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## TELEVISION

### ALTMAN'S PRESIDENTIAL AMBITIONS

**W**ho says there's no suspense left in the 1988 presidential primary campaign? There's plenty of suspense. People are tearing their fingernails and chewing their hair waiting for the next installment of "Tanner '88" to pop up.

For those without access to HBO (which is most of Philadelphia), "Tanner '88" chronicles the rocky presidential campaign of Jack Tanner (Michael Murphy), a former Michigan congressman with high ideals, who sometimes feels, as he tells real-life one-time presidential contender Bruce Babbitt in the most recent episode, that he sometimes feels "like a bystander in my own campaign."

"Doonesbury" creator Garry Trudeau is the co-producer and writer, but the true *auteur* of "Tanner '88" is co-producer-director Robert Altman who has brought to each episode the high-grade verisimilitude and sharp sense of character that made "M\*A\*S\*H," "Nashville" and "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" film classics.

Since its first episode aired in February, "Tanner" has become the ob-



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ject of a devoted, near-fanatical cult of viewers. This multi-layered sect comprises, in near equal volume, political junkies, generic serial eaters, "Doonesbury" fans and Altman worshipers who believe that "Tanner" represents a major comeback for the legendary director.

It is to "Tanner" devotees — and to others who haven't seen it, but would like to — that HBO is dedicating a marathon repeat of all five episodes in a three-hour stretch tomorrow beginning at 5 p.m.

What's more, they're bringing in Linda Ellerbee (where is she working these days?) to host live segments in between episodes during which viewers will be asked to phone in toll-free votes for their favorite Democratic candidate for 1988 — Gov. Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts, the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson or former Michigan U.S. Rep. Jack Tanner. I wonder how that will turn out.

After you're all caught up, you can watch the sixth episode Monday in which Tanner is campaigning and debating his way through the California primary (which really is Tuesday). Ellerbee, incidentally, will appear as a moderator for a Dukakis-Jackson-Tanner "debate" in which Tanner will come out for the legalization of drugs. Footage of the bonafide candidates taken from previous debates will be mixed in.

A seventh episode, also taped in California, will air June 20.



Robert Altman, co-creator of "Tanner '88," says the show will last through the Democratic Convention

And then what? Altman, in a recent phone interview, said the series was definitely going as far as this summer's Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. And then? ... And then? ...

Then, there are uncertainties, Altman said. Well, not quite. The one certainty is that Tanner will not win the Democratic nomination. What is less certain, he said, "is whether we end at the convention or whether Tanner decides to declare an independent candidacy to go 'til November."

Is there room for a good-natured foul-up like Tanner in what now ap-

pears an inevitable horse race between Dukakis and Vice President George Bush? Sure, Altman said.

"We think there is a serious need for a more human position between these two men," Altman said. "Tanner doesn't expect to get elected in November any more than now. The whole purpose behind his campaign is educational. The legalization of drugs, for instance. That's been a hot potato that no one's wanted to touch. We can bring these issues up in ways that the press cannot."

Most of the positive response Altman has received from the series has come from politicians and pundits. "Ev-

erybody in the real world seems to understand what we're doing. They know we're not trying to trivialize any candidate by exploiting the process. The only group of people who don't understand it and won't appear on it are Hollywood celebrities."

This isn't surprising, given Altman's longstanding reputation as a maverick, a reputation he doesn't mind maintaining and enhancing with a series like "Tanner." Or whatever comes afterwards.

"I'm not going to be making a major motion picture any time soon," he said, chuckling. "I might make an un-major experiment."