I left for Atlanta (and the Democratic national convention) back in 1988,” Dukakis told me in a September 1990 interview. But it was too little, too late, at every stage of a dizzying two-year descent to BBB bond ratings. The low point came in that September with an emergency \$310 million state budget cut that was virtually dictated at gunpoint by Wall Street bond dealers. They threatened to reduce the state’s bond rating to junk level unless the budget was brought into precarious balance.

This seems to be the bottom line of the widespread disenchantment with the governor: he, and his key aides, kept touting the effectiveness of his governing, after the state plateaued and began nosing down. It did not matter that the shrewdest businessmen in the state were similarly gulled, or that there had been ample warning signs.

In another state, or with another politician, that might not seem like much: a little exaggeration, a little fudging, a little buck passing, a little song and dance, and the damage might not be nearly so severe. For Dukakis, the economic roller coaster took him right into the cellar, below the level of political respectability into the dank netherworld of approval ratings below 20 percent. “Serial killers do not have approval ratings as low as 20 percent,” cracked one political technician shaking his head over the Duke’s polling numbers.

Why did he fall from grace, fall so far, so fast, and with such sickening, stomach-churning momentum that his friends and supporters winced at his fate? The answer is complex.

Where do you start in cataloguing the reasons? Were they personal? Of course. And political, economic, social, historical. There were hundreds of reasons, once you started looking for reasons, but no one could say, not even the Duke himself, which mattered most. One of the newspapermen who’d chronicled his rise over twenty years put it this way: “You never hear him say, ‘I was wrong, I made a mistake, it’s my fault.’ That’s his problem.”

Beginning on the day after the presidential election, in speeches and in news conferences, Dukakis nibbled away at the hard cheese of admitting flaws. But his rationalizations never bought him any understanding. People weren’t buying it. Why?

A lot of it had to do with hard times at home, a steep, sharp, severe downturn in the economy that caught everyone flat-footed. Knocking Dukakis became a way of venting

fury for all the Establishment figures who failed to discern the rocky road ahead for the old Massachusetts Miracle. The computer wizards, the high-flying high-tech crowd, the investment bankers, the go-go real estate developers, hot-shot businessmen who expanded too fast, Boston-based bankers who kept lending after real estate crested, they all crashed along with the handlers of state government. But nobody had voted for them.

The closest I ever heard Dukakis come to trying to spread some of the blame to the captains of industry, development, computers, and finance who presided over declines in their enterprises was when he talked one afternoon about bad bank loans: “Hey, the *state* didn’t make any of those loans.”

There were a number of political trends, some specific to Massachusetts, others derived from the nation at large, that conspired to frustrate the governor. Washington had steadily trimmed back the flow of money to the states and local governments in the 1980s. The year before Ronald Reagan took office only 76 percent of all state and local spending came from state and local taxes. In George Bush’s first year in office, that was up to 83 percent.⁶

Like forty-nine other governors, Dukakis was hemmed in by a decade of presidential prevaricating about the need for new taxes. Ronald Reagan tripled the national debt on his eight-year watch. George Bush added two years of “No new taxes” and “Read my lips” before finally breaking his vow halfway through his term. Under Reagan and Bush, the Republicans embraced the no-new-taxes-are-necessary theme. And the public bought it. Two popular presidents spent ten years persuading the folks that more taxes were unnecessary. Never mind that thirty-four states were in the red by the summer of 1990. The president says we don’t need new taxes, and that’s that. Period.

Then there was a new phenomenon, discernible here as well as in states far from Massachusetts: a decreasing willingness, or an increasing unwillingness, of one voting bloc to support the needs of another. As voters came to pick and choose among ballot referenda, or Proposition 2½ overrides, or school bond issues, the trend became unmistakable. Yes for what helps me, no for what helps you. The elderly wanted money for their ambulance attendants or meals or medical programs that benefited their age bracket, but they voted resoundingly against spending public money on schools or playgrounds.

What was meat and drink to one ethnic or class grouping was fat and waste to another. With the federal government retrenching from domestic programs, with Proposition 2½ limiting how much real estate tax money a city or town could pour into maintaining services or schools, the state was forced to fill the gap. During the flush times of the mid-1980s, when the state’s tax yield vaulted up by 10 or 12 or 15 percent in yearly increments, it was possible to pick up the slack by increasing local aid. By 1990 the typical Bay State city or town got 37 percent of its money directly from the state tax pool — \$2 billion worth.

But when the tax haul began to dwindle, and legislators cast about for ways to cut expenses, the various lobbying groups fell upon each other with gusto. There was a sharp increase in angst. Bitter charges were flung hither and yon. One of the few principles on which pleaders for special interests agreed was that the governor and the legislature were sure doing a lousy job of managing this downturn.

The legislature became a killing ground for civility and intelligent discourse, polarized between taxers and antitaxers. Barely one fifth of the 160-member House and 40-member Senate had served a decade or more, so few had ever had to vote to raise taxes in the midst of an economic downturn. That task proved too daunting for them until, in July 1990,

fully two years after the state budget was acknowledged to be on the skids, a major billion-dollar-plus tax package was finally wrung from the bitterly divided legislators.

Running a close second to Dukakis in terms of public scorn was the legislature and its leadership. House Speaker George Keeverian, Democrat of Everett, tried to conduct a statewide campaign for the office of treasurer and receiver general while he was trying to construct a tax package that would meet the revenue need and attract a majority of votes on the House floor.

Cruelly lampooned by some in the media, deserted by a number of his own leadership appointees, and repeatedly undercut by his archrival on the third floor, Senate President William Bulger, Keeverian was savagely battered from all sides. By early August 1990, after a massive tax package was finally cemented into place, Keeverian went public with his distaste for Bulger: "I don't respect his style of leadership, and that's what it's all about." It is safe to assume that Bulger returned the sentiment.

Even some of his closest allies threw up their hands at Keeverian's backing and filling. The Speaker talked repeatedly of the antagonism he encountered in the street and on the campaign trail. Voters were furious, and he was a big target. In September he was defeated in the Democratic primary for treasurer.

Even though both House and Senate were lopsidedly Democratic in numbers — approximately 4 to 1 in both branches — the House leadership lost control of the Democrats early on in the financial swoon. Keeverian was every bit as much of a lame duck as Dukakis, a factor underappreciated by those outside the legislature. A vote for taxes is a painful vote to a legislator, who quickly learns that you make people happy by giving them money for their program or pay raise, and you make people *unhappy* by taking money from them in taxes.

Legislators calculated, selfishly to be sure, but coldly and logically, that Dukakis, on his way out, did not have to defend a vote for higher taxes in the next election. Thus it would make more political sense to await the blandishments of the new governor before giving away a vote for taxes. These same legislators, some of them longtime friends of Keeverian, many of them beneficiaries of his largess as Speaker, decided to stiff Good Old George just as they stiffed that no-good blankety-blank so-and-so in the corner office. Why not wait and make your deal with the next Speaker?

As the Democratic establishment came under increasing pressure, it began to melt down. There was a pronounced bifurcation of the nearly seamless web of Democratic officeholders in the one-party state. The Washington crowd, Senators Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, and the ten or eleven congressmen who were Democrats, gave the state fiscal problems a good leaving alone.

In the election year the Democrats were assailed as top-heavy, corrupt, out of touch. Scandals, old and new, were recycled. Sexual problems, money problems, marital problems, conflict of interest problems, dotted the media landscape. The Democrats appeared to be leaderless, inept, disorganized, distracted. The party had no enthusiasm, no confidence; it seemed to languish like communism under Leonid Brezhnev.

The Republicans, trying to win back the governor's office for the first time in twenty years, pounced gleefully on every Democratic miscue. One of the striking differences between Massachusetts and states like Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey was the relative impotence of the GOP in Massachusetts. Those other northeast states suffered virtually the same kind of economic distress and sinking tax yields. Still, Republicans there were part of the solution. They had sufficient clout in their legislatures — control-

ling the majority in some branches — so that Democratic governors had to deal with them and include them in any recovery plans with a chance of passage.

Massachusetts Republicans settled on this strategy: oppose any and all taxes, period, no matter how broke the state gets. Fiscal stability and the bond rating were risked in hopes of winning the governor's office for the first time since Frank Sargent turned it over to — ugh — Dukakis in 1974.

The attempt to paint the Democrats as profligate spenders took an international turn when, in a speech at Harvard, Republican gubernatorial candidate William F. Weld said Bay State Democrats were mired in “a European-Socialist philosophy.”⁷ Such a sobriquet must have come as a shock to the reps propping up the bar at the Golden Dome pub.

Under the generally articulate command of House Minority Leader Steven Pierce, Republican of Westfield, who based his campaign for the GOP gubernatorial nomination on a no-new-taxes-for-the-next-four-years pledge, House Republicans settled for fanning the media flames of antitax fever.

To Pierce's barbs were added the slightly more humorous, but often just as acerbic, wisecracks of House Taxation Committee Chairman John Flood, Democrat of Canton, a former telephone company pole-climber-turned-lawyer. He campaigned for governor as a Democratic fiscal conservative until he fell short of the 15 percent delegate total threshold at the Democratic state convention in early June, and missed making the ballot.

With the Republicans in full cry, and Democratic defectors rallying behind born-again antitaxers like Flood, Keverian and Dukakis found themselves fishing for protax votes in a steadily diminishing pool. Dukakis and his cadre of inner-circle adviser-survivors sought to enlist the help of groups that benefited from state spending. But such groups were largely late and lame when it came time to deliver specific votes in the House.

Labor unions, government employees, and groups that had succeeded in lobbying legislatures for ever-higher spending programs also found they had worn out their welcome with the public at large. The people were furious over what a large majority perceived to be waste, fat, fraud, and mismanagement on a vast scale in state government.

There was a corresponding surge in the influence of commerce, business organizations, industry lobbyists, and trade groups. “For the first time in my career,” said a retired legislative leader now working as an occasional lobbyist, “members were calling lobbyists to find out what was going on, instead of vice versa.”

Particularly effective at the end of the 1980s was the Massachusetts High Tech Council, which had spearheaded antitax sentiments. Its chief executive, Howard Foley, was the principal architect of a draconian tax and fee rollback intended to capitalize on antitax sentiment by asking voters if they wanted to repeal, with a November 1990 referendum vote, all tax increases and fee hikes imposed by the state since the middle of 1988. Opponents predicted widespread dislocation and disruption if a projected \$3.8 billion was stripped from the precariously balanced \$13 billion state budget over a period of eighteen months.

“We're in yahoo time in politics in this state,” said Robert J. Bezucha, a history professor at Amherst College in his fourth year as a member of the board of trustees of Westfield (Massachusetts) State College. “Our bond rating is right down there with Louisiana, and we don't even have Earl in the corner office. We're the only state that has actually *reduced* funding for higher education. Virtually all the candidates running for governor beat up on higher education. They treat it [as if] it's the public works department.”⁸

A raucous rump media trio calling itself The Governors was formed by Citizens for

Limited Taxation lobbyist Barbara Anderson, WRKO talk show host Jerry Williams, and *Boston Herald* columnist Howie Carr. They formed a bumptious clique braying denunciations of Dukakis and the “hacks” of State House politics. The talk show trashing of anyone who suggested that new taxes were needed helped delay, but could not forestall, the eventual adoption of a series of unpopular tax hikes.

In 1989 Williams was given an award for public service by a delighted Republican State Committee. What was even more surprising was Jerry showing up to claim it. The systematic denigration of state political figures became such an enjoyable blood sport that the lowbrow humor of Howie Carr was declared fit for the elite viewers of the *Ten O’Clock News* on Boston’s PBS outlet, Channel 2. Carr was featured till a viewer/contributor revolt caused that connection to be quietly severed. Channel 2’s change of heart notwithstanding, the barbs of “The Governors” echoed in the State House. They found a ready audience among not just the outnumbered Republicans, but with such conservative Democrats as Greg Sullivan of Norwood, who abandoned the leadership for conservative bedfellows in the media.

Talk radio became a sort of bulletin board for antitax activists. Station managers were thrilled. Advertising income depends on numbers of listeners, and one surefire way of drawing a horde on the crowded dial was to emphasize denunciations of tax hikes. No one liked to raise taxes, but radio-borne theories about conspiracies, waste, fraud, and dirty deeds in the political world fleshed out a vision of a conspiratorial world with good guys, bad guys, and all sorts of side plots.

Dukakis made no dent in the cacophony, despite repeated efforts like his May 15, 1990, speech to the Boston Chamber of Commerce.

First, some facts about taxes and spending in Massachusetts: Massachusetts is now the third wealthiest state in America. Over the past nine years, we’ve had the highest rate of growth in personal income of any state in the nation. Our revenue burden — state and local taxes and fees as a percentage of personal income — is currently the eighth lowest in the country. . . . Our property taxes are the lowest in the Northeast. . . . The number of state, country, and municipal employees in Massachusetts, per capita, is below the national average.

The public largely ignored his explanations. As when protesting in the presidential campaign that he was neither unpatriotic nor uncaring toward his wife, Dukakis seemed to be shouting into a wind that snatched his words away without effect. Having been effectively dehumanized by the Republican presidential campaign, Dukakis was denied a hearing on the tax and spending issues. People had become used to tuning him out. They did it automatically.

Massachusetts was not alone in giving talk radio a shot in the ratings arm with contentious dialogue. New Jersey Governor James Florio hiked taxes and won himself a built-in radio clique of critics. “In a state without a network television station, WKXW has transformed itself almost overnight from a soothing ‘adult contemporary’ music station into the nerve center of what is becoming an angry revolt against tax increases rammed through the Legislature by the new governor,” the *New York Times* reported. “The station has become the focal point for anti-Florio sentiment.”⁹

New Jersey is the state most like Massachusetts in some ways. It is the same size (population 6 million), has a similar industrial mix, an educated work force, and so on. If there is a Massachusetts clone, it is the Garden State. It did not seem to register on the Bay State political and media establishment that while Dukakis was mud wrestling with the legisla-

ture to win passage of a \$1.4 billion tax package, Governor Florio rammed home a \$2.8 billion package for the Garden State. So harsh was the reaction, according to the *New York Times*, that “barely six months after taking office, Gov. Jim Florio is confronted with a growing tax revolt that is fast turning into a general wave of discontent threatening his dominance of the machinery of government in New Jersey.”¹⁰

In the first six months of 1990, legislative discipline had more or less collapsed in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. The House is the key legislative body because, under the state constitution, all tax and spending measures must originate there.

Fragile majorities of eighty-one votes for new taxes crumbled repeatedly under the withering fire of antitax forces. Casting about repeatedly for support in the business community and among the professions, Dukakis and Keverian found their pleas largely ignored. They discovered that the business community, the Establishment, wanted little part of the struggle.

Many businessmen had their own problems. Where big bankers and insurance executives in decades past had exercised vast clout in the inner circles of government, that was no longer the case. The Vault, an informal organization of Boston’s largest employers, played virtually no role in the searing public debate over the state’s fiscal fortunes. As bond ratings plunged to BBB, the lowest of any state on the Standard and Poor’s ranking, the business community remained on the sidelines.

A few braved the brickbats. John Gould, the chief executive of the largest industry lobby, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, met repeatedly with government and business leaders to try to restore some semblance of sanity amidst the fiscal free-fall. But the vilification and controversy ladled out in the newspapers and the talk shows by antitax spokesmen seemed to intimidate most business leaders. One high-ranking bank executive who headed a gubernatorial committee was denounced as “a fat-cat banker” by CLT spokesman Anderson for not being sufficiently antitax. That example was not lost on his brethren, who had their own problems in the credit and real estate crunch that left some of New England’s strongest banks reeling. The net effect was that most businessmen slunk away from any meaningful role in addressing the fiscal crisis.

The business Establishment seemed to have been deconstructed. Private sector figures who in decades past assumed leading roles in the community were no longer as evident. Many corporations that were previously headquartered in Boston had been absorbed by even larger organizations elsewhere. “They’re all branch managers here now,” grumped one business lobbyist trying to raise funds to fend off the CLT petition in the November referendum. And the men who remained in Boston could no longer call the shots the way their predecessors had in the 1970s and 1980s.

The media were filled with a good deal more negativity. Those with an interest in public policy, or raising or lowering the taxation level, discovered the effectiveness of the kinds of negative advertising that had come to characterize political campaigns. The “Willie Hortonizing” of Massachusetts politics meant that those who dared enter the fray on either side risked a mud bath from groups opposed to their goals. “You’ve got to understand that a banker or business leader has thousands of customers, some of whom feel very strongly about taxes, and those businessmen take a risk if they raise a voice against CLT, a risk of retaliation by some of their customer base,” said one anti-CLT organizer.

The political toll was evident in other states. Connecticut Governor William O’Neill and Vermont Governor Madeleine Kunin, forced, like Dukakis, to raise taxes, decided not to run again when polls showed they faced expensive uphill struggles. Rhode Island’s Republican Governor Edward DiPrete ran into the same kind of political buzz saw that had

chipped the bark off Dukakis's hide. Virginia's new Democratic Governor Douglas Wilder encountered his own fiscal sandstorm. Republican incumbents Judd Gregg in New Hampshire and John McKernan in Maine scrambled to cover shortfalls that were roughly proportional to those of Massachusetts. Only New York's Mario Cuomo, facing token Republican opposition, seemed to escape the blight that affected every other northeastern state incumbent.

But none of these others had run for president brandishing their competence. And lost. None had to live down the taunts of the Massachusetts Miracle. Dukakis had been highly touted as a consensus builder, an architect of compromise, a healer of wounds, and a mid-wife of compromise during the glory years of the Massachusetts Miracle. But that touch eluded him when he needed it most. He became, almost eerily, a kind of nonperson in public gatherings, shunned by those who wished to make a favorable impression on the populace.

The night that Nelson Mandela appeared before a huge and rapturous throng on the Esplanade in the summer of 1990, various local dignitaries greeted the wildly popular South African leader. When Mandela thanked Dukakis for being one of the first American governors to lend his support to the imprisoned black leader's cause, the crowd's mood turned briefly ugly.

A nineteen-year-old woman who was present said afterward, "That was the only ugly part of the whole day. All my friends had been singing and clapping and cheering for Mandela, and then when he thanked Dukakis, my friends started booing and jeering. Why do they do that, when Dukakis was one of the politicians who really tried to help the black effort there? Some of my friends blame Dukakis for not being able to get a job this summer. But is that really his fault? It made me sick."

The opprobrium that became Dukakis's steady diet unsettled even some who were sympathetic to him. A Greek-American woman who voted for him told me she dreamed about the governor. "I had a dream. And in my dream, he was stabbed — but he *didn't bleed*." His public persona was so demeaned, so dehumanized, that even a person well disposed toward him saw him as a bloodless figure. Another woman who was heartsick at what had happened to the liberal champion of 1988 turned from a television image of a chastened Dukakis waiting to address a surly legislature and said sadly, "He looks so small, so *diminished*."

There was little question that Dukakis's stature as a national leader had shrunk by the end of the presidential campaign. His negative ratings soared as the Republicans used millions of dollars' worth of negative television advertising to sow doubts about his patriotism, his values, and his record.

Dukakis was badly mauled in the 1988 general election campaign, concluded Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover in *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency, 1988*. The Bush campaign, they wrote, "made a conscious and critical strategic decision to define Dukakis in the most negative way possible as the most effective means to combat the voters' very negative view of Bush . . . In the hands of Bush's hired guns, the concept of campaign as educational exercise crumbled before the concept of campaign as warfare, and Dukakis was gunned down in the process."¹¹

Then there's "the loser thing," as George Bush might have put it had *he* lost. In American politics at the highest level there is no second place, no silver medal. Winning is better, because winning is all. Winners, if they don't write the history books of political campaigns, get the lion's share of attention from those who do the writing. Dukakis won more votes, more states, and more counties than Walter Mondale, than Jimmy Carter,

than George McGovern, the last three men to precede him as Democratic nominee. It mattered not. He *lost*. And many of those who voted for him were furious at the way he lost.

He let Bush and the conservatives tarnish liberalism and demean the patriotism and common sense and goodness not only of Dukakis but, by electoral implication, of all those who supported him. When the Bush wrecking crew of James W. Baker, John Sununu, Roger Ailes, and Lee Atwater got through with Dukakis, he was a mess. You were a sucker if you voted for this sorry sad sack was the prevailing negative message of the Bush campaign. It was propped up neatly by the positive theme, the “kinder, gentler” Bush, whose paid commercials showed him hoisting handsome grandchildren for a grandfatherly snuggle. But what they did to Dukakis was not pretty, not kind, not gentle. Dukakis wound up with 42 million votes and relatively few friends, because so many of those who voted for him were angry that he hadn’t fought harder.

“Loserhood is the *bête noire* of Americans; it is the condition that MBAs and college students throughout the United States fear most,” wrote Donald L. Kanter and Philip H. Mirvis in a book analyzing cynicism at the end of the 1980s. “. . . In America, trust and respect are only grudgingly given, if at all, to anyone who is not an obvious winner.”¹²

Kanter and Mirvis advance the thesis that “the 1980s can be characterized as the cynical decade, and that the Reagan presidency, while contributing to a fast-paced cycle of high hopes and disillusionment, has been only one of many ingredients in the public’s increasingly jaded outlook.” They carried it a step further, to Reagan’s surrogate-replacement and political heir.

The election of 1988 is a case in point. The campaign of George Bush demonstrated that fear and fantasy can beat complacency and generalities among that portion of the electorate that bothered to vote . . . Initial appeals to idealism and community were forsaken for the expediency of negative campaigning, in the one case [Bush] and divisiveness, in the other [Dukakis]. It was almost a repeat of the previous election, when a cynical electorate told Walter Mondale that looking out for oneself was more important than reaching out to the less privileged.¹³

Others, like Elizabeth Drew, saw Dukakis as fatally flawed in his slowness to sense what was being done to him.

What Dukakis said or failed to say in his campaign is only part of his problem: the other part — probably the larger one — has been Bush’s ability to paint Dukakis as a liberal, out of touch with the mainstream. Yet Dukakis, by his slowness to react, or even to see the peril in what Bush was doing to him, became an accomplice in Bush’s strategy.¹⁴

The Bush White House staff was headed by an old Dukakis enemy, former New Hampshire Governor John Sununu. The Bush camp took an unusual interest in scotching Dukakis at every turn. One of Bush’s top political aides, Bay State native Ron Kaufman, turned up on June 2, 1990, at the Democratic state convention, of all places. Dukakis’s farewell speech to his party was delayed five hours by an unexpected Springfield police union picket line. In the turmoil that followed, some Republican political operatives claimed Kaufman played a role in fomenting the disruption. The Democratic State Committee sued Kaufman as a result. President Bush, it was reliably reported, was furious that Kaufman got caught skulking around Dukakis’s convention. Said a Republican who knew Kaufman and his brother-in-law, Andrew Card, another Bush assistant: “Andy and Ron

regard the 1990 governor's race in Massachusetts as the logical conclusion of the 1988 presidential campaign."

Massachusetts Republicans, after twenty years in the wilderness, concluded that their best chance in two decades depended upon their further demonizing Dukakis with the already disenchanted Massachusetts voters. The tool kit of each Dukakis Republican critic contained the same three basic implements. These were contentions that (1) he had lied about the health of the Massachusetts economy; (2) he had spent too freely to cadge votes and appease special interests; and (3) he delighted in dipping a sticky paw into the pockets of the hard-pressed taxpayers.

Measured against the record of the man who defeated him, the defense could go like this: (1) Lies? Did George Bush come clean on the savings and loan crisis, or Iran-contra, or Pentagon procurement corruption, or white-collar crime in the financial markets, or the devastating mismanagement in the nuclear weapons industry? (2) Spending? Whose mismanagement cost the taxpayers more? Mine, or Bush's record with the deficit, with military spending, with farm supports, with Medicaid? (3) Taxes? I never said, "Read my lips — no new taxes," then turned around and broke that pledge two years after the election.

As Dukakis's favorability sank, Bush's remained at record-high levels for a president halfway through his first term, assisted mightily by the virtual collapse of the communist cartel. A poll released in June 1990 by the Becker Institute for business clients among 500 likely Massachusetts voters found that 77 percent held an unfavorable opinion of Dukakis and 68 percent rated the legislature unfavorably.

Dukakis fared better, but still not well, in a national survey conducted in early April 1990. Among 1,005 registered voters across the country selected by a pollster for the *Boston Globe* and WBZ-TV, 49 percent of the overall sample viewed Dukakis unfavorably, while Bush was seen in a favorable light by 77 percent of the same voters. Bush's popularity stayed high despite the torrent of red ink that poured out of Washington.

Bush's top budgeteer, Richard Darman, warned that mandatory cuts in government programs "of totally unprecedented size" loomed for October, triggered by automatic spending cuts imposed by the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings deficit reduction law. The prospect of lopping off a million military personnel, increasing air travel delays by 600 percent, wiping out Pell grants for 3.4 million college students, cutting 200,000 preschoolers from Head Start, reducing drug research and treatment by one-third, mirrored on a national scale the kinds of disruptions taking place on the state level in Massachusetts. But Bush's popularity seemed insulated from any voter retribution.

At home, Dukakis's media enemies mocked his standing yet, curiously, kept warning the unwary that this sly fellow might try again to run for president. Democrats in Iowa, the first caucus state, who'd delivered the state for him in 1988, continued to hold Dukakis in higher regard than the Massachusetts electorate. But many of the people who supported Dukakis in his first presidential effort winced at the thought of his trying again after the turmoil of 1990.

Some who'd voted for Dukakis over Bush had second thoughts. "He never grew," said a powerful media executive who'd admired Dukakis over two decades in which the governor moved from being a little-known state representative to the front-running candidate for president of the United States. "[Dukakis] didn't expand, he didn't change, he didn't absorb experiences and turn them into something that made him bigger, as Jack Kennedy did."

To a political insider who'd been much closer to Dukakis, the fault was not so much in his capacity for growth as in his hearing. "He doesn't listen," said a person who'd been a key operative in the presidential campaign. "He doesn't *listen!*"

That trait of tuning out advice he didn't want to take looms large in the minds of some journalists who followed Dukakis's career, like the *Boston Herald's* Peter Lucas, who wrote in 1989:

He did not listen to people then — when aides, advisers and fellow politicians told him what he had to do to win. And there is no sign that he is listening now, when aides, advisers and fellow politicians are telling him that his credibility is shot so full of holes that he cannot raise taxes without making more budget cuts. Dukakis listens only to himself.

For reasons that defy adequate explanation, Dukakis for a long time resisted advice to try to get ahead of the antitax wave that swept the legislature to the brink of hysteria. A number of knowledgeable politicians urged him to make symbolic cuts in controversial areas: fire some executive department press secretaries, reduce the number of legislative doorkeepers and pages, call for the legislature to eliminate its research bureau, list specific jobs being vacated.

He resisted such entreaties as unworthy. That would be surrendering to the mob, he seemed to imply. As it turned out, Dukakis eventually cut 5,000 full-time employees from the state payroll, by attrition, transfers, early retirements, and a hiring freeze. He got rid of 3,000 part-time jobs. But so long did it take, so ineptly was it promoted, that he got little credit for it with the media, or the taxpayers at large. It was as if the Duke did not deign to play the silly games the media and the legislature were forcing on him.

His stubbornness won this tribute from Lucas, a boxing fan, in a July 1990 interview with me: "Dukakis has proved one thing to me: he showed he can take a punch. A lot of lesser guys would have been down for the count. The Duke is still standing. That's impressive, whether you agree with him or not."

The campaign manager for John Silber, one of the Democratic candidates who sought to replace Dukakis, was Robert Donahue, a veteran of Massachusetts campaigns, as well as the presidential efforts of George McGovern and Jimmy Carter. Donahue traced Dukakis's dilemma to being a lame duck for two long years. "The most tragic mistake he made was when he announced he wouldn't run for reelection. That made for the longest 'lame-duckness' I've ever seen. He opened up a vacuum that turned into a black hole."

It is undeniable that the success Dukakis achieved with the legislature up to the middle of 1988 evaporated. Legislators who had quaked at the thought of denying him a vote became lions overnight. The raw power of a governor in dealing with the microcosm that is the world of most legislators suddenly disappeared. The munchkins of Lilliput rounded on the once-mighty Duke. "State reps whom you could have intimidated or bought off with a dozen summer jobs for their relatives or their constituents suddenly found some courage and began yelling for his head," said one saturnine veteran of the State House patronage process.

For a governor to declare two years in advance of his departure that he is leaving is highly unusual. It changes the picture dramatically, particularly in dealing with legislators. There is a great deal of bluff and bluster between executive and legislative branches, not only in Massachusetts but in every state capitol, and in the Congress to boot. The U.S. Marine Corps and the penal system are not the only branches of government that rely

upon the principle of motivational fear to coerce obedience. Every governor, every president, must threaten, and occasionally deliver on said threats, to compel behavior that a legislator might otherwise find distasteful, uncomfortable, even repulsive. The Duke turned himself into a lion tamer without a chair. Or whip. Or pistol. And the cowardly lions of Beacon Hill became tigers against taxes.

If it is relatively easy to trace how Dukakis became estranged from the House membership, it is much harder to assay the degree to which Kitty Dukakis's problems affected how the state was governed. On the eve of the first anniversary of her husband's losing the White House, Kitty Dukakis drank some rubbing alcohol, collapsed, and was rushed to the hospital. Eight months before that, she'd professed that she was an alcoholic, that her problem had been with her for some time. She entered a residential treatment facility in Rhode Island. She discussed some details of her chemical dependency and emotional problems in *Now You Know*, published by Simon and Schuster.

How much of Dukakis's swoon was traceable to the pressure of his domestic life brought to bear by Kitty's professed drug and alcohol dependency and the emotional burden that piled atop the normal wear and tear of political life? Only Dukakis knows. And he has adamantly refused to cite it as a factor in his political difficulties. He never blamed his personal situation for any of his political problems. He never pitched for sympathy because of his wife's repeated hospitalizations. He never rounded on his critics by implying their rebukes were somehow unfair because of the suffering with which Kitty and her family had to cope.

But because this kind of thing cannot be measured does not mean it didn't count. The weight of worry and apprehension, the never-ending confidential calculations about her condition, must have taken their toll, not only during the presidential primary campaign but throughout the bitter months that ensued: How's Kitty today? Is she up to the schedule? Can she get through this interview? Make that speech? Put up with all the "loser-loser-loser" questions from the reporters? Will she break and say something nasty to an unfriendly crowd? What about when she gets back to the hotel tonight? How will she handle it? Will she be able to get up and get on the plane at six in the morning? Is she smoking? Drinking? Is she taking pills?

There were pressures of equal magnitude on the family of George Bush, as there are on the spouses and children of every man who makes the final round of two for the presidency. How would Bush have handled it if his beloved Barbara were afflicted with problems similar to Kitty's? Would he have endured as stoically? Would he have taken his lumps in the same patient fashion as Dukakis? Who knows?

Would Dukakis have reacted differently in the second and climactic television debate with George Bush if he had not been worried about his wife? That was the debate in which Bernard Shaw asked the dreadful question: "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?"

Mishandling that, by totally ignoring the emotional implications of the hypothetical situation, inflicted untold damage on Dukakis's chances. It gave millions of Americans reason to doubt his humanity. Never mind that Dukakis had awoke that day with a fever and severe laryngitis. Every candidate feels fluish or unwell at times during campaigns. But if Dukakis had not harbored private fears about his wife's well-being, would he have handled that question any better than this? "No, I don't, Bernard. And I think you know I've opposed the death penalty all during my life. I don't see any evidence that it's a deterrent, and I think there are better and more effective ways to deal with violent crime."

If you like him as a person, and as a politician, as I do, your answer is hopeful: of course he would have handled it better. Nobody will ever know. Now, it's water under the dam.

Measured by the prevailing standards of politics, the Dukakis saga is one of sadness and remorse. He lost the White House. His reputation for competence turned to ashes. His wife's travails shattered the tranquillity and privacy of his home life. His name became a vile epithet to thousands of voters who, taken at their word, actually *hate* him for what happened to the commonwealth on his watch.

Politicians who previously trailed in his wake like baby ducklings sneered at his mention and refused his phone calls. Legislators who made their first trip to the big time in campaigning for Dukakis in various primary states around the nation vied with one another to see who could denounce him in the most florid language. Some journalists who'd praised him in the most mawkish terms abruptly fell upon him at every opportunity.

And what were his sins? He stole no money. He corrupted no businessmen. He didn't sell out the state. His personal conduct remained above reproach. Did he sniff cocaine? Abuse women for his own lust? Commit any outrage to public decency or order? Install relatives in high and undeserved public places? Follow for any appreciable length the well-trodden Bay State path of cronyism? No, no, no, no, and no. Well, perhaps rigorous scrutiny on the last count may require a "maybe."

But Dukakis's stunning fall from grace was unaccompanied by any of the personal flaws we associate with such dramatic reversals. He didn't go to prison, like James Michael Curley. He didn't have close political associates clapped into the calaboose. He wasn't tarred in a sex scandal. He didn't steal, kill, or get caught catting around.

At every stage of his political life, sometimes in private, sometimes in public — as when he became governor, as when he declared for the presidency, as when he claimed his party's highest nomination — he'd repeated the Athenian pledge vowed in Greece two thousand years earlier: "We will never bring disgrace to this country by any act of dishonesty or cowardice. We will fight for the ideals of this, our country. We will revere and obey the law. We will strive to quicken our sense of civic duty. Thus, in all ways, we will transmit this country greater, stronger, prouder and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."¹⁵

As he leaves the office he's held for twelve years, in bad times then good times, for briefly one great time, and at the end in the worst of times, Dukakis was adored by but a handful, praised by few, reviled by many. Measured by the Athenian oath, how does his record stack up? Did he bring disgrace to his state? If so, how? By losing the presidency? By sinking so low in opinion polls that no other governor fared as poorly? Was that the worst of it? Losing an election, and sinking low in the polls? That's all?

It takes me back to the night in New York's Astoria ballroom in the spring of 1988, when Dukakis, his wife, and her father, Harry Ellis Dickson, were mobbed by deliriously happy Greek-American supporters convinced they would one day dance in the White House. In the motorcade, riding away from the tumult, Dickson, associate conductor of the Boston Pops and a veteran of six decades in show biz, laughed about trying to enlist celebrities to the cause. "Danny Kaye was my friend for twenty-seven years. I tried to get him to do something for my son-in-law the governor, but he was afraid of politics. He'd say to me, 'Harry, stay away from politics. You'll get hurt.'"¹⁶

As the car hurtled through the rain under police escort, his daughter sucking on a cigarette, his son-in-law basking in the afterglow of the most riotous reception he'd ever received, Dickson chortled at the memory of Danny Kaye's caution. "Now look at us, right?"

Notes

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