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Skunk in an onion patch Buchanan threatens Dole if he doesn't shut up- and America if he does

March 31, 1996 | By KENNETH LASSON

JEWISH AMERICANS may be tentatively thankful that the majority of their countrymen have rejected Patrick J. Buchanan's arch-conservative, spitball-spewing candidacy, but the rabid support he's already managed to muster (50,000 votes in Maryland, millions more nationwide) has to be somewhat unsettling for Bob Dole as well.

Regardless of his finish in the primaries, Mr. Buchanan is determined to be heard from at the Republican National Convention in late summer. Mr. Dole would like his endorsement for the votes it would provide, but cannot be serious about hoping "that Pat Buchanan would find it in his heart as a good Republican to join forces and close ranks." Can good Republicans be outright bigots? Does Mr. Dole have a political death wish?

What's in Mr. Buchanan's heart is the cause. "We'll go forward," he vowed on national television, "fighting for the cause." But the purity of the cause is forever tainted by the essential Buchanan: a mean-spirited racist, an articulate hatemonger, a political pundit who relishes his reputation for pulling few punches when attacking blacks, liberals, Jews and Israel.

The real danger for Mr. Dole is that Mr. Buchanan won't stop speaking his mind. The real danger for America is that he will. The more he is tempted to temper his true feelings by distancing himself from his past anti-Semitic remarks, the greater the part he will play in shaping the GOP platform. The subtler his language, the more palatable his message to mainstream Republicans.

For many people he already pushes the right conservative buttons, refusing to condone abortion or homosexuality or to coddle welfare cheats. And a lot of honest voters agree with his arguments that we should not intervene abroad neither in Bosnia nor the Balkans nor even, when you consider America's strategic interests, in Israel.

But the defensibility of those views comes undone when it comes to Jews. The unfortunate truth appears to be that much of Mr. Buchanan's bile is motivated by the barely concealed basic instincts of a hard-core anti-Semite.

In his own words unadulterated by presidential spin doctors seeking soft conservative votes Buchanan himself best reveals what makes him tick.

He called Hitler "a man of great courage." He defended Kurt Waldheim's activities as an SS officer. He took up the cudgels for a number of former Nazis like Klaus Barbie, Karl Linnas, and Arthur Rudolph; he wrote at least 10 syndicated columns on behalf of John Demjanjuk. Ignoring historical evidence, he argued that diesel engine could not have killed 850,000 Jews at Treblinka. And he chastised those who anguished over Ronald Reagan's appearance at an SS cemetery in Bitburg, or protested the presence of a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz.

"To orthodox Catholics," he said, "the demand we be more 'sensitive' to Jewish concerns is becoming a joke. The slumbering giant of Catholicism may be about to awaken. When Cardinal John O'Connor of New York seeks to soothe the always irate Elie Wiesel by reassuring, 'there are many Catholics who are anti-Semitic,' he speaks for himself. Be not afraid, your eminence; just step aside, there are bishops and priests ready to assume the role of defender of the faith."

He relishes taking the offensive. "If my friends in the Jewish community feel Pat Buchanan, a traditionalist Catholic, owes some kind of apology for the record of the Holy Father during World War II, they can wait, because it's not going to be forthcoming."

Mr. Buchanan strongly criticized American intervention in the Persian Gulf, predicting that there would be enormous loss of life. He blamed Israel "a strategic albatross draped around the neck of the United States" -- for pushing America into battle:

"[Washington] is Israeli-occupied territory. The pro-Israel lobby has gotten its way in this town year in and year out. There are only two groups that are beating the drums for war in the Middle East -- the Israeli Defense Ministry and its amen corner in the United States.

"What difference does it make to us who governs Hebron, Jericho or East Jerusalem? How are our vital interests affected?"

Evidently, he has not read, or disagrees with, the foreign policy statements of every American president in the past 50 years.

He wrote that if the United States went to war, "the fighting would be done by kids with names like McAllister, Murphy, Gonzales and Leroy Brown" -- in other words, Jews don't do battle for America.

Evidently, he has never heard of the Jewish War Veterans nor seen the thousands of marble Mogen Davids in American military cemeteries.

Even his former mentor, conservative pundit William F. Buckley, concluded that it was "impossible to defend Pat Buchanan against the charge of anti-Semitism."

Men of character have sometimes been able to change their personal and world views. Hugo Black, for example, was

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once a member of the Ku Klux Klan but went on to become perhaps the most liberal of any Justice in Supreme Court history.

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Needless to say, Patrick Buchanan is no Hugo Black.

While presidential politics may have a tempering effect on candidates' rhetoric and sometimes even transmogrifies their policies and platforms, it rarely changes their preconceptions and personalities.

A master of ad hominem attack invites the same in return. Bob Dole must challenge Patrick Buchanan, and ultimately hold him accountable, for all that he has said and written. It won't be easy. Mr. Dole must not allow himself to be out-Scriptured by Mr. Buchanan, who professes to be motivated by the Bible.

For those who take Mr. Buchanan at his word, the more subtle and attractive his choice of language, the more he resembles the snake in the Garden of Eden. A more apt metaphor might be one from the Deep South, the same region where he is likely to garner his greatest support:

He's as hard to smell as a skunk in an onion patch. But skunks rarely change their stripes, or their odor.

Kenneth Lasson is a law professor at the University of Baltimore.

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