

Tempo

Chicago Tribune Monday, March 14, 1988

The not-so-great communicators

For 20 years, William Rush of the Halls Voice Improvement Program has been coaching singers, actors, lawyers, teachers and others who depend on their voices. So we asked him to voice-check the presidential candidates.

Vice President George Bush's problem is "erratic breathing," Rush said. "When his breathing gets up high [in the chest], the depth goes out of his voice [and] he pulls the pitch down. This is the wimp factor: He can't pull his voice down further to emphasize the last syllable in a sentence—an unconscious signal of decisiveness we all react to."

Bob Dole is the "easiest to read," Rush said. "When he sees himself in charge, he paces well and sounds assured. When he gets angry, he talks faster and the pitch goes down. That's when he sounds mean, like he's about to lose control."

Gov. Michael Dukakis "breathes too high and tends to talk too fast," Rush said. "Anywhere but in the East, he sounds choppy, and people have to edit what he's saying. When he does this, it trivializes his words; people stop editing and he doesn't get heard."

Of Rep. Richard Gephardt, Rush said: "It's amazing how he's changed from the emotionless face in the black suit to the communicator he is today. His only Achilles' heel is sometimes he gets a singsong quality by emphasizing too many words, as if he were trying too hard to sound sincere."

Sen. Albert Gore's breathing "takes the warmth out of his voice. So he appears very detached from what he's saying. He shapes his statements well, but you don't hear the ring of conviction."

Despite Jesse Jackson's reputation as an orator, Rush said: "He talks very quickly, and his use of alliteration and rhyming and slogans can sound really glib. People have to work like simultaneous translators at the UN, running back over the phrases and editing them. That's hard to do; so they stop."

Sen. Paul Simon "has a lovely baritone voice but a droning voice," Rush said. "We've had a long time to get to know him here. But someone from another state thinks, 'What a bore.' It's tragic. He could be very popular, but there's no shape to his phrases."

Clarence Petersen