

THE DEBATE BY

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An observation on the politics of religion and the influence there of PG 1

(A play in four parts)

Characters – In order of appearance

- A. Sam Stewart - Moderator
- B. John Firstner- Democratic candidate, Senator from Maine.
- C. Sarah, Clark, Dean – Incumbent President- Republican candidate
- D. Robert Kovack- Reporter (African American) N.P.R.
- E. Richard Wellstone- Independent candidate, Governor, California
- F. General James Dean- Husband of incumbent president
- G. Alan Price- Republican vice president
- H. Marcus Develing- President's political advisor
- I. Secret service people- Agents, Lucas Perry, Matty McDowell (McDowell is African American woman)
- J. Camera Man
- K. Gene Moynihan (Woman, Network news)
- L. Mysterious Stranger
- M. Other secret service personal

(Setting for Act one, scene one)

Scene one

- A. Debate setting will be one desk for moderator, one camera, and cameraman. Three podiums, large American flag for back drop. Stage right will have a table angled to the right, two chairs for the reporters/ interviewers with a wall, also angled to the right, that allows one third of stage right to be used as conference room. Actual theatre crowd will be audience. Audience reactions will be supplemented with taped responses. There will be notes in program suggesting participation by viewers. Guests/participants seated front row could also be used to stimulate live reactions. The house lights will slowly come up on this scene as the curtain opens

Scene 1, act one

(Setting— Television soundstage set up in the auditorium of Washington University, Presidential debate in progress)

Debate moderator, Sam Stewart;

“So, Congressman Firstner, your choice would be John F” Kennedy?”

Democratic candidate, John J. Firstner;

“ Yes, I think that in these trying times of war and international terror, his council and experience would be invaluable to an incumbent president. You know, he defined his term by negotiating affairs that were just as serious in nature, if not more so, considering the tumultuous series of events that transpired during his short time in office.”

Moderator;

“ A very insightful answer indeed congressman Firstner. Mrs. president, the same question please. If there were one historical figure that you could consult with to better help you navigate the political waters of these trying, somewhat dangerous times, who would that one person be?”

Republican incumbent president / Candidate- Sarah Clark Dean:

(Long pause as she pensively grips podium, shifting her weight and staring at her notes. Finally she looks directly into the camera and answers confidently.)

“That person would be Jesus.”

(Slight gasp from audience, whispered conversations, smattering of applause and words of approval)

Moderator:

(With a look of surprise and a slight nervous stutter)

“I’m, I’m, sorry Mrs. President, am I to understand you are inferring that the Biblical Christian leader, Jesus Christ would be your choice

President Dean:

(Raising her voice, confidence and self approval apparent)

“Yes, Mr. Stewart, that would be my choice”

Moderator:

“An interesting, and if I might add, a somewhat unorthodox answer, To what has always been interpreted as a political question. Would you care to elaborate on your selection?”

President Dean:

“Well, it’s no secret, as I have stated on numerous occasions, that Jesus Christ is my personal savior, and that I do consult with him through prayer. He lived in treacherous times, and understood the politics of race and religion. I could elaborate more on the subject, but, I don’t want sound like I’m preaching up here.”

(Richard Wellstone, the independent candidate from California, has been fidgeting with his notes and shaking his head angrily while listening to the president rationalize her choice. The similar reaction of others in the audience, fuels his discontent.)

Governor Wellstone:

“That’s all good and well that you end your sermon with that disclaimer. But isn’t preaching exactly what you just got done doing ^{Mr.} President, or should I say, Reverend Dean?”

(There is a titter of muffled laughter and some applause, as the moderator try’s to take back control.

Moderator:

“Candidates, we’ve kept pretty much within the parameters of our format here tonight, and it would be much appreciated if you would try to restrain yourself from random outbursts. Please.”

Governor Wellstone; (With forced sincerity)
to the moderator, but for the record let me state that I am outraged by such an apparent reference to religion during a political debate!”

“My apologies to

Moderator,

"Your outrage is duly noted Governor Wellstone, and that will have to be the last word in this evening's debate. I thank you all for your co operation and look forward to seeing you all back here for our final debate this Sunday at 8:00." (Moderator turns to camera and addresses audience)

Moderator,

"And, I'd like to thank you, both our live audience and you at home, for tuning in tonight for the second in a series of three debates we are broadcasting live from Washington university .As I stated earlier to the candidates, the third and last debate will take place this Sunday night at 8:00 eastern time. We hope you will join us again. My name is Sam Stewart, and this has been a special " Your Vote Counts" broadcast sponsored by the Public Broadcasting Network. Thank you and goodnight".

(While the moderator was offering his closing comments to the audience, the candidates were shaking hands and exchanging niceties. The President is brief but courteous before she is whisked away by the secret service agents. The Presidents closing statements still visibly aggravate independent candidate Wellstone.

As the president leaves the stage she is joined by her husband, General James Dean, her vice president, Alan Price, and her Political advisor Markus Develin. Develin, a shrewd and ruthless campaign Administrator, steps in between the president and her husband, interrupting Their conversation with a polite smile.)

General Dean:

"Nice job honey, I'm really proud of you...."

Markus Develin- (abruptly)

" Yes, we're all really proud, but there are some important points we need to go over here while they're still fresh in our minds."

(Develin places his arm on the president's shoulder, turns to her husband, and says, with a forced sense of courtesy.)

Develin;

"Would you mind Jimmy, we're gonna need a few moments to flesh some things out."

(General Dean smiles weakly but before he can answer the agents are leading him and the vice president outside to a waiting S.U.V. Sarah Clark Dean convenes with Develin to a briefing room set up along side stage right. Develin tells the secret service to wait out side and then enters the room through the door located to the rear of wall. Curtin closes from stage left all the way to the conference room wall.)

- B. Small room off stage right comprised of two walls with one door. In room will be several folding chairs, a chart on back wall, a table with cups and papers on it.
Right hand side of room will be window frame with angled illuminated picture of Washington D.C. hanging in mid air in front of black curtain.

C. (There is an electrical storm that is flashing across the Washington skyline. Although there is no thunder, at times it has the effect of a sporadic strobe light. At other times it is a sustained burst of light that illuminates the rooms for seconds at a time. This is not noticeable in the debate hall, but when Markus Develin and the president are in the conference room the lightening, flashing from the window, casts an eerie effect over the conversation)

(Presidential advisor, Markus Develin, closes the door to the conference room loudly and then turns to the President. He is agitated and raises his voice angrily as he speaks)

Develin;

“ Jesus Christ? Is that what I heard you say? Jesus Christ?”

(He is pacing around the room slamming his fist on a table in between words)

Develin:

“ What happened to Benjamin Franklin, or, or Ronald Reagan or any of the other names that we discussed and rehearsed. How could you do this to us! What were you thinking?”

(President Dean is standing at the window staring at the city lights. Trying to ignore her advisors out burst. She is use to his style and is not intimidated by his anger.

President Dean;

(Still looking out window, try's to make small talk)

“This is one of the most unusual electrical storms I've ever witnessed Markus. I keep waiting for the thunder, but it never comes”.

Develin; (Sarcastically)

“Oh the thunders coming all right! After the damage you've done to us tonight with that religious reference the thunder will be relentless!”

President Dean;

“ I have not “done” anything to us Markus, and I would appreciate it if you would tone down your disapproval”.

Develin;

(Not toning down at all)

“But, Jesus Christ, what does that have to do with our message! It's like describing Truman as a religious Icon, or Reagan as a saint. It's just not politically correct Sarah! You can't just decide to go off road like that without discussing it with me”.

President Dean;

(Still looking out at the busy city lights)

“I'm sorry your upset Markus, but when I heard the question something made me search my soul and that's what came out. I was a bit surprised myself, but as I began to speak it seemed more then appropriate

(Develin cuts her off mid sentence. He is standing behind her with one hand on her shoulder. He waves the other hand with a sweeping motion, encompassing the bustling city that glimmers on the other side of the windowpane.)

Develin;

"All this. Everything you see before you, I promised you at one time. I told you back then it could be yours, ours, if you listened to me and did what I told you to do. I delivered on my part of the bargain because you held up yours. Now, it's time to renew that promise again".

(He turns her to face him, and says consolingly, his eyes burning with conviction.)

Develin;

"Mrs. President are you ready to make that commitment again or not?"

President Dean;

(With a smirk and feigned frustration)

"Oh God Markus, will you lighten up and get a grip. This isn't the end of the world you know. There are a lot more controversial subjects and policies other than my religious convictions that we'll have to deal with."

(She moves away and heads toward the door)

President Dean;

"And to be honest with you, I've had enough of this sorority bullshit tonight. I want to get back to the residency and try to relax before the next crisis develops."

(President Dean taps on the door. An agent opens it. She turns and gives Develin a tired smile.)

President Dean;

"Good night Markus, call me if you need me".

(The agent escorts her out of the auditorium)

Develin;

(Out of earshot, shaking his head remorsefully while leaning on table)

"Oh, the next crisis is all ready developing my dear. Believe you me. You'd better relax while you can. This is far from over."

(Lightening flashes ominously)

(LIGHTS GO DOWN SLOWLY. END OF SCENE TWO ACT ONE)

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ACT I THE SCENE ONE

(The setting is still in the oval office. The room and the auditorium are still dark. The music of Holsts “Mars, The bringer of war” slams the audience with a loud crescendo as a large lightening flash illuminates the stage and auditorium. The president who has dozed off is jolted awake and springs forward in her seat. The only light comes from the desk lamp. But before her in a chair situated in front of the desk illuminated by an overhead white spotlight sits an imposing stranger. He is dressed in a long white robe. His hair is long and unkempt. A short untrimmed beard frames his sunken features. The shadows beneath his eyes hide the intensity of his stare, but the sporadic flashes of lightening high light his face in varying degrees of light and shadow. The music continues to play although the volume decreases. President Dean jumps to her feet and says)

President Dean;

“What the Hell”

(Reaching clumsily for the security button beneath her desk, she presses it and makes a beeline for the door. Backing up, never taking her eyes off the stranger. He sits calmly and continues to look straight ahead. The door fly’s open and agent McDowell accompanied by another agent bursts into the room. The lightening flashes and the room lights flicker as the president turns toward them, pointing over to the desk.)

President Dean;

“He’s over there!”

(Just as they enter the light above the stranger goes off and he disappears. McDowell hits the lights, gun drawn, as the other agent shields the president and draws his weapon menacingly. There is no one else in the room but the two agents and the President. One agent continues to shield President Dean as agent McDowell sweeps the room pointing her weapon at every nook and cranny until she is sure there is no intruder present. The second agent has been trying to Shepard the president out of the room, but Sarah Clark Dean was not about to leave the area until she knew exactly what was going on. Agent McDowell, gun still drawn backs her way over to where the president and the other agent are standing.)

Agent Perry;

“Mrs. President you have got to vacate the area”

(The president refuses to leave and starts to check the room herself)

Agent McDowell;

“Mrs. President you have to listen to agent Perry. It’s important that you allow us to do our jobs the way we’ve been trained”.

President Dean; (A bit astonished by what has taken place)

“It’s all right Mattie, I was asleep, and the lightening woke me up. I’m not sure what I did or didn’t see; I just instinctively hit the security button”

McDowell;

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“You did the right thing Mam, but now you’ve got to let us do the right thing. You will have to return to the residency until we sweep the entire grounds for an intruder. What did this person look M’am. How was he, or she, dressed, what was the race...”

President Dean; (Taking McDowell by the elbow and walking her to the other side of the room, speaking in a hushed tone.)

“Agent McDowell, at this moment I’m not sure if I really did see an intruder, and I don’t want to cause a security situation over an apparent dream sequence. I understand your responsibilities and, as a former Military police officer, the last thing I want to do is interfere with the proper security procedures. But you know, I’ve had a hell of a day and I don’t want to end it by causing a situation that might embarrass me, or my staff. So I’m asking you as a favor, out of loyalty, please lets just put this matter to rest. I still have work to do and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let my tired imagination set the agenda.”

(Agent McDowell reluctantly agrees with the president, and tells agent Perry to station himself along with several other agents strategically around the grounds. Just in case.

President Dean;

“Thank you Mattie, I’ll let you know if I need you.”

Agent McDowell;

“I’ll be right outside the door Mrs. President, please don’t hesitate to summon me if you need assistance.”

President Dean;

“Yes, yes thank you. I will do exactly that. Oh and Mattie, not a word of this to anyone. I can count on your discretion I’m sure”

McDowell;

“Yes Mam, you can be sure”

(With that. agent McDowell closes the door and leaves the president standing in the middle of the presidential seal that adorns the blue carpet beneath her feet. President Dean turns toward her desk and after gazing briefly at the chair where the apparent fatigue oriented apparition had appeared, she moves over to the console and turns the radio back up. Still agitated by the strange occurrence, and not one to be given over to flights of the imagination, she attempts to revert the room back to the same atmosphere that initiated the situation. She dims the lights and walks over to the window behind the desk. She is looking out over the white house grounds. The federal buildings glimmer in the distance as the city that never rests continues to bustle beyond the wrought iron gates. Suddenly she notices that her reflection is not the only one that graces the windowpanes before her. She swings around and reaches into the right hand top draw. Her hand comes out with a military service revolver that she cocks and aims, all with one fluid motion. President Dean then slowly makes her way around the desk never taking her eyes off the mysterious stranger that is sitting exactly where he had been before. She wasn’t as afraid as she was angry that this intruder had managed to elude security and then reappear without being observed. She carefully sits herself on the edge of the desk, her gun aimed directly at the stranger, who sits quietly, waiting.

President Dean;

"Let's see where shall we start. Oh yes, I know, let's start with the fact that this gun is loaded and this president does know how to use it. Having spent two years stateside as a military police person, or M. P. for short. I worked myself up to lieutenant by gaining the reputation of a hard ass that was not afraid of confrontations. So that being said, before I call security I want to know how the hell you got in here and, who the hell you are."

(The mysterious stranger does not answer, and President Dean who is becoming more annoyed by the second, continues.)

President Dean;

"Perhaps you didn't hear me, or your confused by the question. Apparently, judging by your apparel you are presenting yourself as a biblical figure. Are you going to tell me that you're Jesus, King of the Jews or something like that?"

Mysterious Stranger;

"It is as you say" (MATHEW, Ch. 27-2- LUKE, Ch 23-3)

President Dean; (Clearly agitated, but in control of her indignation)

"I don't know what this is all about. And I frankly, at this moment, I don't care. But, I'm going to give you one more chance to explain yourself and then I'm going to turn you in."

(She gets up from the desk and starts to pace in front of him, never taking her eyes or the gun off of the stranger. Once again there is no response from her visitor. The lighting is such on the stage that his features are highlighted by shadows. His long dissheveled hair and beard frame his face. His eyes and cheekbones are chiseled by the shades of darkness. After a short pause, the president continues.)

President Dean; "I can't promise you there won't be consequences to face, but it will go a lot easier on you if you co operate with me now. So, one last time, who are you and why are you here?"

Stranger;

"If I tell you, you will by no means believe. And if I also ask you, you will by no means answer me or let me go." (LUKE Ch.22- 67-68)

President Dean; (Smiles to herself, sits back down on the edge of the desk, and crosses her arms. She says sarcastically.)

"Okay! I think I'm beginning to understand the game you want to play. You apparently don't know much about me, and what my background is. I not only served my country proudly in uniform, I also graduated from Bob Jones University with a degree in world religion and theology. In other words, my mysterious intruder, I happen to know the Good book inside out, up and down and all around. There for, I also am aware of the fact that you are quoting the words of Jesus. Verbatim. Not only that, but if I chose to, I could tell you exactly what chapters and passages you are referring to. Taking all of this into consideration, do you still want to do this little verbal dance or, are you prepared to tell me who sent you and for what reason?"

Stranger;

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (LUKE, Ch.4-18-19)

President Dean; (Laughing out loud, pointing her gun to emphasize her astonishment and control.)

Your not going to stop, are you? You are going to try to convince me that you are Jesus Christ, King of the Jews?

Stranger;

You say rightly that I am king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice. (JOHN, Ch. 18, 37)

President Dean; (She barely lets him finish before she retorts cynically)

“John, chapter 18, passage 37, very good, I’m impressed. You’ve memorized the New Testament. King James I believe? Well, I’m afraid that’s not going to be enough to convince me that you are the Son of God. You know we must beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Matthew 8, -15 “

(Although the light above the stranger casts shadows upon his features, it seems to make him glow and radiate with an iridescent sheen. As he speaks his posture remains statuesque.)

Stranger;

“I am the good shepherd; and I know my sheep, and am known by my own. As the Father knows me, even so I know the father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have that are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear my voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. (John, Ch.10, 14-18)”