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OCTOBER 12, 1992 • \$2.95

THE NEW REPUBLIC

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Republican Convention Revisited.

By Heaven Inspired

NORMAN MAILER

Once an agreeable Texas town, Houston had expanded so prodigiously since the Second World War that one could now think of it as a gargantuan humanoid in a special effects movie (after the humanoid has been dismembered by a magnum ray-gun wielded by Arnold Schwarzenegger). Modern Houston sprawls over the nappy carpet of Texas soil in shreds, bones, nerves, and holes, a charred skeleton with an eye retained here, and there a prosthetic hand still smoking.

The megacity is, of course, not burned out; rather it is not yet built. Except in parts. The parts are often called edge-cities, clusters of modern office buildings thirty or forty stories high with nothing much around them. Five miles away, like an amputated elbow of the humanoid, one can find another cluster of tall corporate structures in mirrored glass. Between one edge-city and another, there are, occasionally, funky streets of old cottages or middle-aged ranch houses to remind one of the more modest homeowner passions that once belonged to the West; often these streets come to an end by polluted creeks, or peter out on a country road that will cross a rail track to run eventually next to one or another elevated highway that races on into another edge-city. Thirty-six by thirty-eight miles in dimension, fourth largest urban center in the United States (never crowded except on superhighways), its pride is its absence of form. You can virtually find a nose on the hip bone, an ear on the navel, and all the eyes you would ever want in the blue-gray and gray-green mirrored walls of all those edge-city thirty-story glass phalluses with their corporate hubris pointing up into the muggy Texas sky. So it was a city fit for Republicans in August, since, like the GOP mind, it had never had any other sense of the whole than how to win elections.

This convention year, however, the Republicans could hardly take in what had happened to them. Under Reagan and Bush, they had, by their lights, produced gouts of great and phenomenal

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history, had ended the threat of nuclear war; now all too many Americans did not seem to care about such achievement, and lately they had been trashed by the Democrats. In consequence, they were as mad as a hive of bees just kicked over. Mary Matalin, the party press chief, had described the Democratic campaign as "lower than a snake's belly," an opening gun. "Those characters belong in the out-house, not the White House" was but another of the shots fired at the first session of the convention as speaker after speaker with relatively minor credentials came fulminating to the podium.

It was an odd morning. The floor of a convention offers intensities of mood comparable to the stirring of a beast, but in these first hours, the animal looked too comatose to stir. It was an opportunity, therefore, to study the 2,000-plus delegates and 2,000-plus alternates at 10 a.m., hung over and/or depressed, their faces formed in the main (given much anal and oral rectitude) around the power to bite. Leading an honest hard-working responsible life, at work from 9 to 5 over the middle decades of one's life, can pinch the mouth into bitterness at the laziness and license of others. If one had been a convict up for parole, one would not be happy encountering these faces across the table. Imagination had long surrendered its ghost to principles, determined and predetermined principles.

On the other hand, who had ever said that parole board officers were ideally equipped to run the country? Republicans sitting in their orderly rows of folding chairs, the aisles considerably wider than the cramped turns on the floor of Madison Square Garden, the Astrodome ceiling much higher, the vast floor lavishly carpeted, were a sullen, slow-to-settle audience. They did not listen to the minor speakers—one rarely did unless he was from one's home state—but they applauded moderately on cue, and tried to contemplate the problems of the change that might be in the air. The only speaker to wake them up all morning was Alan Keyes, a dynamic black man running for the Senate in Maryland. The Democrats, he asserted, had brought the poor to a pass where they were "trapped

in welfare slavery. It does what the old slavery never could. It kills the spirit." So Keyes received a standing ovation, but it was a lonely event in a congealed opening morning void of other excitement.

By the time of the evening session, however, the mood had altered completely. Two events had intervened. George Bush had come to town that afternoon, and earlier there had been a jam-packed meeting at a "God and Country" rally at the Sheraton Astrodome across the street from the convention arena. Inside, in the Sam Houston Ballroom of the Sheraton, a medium-sized hotel chamber with no significant decorations other than a very large American flag, a small stage, and a podium, a crowd of delegates, evangelists, and fundamentalist congregations estimated as high as 2,000 people were standing with a remarkable display of patience as various speakers came up to promise the appearance of other speakers, and singers performed, notably Pat Boone wearing a cream-colored suit. The air was celebratory—the executive director of the Christian Coalition told the crowd in the happiest tones: "Within the past hour, the Republican Party passed a pro-life, pro-family platform! We are here to celebrate a victory. The feminists threw everything they had at us, and they lost!"

The assembled were healthy-looking people in the main, with a tendency, given the augmentations of marriage, to put on weight, and a great many young fathers and mothers were holding infants in their arms, the parents cleanly dressed with domiciled haircuts, fresh-washed faces perspiring now, not a bad-looking group, except for the intellectual torpor that weighed on the enthusiasm of the room. The assembled bore resemblance to those faces one sees among daytime TV audiences, the minds graceless, the eyes blank, the process of thought as slack-jawed as chewing gum before the complexity of things. If they were pro-life, and they were, it was because, whatever valid and sincere reasons were present, they were also being furnished with an intellectual rock. God—as the Republican platform they had participated in shaping now told them—was present in every pregnancy. "We believe the unborn child

has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed. We therefore reaffirm our support for a human life amendment to the Constitution, and we endorse legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment's protections apply to unborn children." Pregnancy was an aspect of God's will and every embryo was therefore a divine soul. A mighty certainty resided in this one notion, enough to make abortion illegal again; indeed, they called for a constitutional amendment to codify it as a crime of murder. The consequences, if carried to legal conclusion, could conceivably jail 1.5 million women a year (as well as hundreds of thousands of doctors, nurses, and midwives), since such was the number of abortions a year, but then the prohibitive logic of these numbers could never prevail against their other knowledge.

"I think," said Sylvia Hellman, a member of the Christian Coalition from Dallas, to David Von Drehle of *The Washington Post*, "that the media are actually good people who want to do good, but they go at it from the human perspective, not God's."

She was a lady who could still present a hint of lavender from that lost era before deodorant, dungarees, air conditioning, and parking-lot asphalt malls had come to America, and she added, "In the Bible, which conservative Christians take literally, there are rules to live by. Sometimes the rules demand that we do things that don't make sense to us, but we find out later they are best."

It would have taken a brutal turn of intellect to suggest to her faith that there were men and women who thought the devil might have as much purchase on the sexual act as God, and, if so, then many a young girl with an unwanted pregnancy might feel that she possessed a devil in her heart, or was it the devil she was bearing in her womb? By such livid light, the murder of an ogre within one might seem less unholy than encouraging such a presence to appear and deaden others in small measure daily by words and ugly deeds. The calculus of gestation is as much a moral labyrinth as the food chains of nature, but that is not a thought to propose to those who have found their piece of the eternal parchment. As Richard Bond, the Republican National Committee chairman (once George Bush's job), said to Maria Shriver: "We are America. These other people are not America."

Since nearly all 2,000 people in the Sam Houston Ballroom were obliged to stand, not only visibility was limited at the rear, but audibility as well. One could hardly hear the Reverend Pat Robertson, presidential candidate in the Republican primaries of 1988, as he introduced Dan Quayle, but some words were more dis-

tinct than others, and the vice president, despite the towering religiosity of the hundreds of heads between, was heard to say, "It is a pleasure to be with people who are the real America." No need to describe the cheers. "I don't care what the media say. I don't care what the critics say. I will never back down." He would repeat that sentiment several times in days to come, and was always clean-shaven as he said it. Dan Quayle might have his slips of tongue and occasional misalignment of facts or letters, but one could not conceive of him ever missing a single hair when he shaved.

"Well," Pat Robertson had remarked earlier, "this is a resurrection here today," and it is true that nearly all of God's minions had been on their feet and unable to move for close to two hours: that had proved more impressive than the rhetoric. Robertson was, by now, quietly celebrated among the liberal media for the appearance of a fund-raising letter in which he had declared that the feminist movement "encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians." He had a cherubic face, and he beamed forth a good, warm non-sexual Christian vitality with every smile and gesture. Perhaps he did not realize that his abusive language was calculated to drive feminists a little further into the precise roles he had catalogued.

George Bush arrived in Houston a little later and hastened to the American Spirit Pavilion, now the name for the born-again Astroarena, a ministadium and shopping center on one of the flanks of the Astrodome. There, before a crowd of 15,000 media, delegates, Astroarena mall-shoppers, and assorted guests, he laid into his problems with a squire's wrath. This was no longer the George Bush who vomited at a Japanese state dinner, or suffered a paucity of thyroid from Graves Disease, or was loved by Americans less than they loved his wife—not at all the George Bush who failed to knock out old Sad-damn, or had to patty-cake with the religious right and be bollixed by abortion and AIDS and have to listen to the interminable inner-party debates whether to deep-six Dan Quayle, certainly not the George Bush who was asked to solve the economy when none of his economists had a clue how to begin without getting into Democratic Party measures (such as more federal spending). Put it that he had one problem larger than all the others: the cold war was over. Could one begin to measure how much George Bush owed the cold war?

These were endemic concerns as worrisome (in the pit of nocturnal reflection) as the chronic concerns of any responsible householder in his late 60s. But George Bush was not the man to sink

into the natural pessimism of his condition. He did stand up for one idea, after all, and it was named George Bush. Neither the spirit of wisdom nor of insight, he was the soul of Wasptitude, one man of the gentry born to fight. He could hear the clash of armor when crusaders met Saracens; he had his own taproot into the universe of guts, a soldier's bowels, a knight of embattlement. Of all the misperceptions of the liberal media (and they were legion!), none was so unfounded as the still-prevailing notion that he was a wimp.

Problems passed, worries ceased. Combat was the medicine beneath all other prescriptions. If George Bush stood for one political idea other than himself, it was that America loved a fighter, and if you could maneuver the other elements, by whatever means (which did not preclude kicking your opposite number in the nuts), why, brother, the electorate would vote for the warrior every time.

So George Bush came to the podium of the American Spirit Pavilion, and in that auditorium, with 15,000 supporters there to listen and whoop, he started with the reinstallation of Dan Quayle.

It was part of his strategy. Perhaps it was the most honorable part. If every poll had shown that Quayle was a liability fast approaching the drag of a sea anchor, if most of George's advisers had all but begged him to take on a new dynamite vice president like Jack Kemp or Jim Baker or Cheney or Powell or Schwarzkopf, or even Bill Bennett if you had to keep your conservatives happy, Bush consulted his own psychology. All things being more or less equal, Americans not only loved a battler, but they adored a warrior faithful to his own troops. If he was to overcome the foe, how much more happiness he would find in victory, and how much more virtue (an indispensable companion was virtue) if he kept Quayle with him. The essence of noblesse oblige (which God knows you could not lose sight of no matter what other options had to be picked up) was to do it the hard way.

So he filled the sound of the word "Quayle" with whalebone.

Four years ago, Dan Quayle and I teamed up and I told him then, speaking from some personal experience, that the job of vice president was a real character builder, and I was not exaggerating. But look, this guy stood there and in the face of those unfair critics he never wavered. And he simply told the truth and let the chips fall where they may. And he said we need families to stick together and fathers to stick around, and he is right.

So when the establishment in Washington hears about this, they get all uptight about it, about him; they gripe about it—but folks

in the real world understand, and they nod their head, and he has been a super vice president and he will be for another four years.

This was George right off the cuff, and his minutes at the podium turned into an event. The convention came to life. Our president was no longer wan, defensive, and intrinsically confined by abortion, health care, AIDS, drugs, and Sad-damn still alive. Not to speak of the economy (that subtly nauseated off-beat stomach of the nation); no, this was the George who could win any battle against any Democratic foe any time because he knew the American people and what they cared about and what they laughed about. It was auto-intoxication for sure, but then mountains are climbed by just these will-to-win guys.

I couldn't help but notice an interview my opponent gave to the *USA Today* last week. It was absolutely incredible. . . . He talked about how he's already planning his transition, figuring out who should be deputy assistant undersecretary in every Washington agency. . . . and I half expected, when I went over to the Oval Office, to find him over there measuring the drapes. Well, let me say as the first shot out of the barrel, I have a message for him. Put those drapes on hold: it is going to be certain time for that ticket. And I mean it.

Yes, curtains. The other guy played the saxophone, and everyone knows what that instrument is attempting to convey. It's just a blither-blather of illicit sex and farts.

For nine months the other side has had a one-way conversation with the American people and now it's our turn—and they have called our great country a mockery and ~~sanctified~~ the saxophone of change, and that sound sure sounds familiar. They say they want to shake up Washington, but they oppose limiting the terms of congressmen and that's a change, just changing the subject. . . .

By evening, back in the Astrodome, the same delegates who had sat in despond all morning were ready for fun and more oratorical brimstone. The word was out. The president believed he could win. So the Astrodome was quick with laughter at each assault on Bill Clinton. "You know something," said Kay Bailey Henderson, state treasurer of Texas, a tall handsome lady with a humorous scorn in her voice reminiscent of Ann Richards, governor of Texas, as she spoke of Bill Clinton, "I think he *did* inhale." The delegates took vastly to that idea.

Then came Senator Alan K. Simpson from Wyoming, mean as rawhide, lantern-jawed as Popeye. His manner suggested the serious pleasure to be found in tapping into the jugular; the delegates confirmed his premise. Simpson would remind America that Clinton's only reason

for not fleeing America while the war in Vietnam happened to be on was that he did not wish to lose his "political viability." Contumely rested in those two words. "How many other times," jeered Simpson, "did you sell your political soul to maintain your political viability? . . . How are you going to pay the bill, Bill?"

Then came the first large event on Monday night in the Astrodome—Pat Buchanan's speech. Troused repeatedly in the Republican primaries by Bush, having to contend with the full weight of the Republican establishment in state after state, and succeeding nowhere after the early good showing in New Hampshire, Buchanan had managed nonetheless to amass 3 million votes. Half of them must have been as hard-core in their conservatism as Buchanan himself. Since he had also brought a heart attack on himself following such expenditures of energy, Buchanan could speak with the *gravitas* gained from reconnoitering early mortality.

Unlike the majority of speakers who strode up to the pale and massive podium of the Astrodome only to be overwhelmed by the caverns and hollows of volume in that huge and amplified space, he did not get into the trap of bellowing out his lines. Most speakers had a tendency to exercise hortatory rights—to yell louder as one lost more and more of one's audience. So they sounded cranky as their applause lines failed to elicit large response. . . . In all but the most extreme cases, such questions should be resolved by the families, not the courts. . . . I prefer that intervention . . . should be limited to decisions that could have long-term and possibly irreparable effects if they were not resolved.

Buchanan, having paused for the cheers he received, went on with the attack. Decisions about motherhood and abortion, schooling, cosmetic surgery, treatment of venereal disease, or employment, and others [which] will significantly affect the child's future should not be made unilaterally by parents. Children should have a right to be permitted to decide their own future if they are competent. . . . In all but the most extreme cases, such questions should be resolved by the families, not the courts. . . . I prefer that intervention . . . should be limited to decisions that could have long-term and possibly irreparable effects if they were not resolved.

Like many of you last month, I watched that giant masquerade ball at Madison Square Garden where 20,000 radicals and liberals came dressed up as moderates and centrists—in the greatest single exhibition of cross-dressing in American political history.

The convention was happy enough by now to reveal a curious side of itself. Conservatives might form the vitally motivated core, but these delegates were a far cry from the conservatives of 1964, who had been a group so openly hostile toward the media that after the first day, many a reporter did not venture out again onto the hate-filled floor of the

Cow Palace in San Francisco.

Now, however, it was more like a T.V. game. The delegates booed references to the media with grins, not scowls. They were part of a T.V. audience, after all; you grin, you do not scowl. Besides, they were curious—these were real media people of the sort you can see asking questions on T.V. To be around them, therefore, was to be anointed into the other church, the new fold, television.

Indeed, not until Buchanan began to talk about Hillary Clinton did an ugly underside to his speech begin to emerge:

Elect me, and you get two for the price of one. Mr. Clinton says of his lawyer-spouse. And what does Hillary believe? Well, Hillary believes that 12-year-olds should have a right to sue their parents, and she has compared marriage as an institution to slavery—and life on an Indian reservation. Well, speak for yourself, Hillary.

We can allow her to do that. In 1979 she wrote the article to which Buchanan was referring. Here is the passage:

Decisions about motherhood and abortion, schooling, cosmetic surgery, treatment of venereal disease, or employment, and others [which] will significantly affect the child's future should not be made unilaterally by parents. Children should have a right to be permitted to decide their own future if they are competent. . . . In all but the most extreme cases, such questions should be resolved by the families, not the courts. . . . I prefer that intervention . . . should be limited to decisions that could have long-term and possibly irreparable effects if they were not resolved.

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George Bush was 17 when they bombed Pearl Harbor. He left his high school class, walked down to the recruiting office, and signed up to become the youngest fighter pilot in the Pacific War. And Mr. Clinton? When Bill Clinton's turn came in Vietnam, he sat up in a dormitory in Oxford, England, and figured out how to dodge the draft. Which of these two men has won the moral authority to call on Americans to put their lives at risk? I suggest, respectfully, it is the patriot and war hero, Navy Lt. J.G. George Herbert Walker Bush.

By his own scale of measure, Buchanan also lacked moral authority. He, too, had not served in the Armed Forces. Nonetheless, Buchanan had inner sanction. He laid down a gauntlet:

My friends, this election is about much more than who gets what. It is about what we believe, what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be—as was the cold war itself.

If he had kept to that, one could have

applauded him from across the cultural divide, for he had performed the obligatory task of the serious politician—he had defined the nature of the conflict. The fact that his voice had begun to wear down into a hoarse whisper made him only more effective in his peroration. Each of his words now seemed to insist on a private physical toll; so suffering, he spoke to a sentiment that no other politician of either party would have dared to come close to uttering in public.

Friends, in these wonderful twenty-five weeks [of campaigning] the saddest days were the days of the bloody riot in L.A., worst in our history. But even out of that awful tragedy can come a message of hope.

Hours after the violence ended I visited the Army compound in south L.A. where an officer of the 18th Cavalry that had come to rescue the city introduced me to two of his troopers. They could not have been 20 years old. He told them to recount their story.

They had come into Los Angeles late on the second day; and they walked up a dark street where a mob had looted and burned every building but one, a convalescent home for the aged. The mob was heading in, to ransack and loot the apartments of the terrified old men and women. When the troopers arrived, M-16s at the ready, the mob threatened and cursed, but the mob retreated. It had met the one thing that could stop it: force, rooted in justice, backed by courage.

Greater love than this no man hath than that he lay down his life for his friend. Here were 19-year-old boys ready to lay down their lives to stop a mob from molesting old people they did not even know. And as they took back the streets of Los Angeles block by block, so, we must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country.

God bless you, and God bless America.

The public relations successes of Grenada and Panama must have emboldened Buchanan to believe that when it came down to it, Americans would concern themselves no more over the demolition of Harlem than with the disruption of any other Third World or Caribbean country. So, he was drawing his own line in the sand. If it took martial law, barbed wire, camps of detention, and Pentagon management of the media, then, by God, fellow Republicans, is that not a comfortable price to pay for walking carefree again on the street? The temptation would go deep for many an American. Would one care to see the results of a confidential poll on just this point? Inner-city unrest, however, would hardly be solved by his solution. For a religious man, Buchanan did not seem to comprehend that freedom which is obtained for a majority by amputating the rights of a minority leaves a slough of bad conscience, and so offers no more balance to heaven than to the streets.

Besides, his facts were off. The black

and angry mob in South-Central Los Angeles had not been about to attack the old black folks' home; no, as the Associated Press reported it, the National Guard had been slow to arrive. Following Buchanan on Monday night would come Ronald Reagan. With a few cuts, his text could have been delivered by many a senior Democratic statesman (if, indeed, there are any left besides Jimmy Carter). It was as if Reagan was looking to attain the eminence that is above politics.

In my life's journey over these past eight decades, I have seen the human race through a period of unparalleled tumult and triumph. I have seen the birth of communism and the death of communism. I have witnessed the bloody futility of two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. I have seen television grow from a parlor novelty to become the most powerful vehicle of communication in history. As a boy I saw streets filled with model-Ts; as a man I have met men who walked on the moon. . . .

Yet tonight is not a time to look backward. For while I take inspiration from the past, like most Americans I live for the future. So this evening, for just a few minutes, I hope you will let me talk about a country that is forever young. . . .

This powerful sense of energy has made America synonymous for opportunity the world over. And after generations of struggle, America is the moral force that defeated communism and all those who would put the human soul itself into bondage.

So it went. He gave credit to the Republicans for ending the cold war; he chided the Democrats. "Our liberal friends," he called them. What got liberals most upset were "two simple words: Evil Empire."

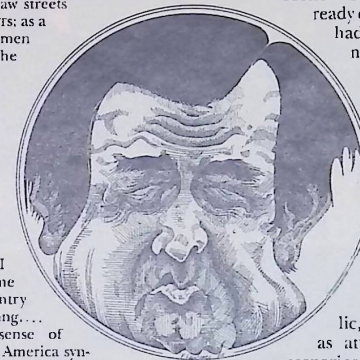
Though Reagan's popularity was great in this hall, it was smaller outside. He had spoken of the "Evil Empire" too often, and now we were left with the bill. Part of the profound confusion that hung over the political atmosphere of America this election year is that we had gotten ourselves in so much debt under Ronald Reagan. If he had come into office promising to cut taxes, balance the budget, and beef up the military so that it could defeat the Evil Empire, the dire fact was that our debt had expanded from 1 trillion dollars in the time of Jimmy Carter to 4 trillion now (4 trillion, we can remind ourselves, is 4 million separate sums of 1 million dollars each); yes, the truth was he had spent

it not to fight, but to bankrupt the Russians. We did not wage a holy war so much as a battle of U.S. versus Soviet military disbursements, and it had been needless. Once, under Stalin, the USSR had been a channel house for human rights, but the monstrosities of the '50s had ebbed by the '70s into a dull and daily oppression, a moribund economy, a corrupt bureaucracy, a cynical leadership, and no capacity whatever, no matter how large the vastly inefficient Soviet armies, to succeed at world conquest. By 1980, when Ronald Reagan came to presidential office, the Evil Empire had been reduced to an immense Third World collection of backward nations incapable of defeating even one other Third World country like Afghanistan. So we had spent our trillions in the holy crusade of a Pentagon build-up against an enemy whose psychic and economic wherewithal was already collapsed within, and had pursued communism into little countries, and wrecked their jerry-built tropical economies even as we were wearing out what was left of the Soviets', but it all cost us twenty times more than it had to. Our grandchildren would pay the bill.

The American public, however, had been as attracted to Reagan's scenarios as he was. So our vision of an Evil Empire did not vanish altogether until the fall of communism itself. Then the fraud was out. Evil Empires, like dragons, slaughter millions in their last throes, but Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union went over to capitalism peacefully. Blood did not run in the streets. Caught in the middle of a long sleep, the American mind began to ask itself: Were we taken? Had there been, for a long time, something phony about the cold war? It might be that Ronald Reagan was the last person in America to realize that he had not won such a conflict, but had merely extended it.

With the conclusion of Reagan's speech, the first convention evening came to a close, and Bush's strategy could begin to be seen. In all of this long day with its double session, Clinton had been attacked scores of times, the nation had been celebrated, the Bush administration had been glorified, pro-life had been affirmed, and legal abortion denied. That conservative movement which had sought to get the government off the backs of the American people had now

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put its foot into the womb of the American woman. Yet, with all the rhetoric, not a new word, nor a new idea, had been brought forth on the economy. The overall strategy was clear: In court, if you have a weak case and can argue neither the facts nor the law, dedicate yourself to arousing the emotions of the jury.

If Clinton was going to base his campaign on improving the weak state of the economy, which certainly handed him the facts, then Bush would look to dig deep into the mother lode of American politics—patriotism. Since the Republicans had been mining such ore since the Second World War, the question was whether the vein had been played out. All the same, Bush could only try. What with his hardest campaign workers coming from the religious right, he could hardly debate in the center; his would have to be the war between the Patriots and the Bureaucratic Managers, between the warriors and the hedonists (read: faggots, feminists, lawyers, media).

In preparation, therefore, the president dropped in Tuesday morning at the Hamilton Middle School to observe a class of students who were giving a karate demonstration. In honor of the occasion, Chuck Norris, founder of "Kick Drugs out of America" and the martial arts virtuoso of numberless blood-drenched films, a quiet, gentle fellow, Chuck Norris—he could afford to be!—presented a white karate jacket and an honorary Black Belt to the president who in turn called Chuck a "point of light." One down, 999 to go!

That Tuesday night at the convention, Newt Gingrich, the House minority whip who had exposed the House Bank scandal (and had then been embarrassed by the number, twenty-two, of his own overdrawn checks) was up at the podium declaring that the Democrats were trying to sell America "a multicultural nihilistic hedonism that is inherently destructive of a healthy society." He had his backing. On cue, delegates were holding up placards that read, "If Hillary can't trust him, how can we?" and a marijuana leaf showed up on a poster with the caption, "Bill Clinton's smoking gun."

Nonetheless, the strategy worked but minimally on the second night. Jack Kemp spoke with reasonable effectiveness and Phil Gramm put his audience to sleep with the keynote speech. The theme for the third day, Wednesday, was Family Values, and it was introduced in the Republican Gala at noon. Four thousand wealthy Republicans, paying \$1,000 each, came to lunch at the George Brown Convention Center in Downtown Houston (largest edge-city of them all), and in the huge main room, as large as a football

field, and therefore commodious enough for 400 tables, the gentry of Texas and a few country clubs beyond had congregated in support of the president and first lady, who, after notables had been seated at the dais, entered the festivities in a mock railroad train called the American Eagle Express, a black and gold behemoth of a toy locomotive about the size of a large stagecoach. On the rear platform of the observation car it pulled were standing the Bushes and Quayles, and in their wake walked the Secret Service, as alert on this occasion as attack dogs. All considered, it was a hairy maneuver: the facsimile of a train choo-chooed and whistled gaily as it trundled through the aisles along the luncheon floor, but it left the president and his wife wholly exposed as they smiled and nodded and occasionally reached out to shake hands with friends on either side.

Standing near the locomotive as it crawled by, one had a fair look at Barbara Bush, who was immensely animated and appeared capable of taking in a formidable amount of information at once. Her eyes scanned every face within ten feet of her, and she did not miss a dear acquaintance or those who were at this hour somewhat less than friends, the smallest movements of her eyes and lips indicating a welcome across the gap, or a small reminder that things between were not altogether in order. To bestow warmth or display rectification in one's greetings suggests command of that spectrum of recognition that usually belongs to royals. On reflection, that was no surprise. Barbara Bush did not look like a first lady so much as like a woman who could be Queen of England, and that did little for George standing beside her, since his absolute thinness of figure, reminiscent of George VI, could also bring to mind King George's older brother, the former Prince of Wales, Edward, the old dear haunted poof who married Wallis Simpson, although George Bush, God knows, was no way a poof, but possessed the genuine steel (no matter how he might be cursed with that mild face and mild voice, and—said the Democrats—his mild brain!). Nonetheless, it was a moment to recall—Barbara Bush, as the Queen of America, or, better yet, our queen mother.

Entered the chow in chuck wagons, pushed along by teenagers in cowhand and cowgirl outfits, the boys leaning on the heavy wagons with all their strength, while the girls, obviously not liberated, were taking it easy. And the gathering of 4,000, whose least costly denominator when it came to dress was the Neiman-Marcus boutique, was delighted by such campy re-creation of chuck-wagon roots, but of course, as was true so often of Republican promises, the wagons were

but symbols for the food to come; the real grub came out later, carried by other files of cowhands and cowgirls toting stacks of round plastic plates and plastic covers with fried chicken and fritters within.

After a series of short remarks offering thanksgiving to those who had brought off this \$4 million fund-raiser, Dan Quayle got up to speak. It was interesting to see him in such a venue. Feeling himself among friends, he was relaxed and not unhumorous, much in contrast to his situation on Monday night at the Astrodome when he had sat in a guest box listening to Buchanan and Reagan while photographers never ceased clicking away. Under those circumstances, it had been possible to notice that a part of his unique appearance, always so off-putting in spite of his good looks, could be due to the fact that his head was strikingly small. He also looked wax-like, but indeed, under the circumstances, who would not? To be obliged to sit for ten or fifteen minutes, then another twenty minutes, and permit not one vague or errant expression to cross one's face on penalty of having it immortalized in the papers the next day, meant that he could neither smile nor groan sympathetically at what Buchanan or Reagan said, but had to content himself with a tasteful clapping of his hands for fear that any grin or grimace allowed to slip out would reveal some leering depth within. If he had not been the epitome of a rich man's son, or, in his case, grandson, a simulacrum for president of the wealthiest house on fraternity row, one could even have felt something like sympathy for him.

Bush came to the podium as a very large American flag was unrolled behind him, and he gave a short zippy set of remarks full of one-liners. "I think the train beats the bus," and "You're gonna love Barbara's speech tonight," or "I am proud and honored to have Dan Quayle on my side." He spoke of Clinton's drapes and George Bush's curtains for that minority who had not heard it before. He told the crowd that one out of two delegates at the Democratic convention was "on a government payroll." He also flattered his people:

This is our last big convention, the last time—you might say—around the track. It is great to come back home to Texas, come home to where it really began for us in the political sense. The friends we made here and throughout our lives are the friends who are in this room—some from Texas, some elsewhere, every one of whom we owe a vote of gratitude to—friends who have stood by us when times are great and when times are tough. Now, we are about to embark on the fight of our life... and one thing that is the most comfort is that through good times and bad, I have had you at my side.

There was a photographers' platform

erected fifteen feet above the floor and 100 feet from the podium, and it was jammed with echelons of T.V. cameras, perhaps as many as forty or fifty; crowded in was a second host of still cameras. Out of this intensely compressed work force, a voice shouted, "Bullshit!"

Later, the heckler was reported as saying, "What are you going to do about AIDS?" but that was later. The first muffled sound was "Bullshit," and everyone at the lunch froze for an instant as if everyone belonged again to one American family and was passing through the hour when Jack and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King had been killed, and Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford wounded and shot at. Like all families who put together a fragile composure after the death of someone who inhabited the center of the home and circle, it was as if the air went pale.

"Bullshit," came another voice, "What are you going to do about AIDS?" and by then, security was up on the platform manhandling the malefactors, who proved to be two wan young men with the telltale pallor of the disease, their hair cut in a punk-rock clump, and sores on their faces; now they were hustled down the stairs from the photographers' platform and out the exit.

Bush picked up his discourse, but he was shaken—how could he not be? The moment one will be assassinated must become one of the hundred entrenched expectations in every public leader's life—unlike other crises, there is not much to prepare for; the angle of attack is never known. In the aftermath, Bush started to make a sour joke—with all else, he felt sour—"This is a crazy year when they can get credentials for this," he muttered, but other voices started up on the photographers' platform ("What are you going to do about AIDS?"), and now several of the new hecklers—second wave of the plan—waved condoms at the boutique crowd there for lunch, and security whammed and slammed the second group of hecklers down from the platform and out of the room, while Bush came up fast with a few figures on what his administration was spending on AIDS—one cannot be a major politician without having a statistics tape in one's head—and then he added, the room now feeling at last restored, "In my line of work lately, this seems normal... If anyone else has anything they would like to say while we are all standing..."

He went on. He told his audience that he was working on his acceptance speech. "To be honest, I can tell you that I have a few butterflies... but you can count on this. I look forward to this fight. I can feel it building in my blood." It was the presence of AIDS that would build in the Astrodome that night, however, and not far from everyone's blood.

Mary Fisher, a slim, blonde, and undeniably lovely young lady with a delicacy of feature and a poignancy of manner, proceeded to give the Republican address on AIDS not long after the prime time commenced. If a casting director had searched for a fine actress unlikely ever to have contact with the virus, he would have selected Mary Fisher if she had been an actress, but she was not. She was in a rare category, a Republican princess; her father, Max Fisher, 84 years old and reputedly worth hundreds of millions of dollars, had been a major fund-raiser for the party since the early days of Richard Nixon. Mary Fisher could speak of George and Robert Mosbacher and Gerald and Betty Ford as her friends; indeed, the women were weeping and the men were wiping their eyes as she spoke. Before she was done, the Astrodome floor would be awash. She was not only lovely, but innocent, after all; she had caught the disease from her ex-husband before they separated. Now, presumably, she would die and have to say farewell to her sons Max and Zachary, 4 and 2.

The Democratic convention had heard from a man and a woman, Elizabeth Glaser, who was HIV-positive, and Bob Hattoy, with AIDS, and their speeches had similarly affected the Democrats' convention. There had been accusations that not enough had been done by the Bush administration to fight against AIDS, and Bill Clinton had declared that such a fight would be one of the central issues in his campaign.

Mary Fisher was the Republican answer, then, to Democrats, and she was effective beyond measure. Outside their gates, across the bordering street beyond the Astrodome, in a weed-filled vacant lot now named the Astrodome and renamed Queer Village by the protesters themselves, there had been a riot on Monday night. A half-dozen arrests and a number of beatings had been handed out "professionally" by the police after a few of the 1,000 protesters had put up effigies of George Bush, set them afire, and then had begun smashing wooden police barricades to feast the fire. The police had charged in on horse and foot and a helicopter shook the sky overhead as chants of doggerel came up from the protesters. "150,000 dead," they began, "Off with George Bush's head!" and

"Burn, baby, burn!" They cried to the effigy, "We're queer and we're here." One protester announced, "This shows how far we mean to take our anger," but then the anger was as bottomless as the rage that victims feel against hurricanes and earthquakes. "We're all innocent. Do you want to see me die?" had shouted one AIDS activist to Senator Alfonso D'Amato in a Houston church when D'Amato made the mistake of remarking on the tragedy of AIDS when it took the lives of innocent children. "What about us?" someone shouted back. "We're also innocent and we're going to die."

Well, they were innocent or they were guilty. It was the intolerable and unspoken question at the heart of AIDS. Many a Republican was harboring ugly thoughts. AIDS, went the whisper, stood for Anal

Injection—Dirty Sex! Out in Oregon a movement was commencing against the gay nation. The

Oregon Citizens' Alliance had sent out mass mailings that said, "Homosexual men on average ingest the fecal material of twenty-three different men per year," which, if a particularly roto-rotoer way of stating that the average homosexual had twenty-three lovers a year, also posed the riddle of how the Oregon Citizens' Alliance ever obtained their

statistic. But the anxiety of homosexuals, borne in private for who knows how many centuries, was now inflamed by the enigma of nature. Was excrement a side-product of nature, offensive to some, as the Democrats would doubtless have argued, or was Satan in everyone's shit? Which, in turn, was a way of saying that the devil was present more often in homosexual than in heterosexual encounters—exactly the question that blazed in the divide. We are dying, said the victims of AIDS, and you have no mercy. Are you cold to our pain because we are the devil's spawn?—beware, then, for we will haunt you. That was the question. Was the gay nation guilty or innocent, victims or devils, damned by Jehovah or to be comforted by Christ? Were such acts shameful or natural? The wheel of obsessive and unanswerable questions went round and round, and gay rage came up from the bottomless funnels of the vortex. Was their illness for cause in a world of immutable principles? Or was it the absurdity of a badly designed natural system that had not provided for safe sex short of the damnable deadhead odor of a condom?



What had happened to American politics? Like Mr. Magoo, it teetered on the lip of ultimate peril—which is to say ultimate questions—and all the while a blood rage had been building in the nation. "If I am young and dying of AIDS," went the credo that was forming, "then I might as well go down in flames." Yes, the riots were building, and the forces of the right, equally inflamed by the more and more vivid presence of the gay nation, were out to exterminate—so went the secret agenda—all human flesh that carried such a virus. Scenarios were germinating on the other side of that hill of time which is ten years away. Scenarios, we know, are rarely put into production by the cosmic forces who make the real films of our lives, but let us contemplate the Republicans in this pass—an enormous congregation of the conservative-minded, who can be enumerated as the greedy, the spiteful, the mean-spirited, in party congress with the sincere, the godly, the principled, and the tidy, all philosophically unsuited to contemplate the nightmare of a disease that is not amenable to medical science and may or may not have the deepest moral roots: yes, the Republicans were paralyzed before the obscene enigma of AIDS and so when Mary Fisher spoke like an angel that night, the floor was in tears, and conceivably the nation as well, for instead of the Evil Empire, so nicely manipulable by American might—we always held the ace—now we lived on the edge of uncontrollables we did not know how to stir against—drugs, crime, abortion, race, disease. How much, nearly half of the nation at least, must have longed for Buchananite solutions: how bewildered was each angry soul of the right that there was no retaking of the disease of AIDS block by block.

Into this stew of choked passions and muffled fears (where a city was now defined as a place you would not enter until you knew where you would be able to park your car and ascend by elevator to your event), into this ongoing panic came Mary Fisher with a message so old that the corrupted souls of the Republicans, nine-tenths barnacled by now in greed and wealth, cant and bad conscience, fury and fear, began to weep in longing for the old memory of Christ kissing the feet of the poor. How contradictory are our conventions! At this one, the most moving message of the four days came from a Republican princess who had the Republicans bawling their hearts out at sentiments usually characterized by the I-word.

Less than three months ago, at Platform Hearings in Salt Lake City, I asked the Republican Party to lift the shroud of silence which has been draped over the

issue of HIV/AIDS. I have come tonight to bring our silence to an end.

I bear a message of challenge, not self-congratulation. I want your attention, not your applause. I would never have asked to be HIV-positive. But I believe that in all things there is a purpose, and I stand before you and before the nation gladly.

Tonight I represent an AIDS community whose members have been reluctantly drafted from every segment of American society. Though I am white and a mother, I am one with a black infant struggling with tubes in a Philadelphia hospital. Though I am female, and contracted this disease in marriage, and enjoy the warm support of my family, I am one with the lonely gay man sheltering a flickering candle from the cold wind of his family's rejection.... We may take refuge in our stereotypes but we cannot hide there long. Because HIV asks *only one thing* of those it attacks: Are you human? And this is the right question. Are you human? Because people with HIV have not entered some alien state of being. They are human.

I want my children to know that their mother was not a victim. She was a messenger. I do not want them to think, as I once did, that courage is the absence of fear; I want them to know that courage is the strength to act wisely when most we are afraid....

To my children I make this *pledge*: I will not give in. Zachary, because I draw my courage from you. Your silly giggle gives me hope.... And I will not rest, Max, until I have done all I can do to make your world safe. I will seek a place where intimacy is not a prelude to suffering.

I will not hurry to leave you, my children, but when I do, I pray that you will not suffer shame on my account. To all within the sound of my voice, I appeal: Learn with me the lessons of history and of grace, so my children will not be afraid to say the word AIDS when I am gone. Then their children, and yours, may not need to whisper it at all. God bless the children. God bless us all—and good night.

Marilyn Quayle came next. Had the coordinators been wholly unready for the impact of Mary Fisher's speech and so had not foreseen what a powerful effect it would produce upon the mean-spirited not to be mean-spirited for a little while? Or did the convention organizers possess the wisdom to know that Marilyn Quayle was ready to appear at the podium after anyone—Gorbachev, St. Peter, Madonna—she would not be cowed by those who came before. She had, after all, the insularity of a duchess, an insensitivity to her surroundings so monumental that it was almost attractive—one of a kind!

So she gave her little speech with absolute composure, the only sign that not everyone in herself was right there at home and listening came from her logo—that is, her horsey smile—that peculiarly self-intoxicated stretch of lips and protrusion of teeth that came and went to a rhythm that had next to nothing to do with what she said. Her words

might be pious, or reflective, or she might even attempt to be funny, "If only Murphy Brown could meet Major Dad—what a story," but then the smile would come, on the beat, off the beat; it was like the reflex learned in childhood to hold off tears when one is being scolded.

Her language, however, was always correct. When it came to being politically correct—as a Bush Republican, that is—who could approach her? Her speech was seamless, and her espousal of Republican womanhood could not be improved, nor injured; it was there, flat as Indiana. "Watching and helping my children as they grow into good and loving teenagers is a source of daily joy for me."

On the other hand, she was not a duchess for too little. She had a nasal voice that could drill into clay, and given her disconnected smile, she could have been the president of a garden society, bird-like for all her horsiness, elevated above dross, and spacey as a space station. Let us say farewell while listening to her encomiums to the royal couple:

Because leadership has everything to do with character and unwavering commitment to principle, Dan and I have been deeply honored to serve these four years with President and Mrs. Bush. America loves Barbara Bush because she exemplified our ideal of a strong and generous woman, dedicated to her husband, her children, and her nation. She is a model for all generations, a woman I am proud to call a friend and our nation is proud to call first lady.

To say that the appearance of Barbara Bush at the podium was the second if not the first most important event of the convention is to miss the point. Barbara Bush was also the major gamble of the Bush strategy. The economy, no matter what quantities of pork barrel were going to be brought up from the hold to feed electoral mouths in September and October, was going to remain a problem antipathetic to solution. One might as well roll the dice then with Barbara Bush, and pump up the advantage the Republicans held in family values. It was certainly a gamble. If America reacted with the cry—jobs, not happy hearths—then the election could be lost. On the other hand, Barbara Bush was the only exceptional card they had to play, and one could find a logic to the bet—patriotism, the flag, and the family were, after all, the values taught in elementary schools (even if they were public schools), whereas politics only commenced (if it did) with high school civics. So, family values were gut-bets. Unless the economy got so bad that people had to vote with their minds, patriotism, the flag, and the family had a real chance to hit. George could take care of the patriotism, but Bar-

bara could demolish every Clinton position when it came to family values, and you wouldn't even see the smoke. The beauty of it all was that she was also an ameliorative and corrective force. If the good ship GOP was tilted ten degrees further over to the right than it cared to be, with every attendant impediment to responsive steering, Barbara could ballast it back a little to the left. The pro-lifers had kept cutting too hellish a swath in Houston that week, blockading abortion clinics so violently that forty-one of their *religiosos* got arrested on Monday, and then were so bad in court that they called the judge, who was a mother and a Catholic named O'Neill, nothing less than "anti-Christ"—Jesus, it was enough to make you swear. Ultra-religious Americans were not paying heed to the effect on the electoral result. After Judge O'Neill ordered Operation Rescue to keep 100 feet away from Planned Parenthood clinics, one preacher even started praying for the judge to repent or she would "be stricken from the face of the earth." Somebody else left a stink bomb at Planned Parenthood. Besides, you couldn't have a crazy-looking father, holding his kid, scared frozen, by one hand, while he swings a seven-month fetus (still reeking of formaldehyde) with the other. Republican women were going to leave the party in droves. George understood female psychology. You don't allow something as ugly as a fetus to be waved in public—women do not like to advertise the disagreeableness of some personal and private functions. Dammit, the Party needed amelioration concerning pro-life.

Barbara could provide it. Barbara would provoke the religious right hardly at all because, after all, even they knew they needed her. Pat Robertson made a point of saying, "I can't believe the American people are so blind that they would want to replace Barbara Bush." Family values was the epoxy, then, to keep the party together, and Barbara could handle any press conference or podium assignment. Trust her every time. In with reporters from *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post* just a week ago, why, she blocked every thrust, and these were top-flight journalists, true hard-ons, *honed!*

BOSTON GLOBE: On abortion, I have to ask you something. Why is it so many of your friends think you are pro-choice?

BARBARA BUSH: I have no idea. I have no idea.

BOSTON GLOBE: Because you never expressed it to them? Never talked about it?

BARBARA BUSH: I've always felt that if I ran for President, George Bush would back me 100 percent. That's the best I can do. [So] we can't return to that. I've given my answer.

WASHINGTON POST: Well, I'm returning to

it and I want you to tell me how the Republican Party which...

BARBARA BUSH: I don't know the answer. WASHINGTON POST: ... which wants less government in our lives...

BARBARA BUSH: I don't know the answer to your question and so, in all honesty, don't ask it. I don't know the answer to your question. Pro or con, I just don't want to get into abortion. I've had it with abortion.

She could front any confrontation. The day before she had said, "It's a personal choice.... The personal things should be left out of... platform and conventions." She had said that during a televised interview in a simple setting. The only picture in the room was on the end table next to her, and it was a framed photograph (signed, presumably) of Pope John Paul the Second. She could offer every indication to Republican women that she was their advocate for choice in the land, while reassuring the religious right by dint of her close respect for John Paul II—no champion of abortion was he!

Speak of presumption, let us leave these musings of George Bush to hack away at the matter on our own. Concerning abortion, Barbara Bush is leaving just the kind of mixed message that only a monarch can dare to send out. Mixed messages are the prerogative of kings and queens; they are supposed to represent the entirety of the populace.

That was just what she did in her speech on Family Values. It was no rhetorical gem. On the page, it read like one of those decaffeinated pieces of prose that used to blanket the old Reader's Digest, affirmative, highly simplified, and emotionally available to anyone whose I.Q. had managed to stay below 100. But the GOP, we can assume, was profoundly aware, along with Barbara Bush, that most of the electorate, was right there, right under that magic number.

Virtually at her commencement, she paid lip service to other orators: "There is something not quite right here... speeches by President Ronald Reagan, President Gerald Ford, Secretary Jack Kemp, Senator Phil Gramm, and... Barbara Bush!" It was evident already that despite her protestations, she was an exceptionally good speaker, and this because of one exceptional and virtuous ability—she could address tens of thousands of people as if they were not more than two or three individuals sitting

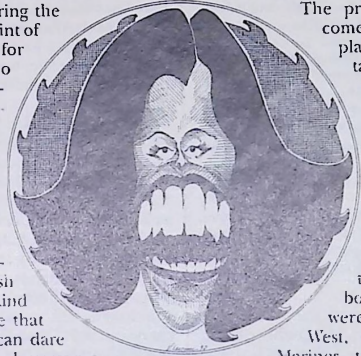
across from her on a couch. This faculty is available to few, and it suggests she had managed some exceptional transcendence—a woman once sensitive about her stocky build and much-lined face, her dumpy presence once so remarked in relation to Nancy Reagan, had undergone, now that she in turn had become first lady, so many rites of passage, that she was now possessed of a consummate ease in public. So she gave her audience in the Astrodome a satisfaction they had found nowhere else—a wholly comfortable, social, witty, and reigning queen in their midst; yes, Barbara Bush was politics in the deepest sense, even as is monarchy. Her confidence suggested that one thing at least was right in the world—herself. We vote for what looks right.

So the royal presence that the Reagans had imperfectly commenced, the Bushes had now developed.

The presidency had become a monarchy. In place of landed estates or thousand-year-old families, we had endowed symbols—endowed by the psychic etching upon our values of our quick history and, intrinsic to us, our American entertainment. Our symbols and our heraldry were in our American West, our Cavalry, the Marines, the Air Corps, the

spirit-of-the-fourth-quarter, Notre Dame, and the kind of family values that had come down to us from Queen Victoria and been brought over by boatloads of immigrants, a sense of propriety brought up to the mark now by Queen Mother Barbara, and our own not wholly overpowering King George, a fantasy of rich national theatre. However, since Mr. and Mrs. Bush partook of it as only WASP gentry and WASP vigor can settle into a set of roles they are able to spend their lives living out, but will never name, a subliminal nourishment was there for that part of America which could hardly survive without the certainty of a single powerful and uplifting idea, the unvoiced sense that Barbara Bush was, for all effects, our Queen and so could underwrite the religion beneath all other American religions—America itself. Well, thought the Republicans, we'll win by an avalanche if we can only keep the focus on Hillary versus Barbara, Hillary with her feminist intelligence and her hairband.

For the speech itself, little registers in the text unless we bring the emoluments of her presence to it. Speaking of her hus-



band, she moved him safely out of harm's way with queenly dispatch:

I always feel wonderful when I get to talk about the strongest, most decent, most caring, wisest, and yes... handsomest man I have ever known... George Bush. Now I am here to thank hundreds of communities across the country for one of the great privileges George and I have had in the last four years... the chance to meet so many American families and to be in your homes. We have learned from you. And we look forward to meeting many more of you with four more years!

We've met thousands of wonderful families, we include extended families... we mean the neighbors... even the community itself.

and gave the enumeration:

Heroic simple mothers and fathers, and grandparents... now raising their grandchildren... we've visited literacy classes where courageous parents were learning to read... we've held crack babies and babies with AIDS... George and I have seen communities gather around parents with a gravely ill child... times in our lives when we, too, couldn't have made it without our neighbors... shared moments with [Persian Gulf families]... those yellow-ribboned towns not only wrapped trees and posts, they also strapped their arms around their young families... as in our family, as in American families everywhere, the parents we've met are determined to teach their children integrity, strength, responsibility, courage, sharing, love of God, and pride in being an American. However you define family, that's what we mean by family values.

The Republicans in the Astrodome were delicious. They could believe in victory for the first time. Clinton's lead was vanishing even as the first lady spoke. For there was depth to this gambit. It would appeal not only to all who were happy and fierce about their family, but one could probably add in a host of those loners bereft of family, plus the unhappy families that wished to be happy so much that their hearts tugged at the thought that it might still be possible. Family values was bound to exert a force on 75 percent of the vote—all the people who were in favor of Barbara.

You may be exhausted from working a job... or two jobs and taking care of your children, or you may have put your career on hold. Either way, you may wonder, as I did every now and then, am I really doing the right thing?... Yes, you are... from the bottom of my heart I'm here to tell you that you are doing the right thing and God bless you for it.

Who would ever have believed there was any other side to her tonight? When the scandal about George had hit the fan just a week before the convention, and the media had been teeming with tales, not quite nailed down, of George and Jennifer Fitzgerald, Barbara Bush had

called the reports "deceitful," "harmful," "mean," "ugly." That was to the media at large. To one interviewer, for whom she may have had a fond spot, she had laughed and said, "It's funny. Nobody ever asks if I've fooled around."

Who knew? With all the Republican candidates for '96, could she be wholly out of her mind if occasionally she had an errant thought or two about who might be added to the list? History, we know, has its own mordant sense of humor. Tonight, with seventeen children and grandchildren surrounding Barbara and George, the story about Woody Allen, Mia Farrow, and Soon-*ni* was circulating happily among the Republicans. William Kristol, an able servant in the development of the Republican mind—he was Dan Quayle's chief of staff—was heard to remark at a press briefing, "I'm tempted to say Woody Allen is a good Democrat and leave it at that." Newt Gingrich looked to rake in the pot. "Woody Allen having non-incest with a non-daughter to whom he was a non-father because they were a non-family fits the Democratic platform perfectly."

William J. Bennett, the former secretary of education and the drug czar for the Bush Administration, was chosen to nominate Dan Quayle, a well thought-out selection since Bennett was reminiscent of Pat O'Brian in the movies of the '30s and '40s where he would play a tough priest. Bennett gave a quiet principled conservative speech and concluded with a dignified series of encomiums for Dan Quayle. He has succeeded, said Bennett.

In sparkling needed debate about our most important social issue: the values by which we live and which we convey to our children. He has stood for family values. He has stood up against his critics. He has been principled and courageous and in response he has been belittled, but he has not been silenced. Through it all, this good and decent man has demonstrated grace and resolve and resilience. He has earned our respect. And we should stand by our man.

On the following night, Thursday, last session of the convention, it was up to Dan Quayle to fit such specifications. No routine task. One would have needed the light forged by inner contests with one's rage and anguish, and Quayle, from the day he had been chosen by Bush in 1988, had been unable to take in one breath that was not predeterminedly partisan. Embattled, ridiculed, in liege to a wife who seemed twice as strong as he was and eight times more opinionated, he had had a full term of skirmishing with the media, and now, four years later, his petulance still leaked through. After a bow to the greatness of George Bush, he said:

I know my critics wish I were not standing here tonight. They don't like our values. They look down on our beliefs. They're afraid of our ideas. And they know the American people stand on our side. That is why, when someone confronts them, they will stop at nothing to destroy him. To them I say: You have failed. I stand before you, and before the American people—unbowed, unbroken, and ready to keep fighting for our beliefs.

To this he added *extempore*: "I'll never surrender, never quit, never retreat," which was reminiscent of Churchill's speech after Dunkirk, but then, Churchill, quite as easily as Quayle, could have been seriously influenced in adolescence by Thomas Henley's *Invictus*. "Out of the night that covers me / black as the pit from pole to pole / I thank whatever gods may be / for my unconquerable soul."

Quayle might speak with defiance, but he still seemed not so much unfinished as uncommenced. "It is not just a difference between conservative and liberal," said Quayle, speaking with the sanctimoniousness that no politician in America seemed to have in greater supply. "It is a difference between fighting for what is right and refusing to see what is wrong." That is probably why he inspired such hostility in the media. A young, rich, good-looking man does well not to be pious—piety, we sense, is not convincing unless it is based on tragedy and dread. Even as he threw down the gauntlet, he lacked dimension, a mediocre actor reciting a line more powerful than the true register of his experience.

Besides, he lacked taste. He mashed tuna salad and blueberry muffins into the same picnic baggie:

We have taught our children to respect single parents and their challenges—challenges that faced my grandmother many years ago and my own sister today. And we have taught our children about the tragedy of diseases like breast cancer—which took the life of Marilyn's mother. Marilyn and I have hosted an annual event called the Race for the Cure of Breast Cancer. Two months ago, 20,000 runners, men and women, young and old, joined us in the nation's capitol to race for the cure.

Let us give him credit, however, for the interesting point he did make. He was all for reforming the legal system. If he did not say how he would bring this about without government interference, he did, at least, point to one of the first of our economic ills.

America has 5 percent of the world's population and 70 percent of the world's lawyers. I have nothing against lawyers—at least most of them. I'm a lawyer; I'm married to one. When we worked our way through night law school, Marilyn and I looked forward with pride to becoming part of the finest legal system in the world. But

today our country has a problem: our legal system is costing consumers \$300 billion a year. The litigation explosion has damaged our competitiveness; it has wiped out jobs; it has forced doctors to quit practicing in places where they are needed most. Every American knows the legal system is broken—and now is the time to fix it.

Yes, indeed, and would he lead the war against the non-productive costs put into our economic system by all the law firms that did corporate work?

Packed around the floor under the podium, cheering every phrase, placards pumping, voices chanting, and with a high tropism for the nearest television lens, the Republican Youth Delegate Program, also known as the Youth Group, had been powering it up so masterfully for Dan Quayle that if one had not seen them do as much for Pat Buchanan, Ronald Reagan, Jack Kemp, Phil Gramm, and Lynn Martin, the impression could have developed that Quayle's address to the convention had gotten him off to a good start for '96. The essence of successful prostitution, however, even when it is merely spiritual, is an exaggerated if temporary enthusiasm for the client, and the Youth Group had certainly done as much for each of the other speakers. Two hundred strong, picked for Republican balance in gender and ethnicity—a judicious spotting of black, Hispanic, and Asian faces—they were Republican high school and college students who would be future politicians, and so were up each day by 5 in the morning and did not pack their convention gear until after midnight, a special corps bused from rally to rally and event after event, there to give life to the T.V. crews outside and inside the Astrodome.

They certainly did their best for Quayle, and if one did not discern the drop in intensity as one moved further away from the podium, there would have been no way to explain the little economic fact that over in the Astroarena, down in the shopping center, Buchanan buttons were selling briskly, Kemp buttons modestly, and Quayle buttons were not moving at all. How severe are the findings of the competitive free market! By its stern laws and principles, the unsuccessful are equal to the undeserving. Quayle's buttons would be cast out on Friday.

Enter George Bush. Once again, as in 1988, he would have to give the speech of his life. Or so it was generally agreed. The feeling among Republicans was that Family Values had taken a full bite out of the Democrats' lead in the polls, and if George could deliver on this occasion, parity might be near.

Bush had fretted over the need to prove himself one more time. It was as if

he could not overcome his resentment that he, the conqueror of the Persian Gulf, was still obliged to seek victory through oratorical splendor. Whatever his desires, he had ended as the focus of narrative interest for this four-day convention. Would he or would he not startle and encourage the nation with new ideas and new policies? Or, would he fail to?

Thursday morning at an ecumenical prayer breakfast, he had said, "Tonight, I give my acceptance speech—and if it catches fire, it may give a whole new meaning to the burning Bush." A humorous remark, but a vain hope. He was too angry within: the delegates were treated instead to the smoldering Bush. If Clinton had failed to deliver a great speech and took fifty-four minutes to prove it, the same sentence could now be employed for George Bush except that he ate up fifty-eight minutes.

On reflection, there was a difference in the nature of their journeyman gifts at the podium. Clinton had elucidated a number of points and programs, even if he had felt obliged to do it three times over; the president, having no new themes, provided 100 applause lines. In the beginning, response came quickly and frenetically, his audience steamed up to hysteria not only by the Youth Group, packed in whole compressions of young humanity under his nose at the podium, but from the delegates on the floor, superheated in the first minutes of this hour of climax, ergo George Bush had difficulties handling the din. His first estimated ten minutes must have consumed twenty. Nor was he simple and modestly appealing as he had been in '88 with Peggy Noonan's speech. Tonight, the text read like a committee production, and by the end, a quiet pall was on the Astrodome, not unreminiscent of Bill Clinton's last ten minutes at the Garden.

So it is pointless to do more than give a most restricted sampling of what he offered. He had, after all, said it before, and would say it again. His contribution to the problem of the economy was to tell again his tale of woe. Blame must fall on the head of Congress. The speech, like his ideas, was scattered in bits and pieces, a Broadway comedy which cashed laugh after laugh and left its audience muttering, "What an empty show!" The longer it went, the more one became aware that the center of narrative interest, the philosophical content, was the one protagonist that never appeared.

Here, then, is Bush's climactic speech presented in selected snippets that will prove less injurious to him than the complete text.

This convention is the first at which an American president can say—the cold war is over, and freedom finished first... I saw the chance to rid our children's dreams of

the nuclear nightmare and I did... when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait... What about the leader of the Arkansas National Guard—the man who hopes to be commander in chief? Well, while I bit the bullet, he bit his nails... Sounds to me like his policy can be summed up by a road sign he's probably seen on his bus tour, "Slippery when Wet"... Who do you trust in this election? The candidate who raised taxes one time or the other candidate who raised taxes and fees 128 times, and enjoyed it every time?

Listening carefully in one of the VIP boxes above the floor was Jim Baker. Studying his expression, one could only decide that he was not the fellow to play poker with—by his expression you could not tell whether Baker was enthralled, appalled, or bored. As Bush went on, Baker proceeded to study the text of the speech with the concentration others might give to a musical score. Was he noting which lines produced more genuine response or less than he had anticipated?

Now, I know Americans are tired of the blame game, tired of people in Washington acting like they are candidates for the next episode of American Gladiators. I don't like it either. Neither should you. But the truth is the truth. Our policies haven't failed; they haven't even been tried.

It was a long exercise in the use of the larynx to come from a man whose voice was 68 years old, and he was beginning to whine—indeed, the timbre of complaint was beginning to remind one of Quayle.

He was near the end, however. It was time to produce a new sound.

I believe that America will always have a special place in God's heart, as long as He has a special place in ours. And maybe that's why I've always believed that patriotism is not just another point of view... Tonight I appeal to that unyielding spirit... Tonight I say to you—join me in our new crusade—to reap the rewards of our golden victory—to win the peace—so that we may make America safer and stronger...

The president could not help it that he felt contempt for the American people. They had been out there and down there for so long. There they were, that long way off, far from the numberless committee rooms where he had lived and mingled and made his purchase on history for two decades now.

The last 100,000 of a quarter-million balloons floated down with the conclusion of his speech, and golden confetti gave an effulgence as it fell, a heavenly light to outline the podium as the singer offered "God Bless America."

Yes, God bless us—we need it. If fascism comes from the rotting away of a nation's virtue until words like trust mean corrupt then yes, we are going to need it. ♦