

'No-debate' decision ma

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WASHINGTON — Publicly, John Anderson is the candidate who is most unhappy about the apparent collapse of prospects for further "debates" in the presidential campaign. Anderson had counted on the joint appearances with Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan to sustain his long-shot bid for the White House. Without them, he has few cards to play.

But in traveling through the key states of Pennsylvania and Illinois last week and talking with some officials in both the Reagan and Carter campaigns, it became evident that there is a considerable degree of nervousness in those camps as well about the consequences of the "no-debate" decision.

Officially, the Carter campaign would have you believe it is delighted to have the debate monkey off its back.

Carter accepted the bid from the League of Women Voters to save the "debates" by having a Carter-Reagan one-on-one followed by a three-way match including Anderson. Reagan said no to that, ostensibly be-

David Broder Commentary



cause it would be unfair to Anderson and would require Reagan to prepare for three of the joint appearances while Carter did only two.

After taking a good deal of verbal and editorial abuse for boycotting the first of the League panels, Carter was happy to let Reagan be the fall guy.

But in the states where Carter is battling Reagan on even terms, there were some Democrats who suggested that Carter is still in trouble on the "debate" issue.

They made two arguments. Carter's paid media program is more

modest than Reagan's, in part because Reagan has the advantage of the "independent" expenditures by conservative groups and in part because the Reagan campaign has managed to lay off onto state Republican parties more of the costs of phone banks, direct-mail and headquarters operations than Carter has shifted from his budget to the Democratic state committees.

By absenting himself from what apparently will be the only "debate" of the year, Carter forfeited an opportunity to make his basic case for re-election to the biggest free audience of the campaign.

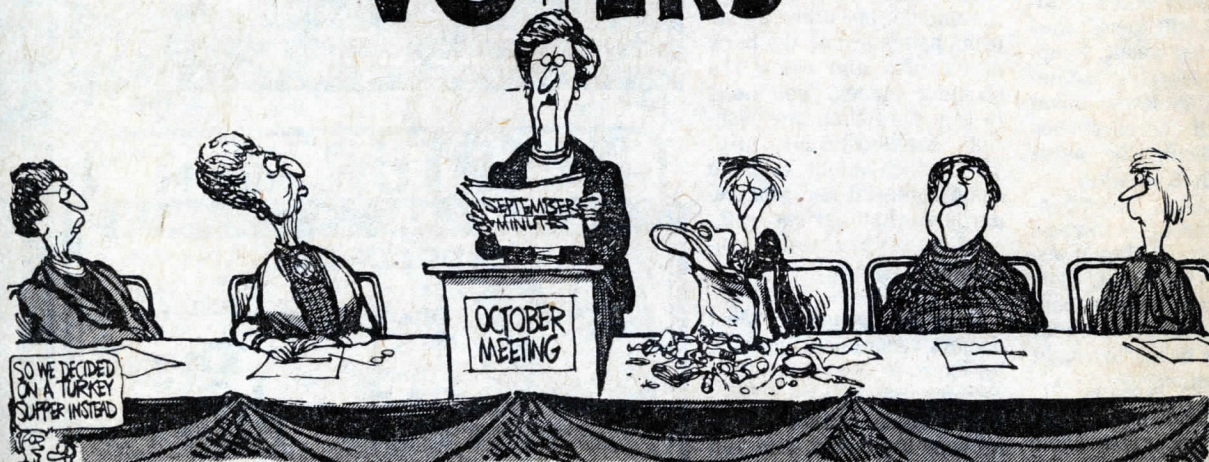
The second argument concerns the future of the Anderson candidacy. With the independent challenger's chances now declining, it is foreseeable, these Democrats say, that in three weeks or so Carter or his emissaries might be in a position to remind Anderson of his earlier pledge not to be a "spoiler," if his only effect were to increase Reagan's chances of victory.

But, as one astute Democrat remarked to me, "How in hell does

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STALK*

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS



... THEN MR. CARTER SAID OK WITH REAGAN BUT NOT WITH ANDERSON. THEN MR. REAGAN SAID ALL THREE OR NOTHING. THEN WE HAD ANOTHER DEBATE PROPOSAL, BUT FLORENCE HERE FORGOT TO MAIL OUT THE INVITATIONS.

Illinois, Saturday, October 4, 1980

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Carter ask Anderson to step aside, if it's Carter, not Reagan, who has refused to meet Anderson in debate? I think we've got another (Ted) Kennedy situation, where Carter's refusal to debate makes the challenger reluctant as hell to quit the race just to accommodate Jimmy."

As for Reagan, leading Republicans in both Illinois and Pennsylvania — including both early Reagan supporters and some who are very close to running mate George Bush — expressed real misgivings about Reagan's decision to shut off further "debates."

"I would never be reluctant to send Ron Reagan into a debate," said his Illinois campaign chairman, Donald Totten. "He (Reagan) doesn't need to be protected," said a senior Republican official in Pennsylvania.

While these Republicans have great respect for the polling data of Richard Wirthlin, which made the Reagan senior advisory board believe the challenger was far enough ahead of Carter not to need another "debate," their own assessment of the situation in their states is less sanguine.

"I don't think we have this thing nailed down near as solid as it ought to be, when you're facing an incumbent," one top Pennsylvanian said he told Bush on his swing through Pennsylvania. According to him, Bush indicated he shared the sense that Reagan could not afford to "sit on his lead" and adopt a minimal-risk strategy of avoiding any face-to-face meeting with Carter.

An argument used by top Republicans in both states is that the shaky world situation makes a Reagan-Carter debate more imperative from Reagan's viewpoint — not less.

"If there's a date for a debate, and the Middle East or something else blows up, then the onus is on Carter if he cancels," I was told. "But if there's no agreement, and there's an international crisis, then he (Carter) becomes Mr. President and Mr. Commander-in-Chief on the news, and our guy (Reagan) is just another bystander, watching it all happen."

For all these reasons, the "missing debates" could undercut more than Anderson's campaign strategy.