



FROM *STANDING FIRM*

MR. POTATOE HEAD

STANDING FIRM

By Dan Quayle

HarperCollins/Zondervan, \$25

In *Animal House*, upon being told the Deltas had been kicked out of dear old Faber, future U.S. Senator John "Bluto" Blutarsky rose up to declaim, "Hey! What's this lyin' around shit?! Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor? Hell no! And it ain't over now, 'cause when the going gets tough... the tough get going! Wormer—he's a dead man!"

Fast-forward to Houston, 1992. The Republicans are on the verge of being expelled from the White House, where National Guard veteran, former Deke, and C-average student Dan Quayle has been wearing a dunce cap ever since his deb party in '88. His mission in Houston: "to reintroduce myself to the American people."

I know my critics wish I were not standing here tonight. . . . [W]hen someone confronts them and challenges them, they will stop at nothing to destroy him. . . . I stand before you . . . unbowed and unbroken and ready to keep fighting. . . . We've taken on the strongest forces of the status quo and we will not back down. . . . We've taken on the Democratic Congress, and we will not back down. . . . We've taken on Hollywood and the media elite, and we will not back down.

Although speaking to very different packs of frat boys, these two ex-Senators fit similar molds; both are gaffe-prone orators fond of gridiron exhortations, and both have the same overarching theme: revenge. Bluto's out to get Dean Wormer and the boys of Omega House; Quayle is going after David Letterman, Murphy Brown, and more media personalities than you can

VOICE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, JULY/AUGUST 1994 7

shake Dick Nixon at.

Nixon hovers over *Standing Firm* like a scowling phoenix. He's the first person mentioned in the acknowledgments, and one of the last to leave as he exits a post-election-defeat breakfast. Nixon, that other self-immolating Republican, is Quayle's model—tested, resilient, and ready to kick around the press. But first Quayle must dispense kind words to other Republicans either too dead (John Tower, Lee Atwater), too retired (Howard Baker), or too doddering (Ronald Reagan) to threaten his '96 presidential bid. Possible rivals such as Dole, Kemp, Buchanan, and Jim Baker are evenhandedly praised and skewered, as if Quayle were saying, "They have as many faults as I do and I'm younger and better-looking than any of 'em."

The even hand disappears when Quayle hits the media. In an obvious, if misguided, homage to Nixon, he compiles a brief "fairness list" of the reporters he feels have treated him objectively, and a much longer list of everyone else: Garry Trudeau, Garry Wills, Maureen Dowd, Al Hunt, Eleanor Clift, Ellen Hume, Sam Donaldson, Ellen Goodman, Mary McGroarty, even the conservative *American Spectator*. And on and on.

Although "Midwest nice" (says Walter Mondale) and lacking "a mean bone in his body" (Jack Kemp), Quayle distinguishes himself by his arrogance. "I don't think of myself as wealthy, because I'm not," he explains, going on to describe the lumpen hardships of living (in 1988, age 41) on a senator's salary supplemented by \$10,000 in interest income annually. Net worth: \$854,000. He skates past a trust fund that, one learns from other sources, will be worth \$76,000 annually. To demonstrate further that he is down with the proles, he speaks of "brown-bag" lunches and how Marilyn Quayle "sold the family van" in order to

buy inauguration outfits for the children. Most journalists, he pointedly remarks, "have never been anything but comfortable themselves." Quayle once whined to California's Pete Wilson that, before his national bid for office, he'd "never had bad press." He did not mention that during his successful House and Senate races his family owned seven Indiana newspapers.

We can only be astounded by how high an opinion Quayle has of himself, particularly given that his wife once said, "He can't read a speech." His debating skills during Indiana races, Quayle notes, sometimes "stunned" viewers. However, when we take into account his mangled syntax, lamb-to-slaughter gaffes, and his deer-in-the-headlights gaze after Lloyd Bentsen dropped the "You're no Jack Kennedy" hammer between his eyes, surely it is clear that Quayle himself is the only person so far stunned by his oratory.

Although Quayle may be unique among politicians in referring to his handlers as "my handlers," he is not, on the evidence of this book, the towering idiot he appeared to be as vice-president, and so *Standing Firm* may achieve its first goal. The prose clearly, often bluntly, makes his points. He no doubt employed some heavy editors and one king-hell spell-checking program—an entire chapter covers the great potatoe massacre of '92—but these 400 pages do seem to come directly from his Hoosier heart, a heart that, understandably, became a bit darker during those four trying years.

Perhaps he should have called his book *Darkness Visible*. Quayle once asked us to "[i]magine a Ross Perot having the IRS, the FBI and the CIA under his control. Who would be investigated next?" Well, who would President Quayle investigate come 1996? Considering that he imagines himself a younger (and better-looking) Nixon, having a "fairness list" probably wouldn't make much difference.

—Robert C. Baker



ANDY WARHOL, CALVIN KLEIN, BROOKE SHIELDS, AND STEVE RUBELL AT STUDIO 54, 1981 / FROM *OBSESSION*

CALVINISM