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Make Way for the Donkephant

The Bare-Knuckled Business of Bipartisanship

By FRANK BRUNI

WASHINGTON

A VOTER had to listen closely (and tune out Vice President Al Gore's aria of sighs) to hear it, but there was something off-kilter about Gov. George W. Bush's references to Democrats during the debate on Tuesday night, something off-key in his tone.

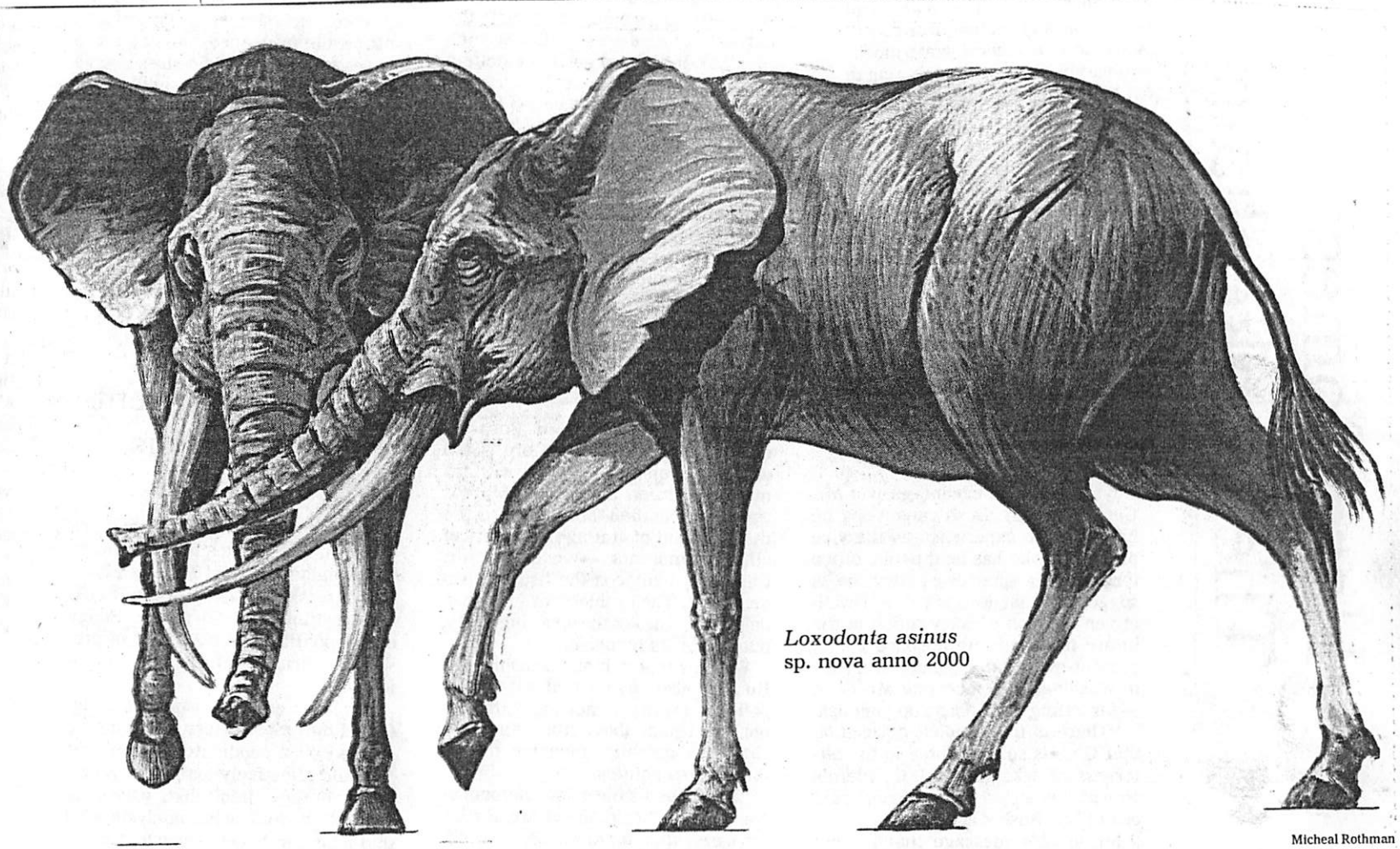
He sounded as if he liked them.

About five minutes into the debate, Mr. Bush bragged about his harmonious relations with them in Texas. A minute or so after that, he looked forward to a similar situation in Washington. By the time the debate was only 25 minutes old, the Texas governor had hitched Republicans to Democrats no fewer than four times, and each time they were blissfully wed.

Dick Cheney, Mr. Bush's running mate, followed suit, boasting about Mr. Bush's bipartisan orientation during Thursday night's vice presidential debate.

"I think you have to be able to reach out and work together," Mr. Cheney said, sounding more like a political therapist than a political warrior. The argument seems to be: Vote for Mr. Bush; he feels both parties' pain.

It just sounds odd. Given how



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Here Comes The Donkephant

unpredictable the presidential race remains with so little time to go, Mr. Bush might have been expected to demonize the people across the aisle. That has been the strategy of many Republicans since the Reagan years, raised to an art by Lee Atwater and Newt Gingrich.

That Mr. Bush did not come out swinging says a whole lot about the challenge he faces in trying to unseat an incumbent, his various strategies for dealing with it and, to some extent, the changing times.

Several pollsters and politicians said that while Americans had been generally content over recent years with a federal government that was often too busy bickering to act, the mood was different in this election cycle.

"Government is no longer an evil force that, anytime it starts to move, has to be chopped back," said Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York. The view today is that gridlock is preventing important business from getting done.

"It comes up in every focus group," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster. "Voters are really tired of partisan bickering."

Mr. Bush, according to several political analysts and some of his advisers, is using this shift to find ways to assert an advantage over Mr. Gore. Since Mr. Bush cannot say he has as much experience as the vice president, who has held public office for nearly a quarter-century, he is suggesting that less is more. Dwelling on a vision of cooperation in the future highlights its absence in the present and tacitly indicts everyone in Washington — including Mr. Gore — for letting bipartisanship languish.

"There is this implicit accusation that Gore is so marinated in the bitterness of Washington D.C., there's no way he can get things done," said one of Mr. Bush's advisers.

Mr. Bush's message that he will bridge the divide between Republicans and Democrats is also a way of saying that he is an outsider, a claim of questionable credibility but undeniable political acumen.

Mr. Clinton, another state governor, at least partly took this tack in 1992. He referred to himself then as "a different kind of Democrat." The Bush campaign has dubbed its candidate "a different kind of Republican."

"Voters still very much dislike the political parties and politicians," noted Stuart Rothenberg, who publishes a nonpartisan newsletter that tracks Congressional races. And so, he added, they find themselves moonstruck by mavericks, or at least people who seem to be chucking partisan labels for a more capacious world view.

"The environment seems content," Mr. Rothenberg said, referring to the current political scene, "but scratch that veneer and you get John McCain or Jesse Ventura."

Only to a point, however. If voters really wanted to take bold risks, political analysts noted, the choice in this presidential election would not boil down to two political scions whose respective proposals on tax cuts, prescription drugs and education sometimes seem like competing salad bars, with the disagreements centered on who has the freshest fixings.

Voters want someone who straddles the vital center, and by promoting his ability to collaborate with Democrats, Mr. Bush is trying to position himself there.

Interestingly, when Mr. Bush recently charged that Mr. Gore would use the projected surplus with as much restraint as Imelda Marcos used her Neiman Marcus card, he made a point of stating that plenty of other Democrats — including Mr. Clinton — had seen the fiscally prudent light. The problem, as Mr. Bush defined it, was not the opposing party, but rather its nominee.

With his talk of bipartisanship, Mr. Bush is also saying that a person's political loyalty is not the most important thing about him. And that carries a potential meaning that is larger than politics.

"It addresses the whole element of compassion," said one of Mr. Bush's advisers, alluding to Mr. Bush's self-identification as a "compassionate conservative." Calling for a truce among rival tribes signals an open heart and an open mind, or least the Bush campaign intends it to.

And yet many political analysts said that there were inherent problems in Mr. Bush's approach. For starters, his positions themselves hold less hope for bipartisan compromise than his words, which may be fig leaves covering very conservative ideological positions.

His proposed tax cut of $1.3 trillion over 10 years is larger than what even conservative Republican members of the House were pushing over the last two years. His ideas for increasing the number of Americans with health insurance, building more houses for lower-middle-class people and bringing down the cost of fuel all involve measures that emphasize corporate competition and profit rather than government regulation. And on issues like abortion and gun control, Mr. Bush is either decidedly or arguably right of center.

Mr. Bush's words describe the biggest of big tent administrations.

"It isn't attitude and style and orientation that makes it possible to build coalitions," said Thomas Mann, a Congressional expert at the Brookings Institution. "It's policy. Policy drives politics. The right kind of prescription drug benefit will win a majority."

Mr. Mann and other analysts maintained that most voters would not be swayed by a candidate's claim that he could effectively lead other politicians, if they didn't like where he wanted go. And these analysts said that polls continue to show that more voters share Mr. Gore's positions on many key issues.

Similarly, Mr. Bush's styling of himself as an outsider, while in line with three of the last four presidents — Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, governors all — could be hard for him to carry off. His surname is a constant reminder of the favor he was able to curry with the Republican establishment, and of the support he draws from it.

BUT Mr. Bush must use whatever advantages he has, and he and his advisers have always felt he maintains an edge on Mr. Gore in terms of sheer likability, which weighs heavily with some voters.

Mr. Bush's promotion of himself as a congenial, inspiring leader works that vein, especially in contrast to Mr. Gore, who is seen by some voters and colleagues as the ultimate partisan attack dog.

"I think it can be a gold mine for votes," said Representative Fred Upton, Republican of Michigan, a swing state whose residents, Mr. Upton said, are impressed when politicians stray across partisan lines. "Folks at home are tired of partisan finger-pointing."