

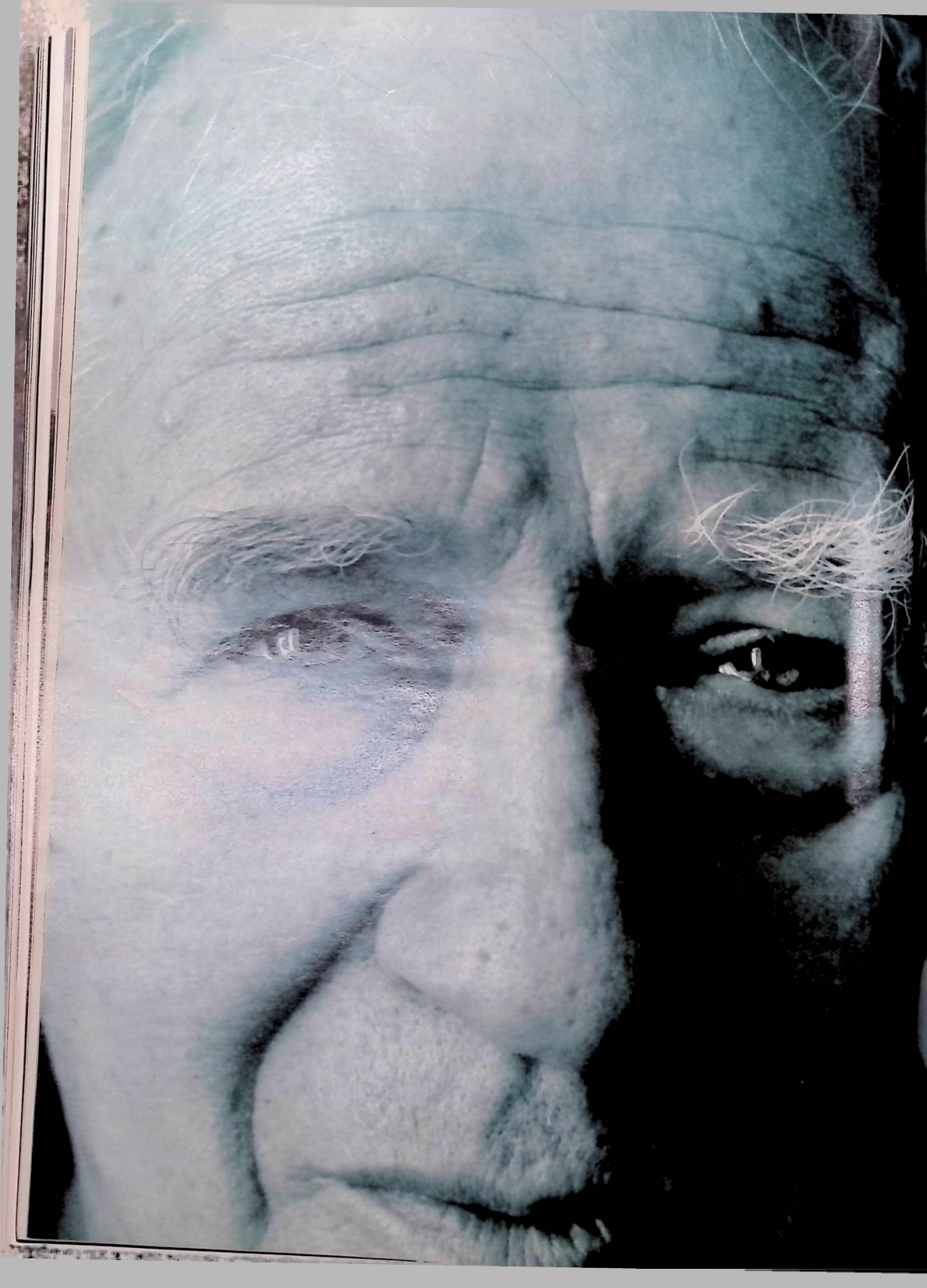
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IMMODEST PROPOSALS

by norman mailer

Calling all voters! A soulful memo from one man to many

In December 2000 George W. Bush became president by dint of a Supreme Court decision warped shamelessly in his direction. He may have lost the popular vote, but he won the game. In compensation for a limited intellectual spirit, he now placed his reliance on big-money advisers who were used to playing with high stakes.

Tax cuts for the rich characterized the first eight months of his administration. In that period he also took more vacations than any U.S. president before him. Chalk it up to the callow distress of encountering his massive ignorance of the new job. In the wake of 9/11, however, came an unmitigated run of White House mendacity calculated to carry us into war. If our Democratic candidate could ever be fortunate enough to run exclusively against George W.'s misdeeds, there is small chance he would fail to win. In the last century no Republican president, not George W.'s father, nor Reagan, Nixon, Hoover, Coolidge—we can go all the way back to Taft, Teddy Roosevelt and McKinley—had put together such an enrich-the-rich set of political actions. Nonetheless, we Democrats face a near to insurmountable irony. George W. is a popular, even a populist, president. All too many of the public love him, love him still. We have to overtake a war president with an immense campaign chest who manages to keep ahead of the skunk trail of an abominable record.

We have, for example, suffered the highest number of private bankruptcies in any 12-month period of our history, in company with the highest number of home foreclosures in the past 30 years. Even as 2 million Americans were losing their jobs, unemployment benefits were not extended. We have the largest budget deficit in U.S. history, a projected half a trillion dollars coming up. Half of the nation is outraged over the lies that embedded us in Iraq.

For those whose pride in America runs deep, this sense of alienation from our country is full of woe, sharp as a divorce. The U.S. now feels like two nations, and Iraq is there to remind us daily of our surrealistic hubris. Boorish arrogance carried the day. Confident we could bring American-style

democracy to the Middle East, we proceeded to ignore an entrenched establishment of mullahs who see American democracy as the literal embodiment of Satan.

It is possible that George W. has never grown up, and the same may be true for half of us in America. This, indeed, is the greatest obstacle to the Democrats winning the election in 2004. We have to recognize the possibility of two entirely different kinds of presidential campaigns. At the time of this writing, George W. Bush's popularity has begun to decline. If that continues, the Democrats can win by running against the economy.

If, however, unemployment diminishes and the stock market shows signs of new life, if our situation in Iraq looks less like a quagmire and the road map to peace between Israel and the Palestinians has not fallen apart, then Bush's personal popularity can rise again. At that time it will behoove the Democrats to try to win every serious voter. No longer can we address ourselves to our own side only; no, we will be obliged to look for open-minded Republicans as well. There are a number of serious conservatives who have been appalled by a leader who speaks like an android and plays Russian roulette with our economy and foreign affairs. In a close election the Democrats have to pick up a significant number of conservative and independent voters, and that is possible provided—and this proviso is the crux of the matter—we are able to demonstrate that the spiritual values in our politics go deeper than the Republicans'.

Given the size of the endless and complex debates between and within the two parties concerning the multitudinous problems of labor, farming and foreign trade, this memo will restrict itself to the following subjects: Bush's Virtual Reality, the Corporate Economy, advertising and education—the last two closely affect each other—then the trinity of oil, plastics and the ecosystem, followed by such social issues as prison, abortion and gay liberation, welfare and the safety net, after which we can take a look at foreign policy, homeland security and terrorism.

These topics, given their complexity, can hardly be satisfied by a memo, but one or two suggestions may prove of future interest provided we win the election in 2004.

A new American belief system: Virtual Reality

So why did Bush and company go to war? The probable answer is that an escape was needed from our problems at home. Joblessness gave no sign of going away, and corporate greed had been caught mooning its corrupt buttocks onto every front page. The CIA had become much too recognizable as an immense intelligence apparatus whose case officers did not speak Arabic, and the stock market was offering signs that it might gurggle down to the bottom of the bowl. An easy war looked then to be George W. Bush's best solution. What he needed and what he got was a media jamboree that provided our sweet dose of patriotic ecstasy. Bush would give us *The Twin Towers, Part Two—America's Revenge*. We had all seen Part One—the audacity of the terrorists, the monumental viciousness of the attempt and its exceptional filmic success—who will ever forget the collapse of those monoliths? The TV viewer had been overpowered by the kind of horror that belongs to dreams. One was witnessing what seemed a video game on a cosmic scale. Worse! The exploitation film had finally come alive! Two gleaming corporate castles disintegrated before our eyes. Two airplanes did it. David had struck Goliath, and David was on the wrong side. The event had gone right into the nervous system of America, but Bush now had his mighty mission, and he knew the game that would handle it—Virtual Reality.

Virtual Reality is built on whatever parameters have been laid into it. The predesigned situations, plus the responses permitted within the limits of the game—steering a car on a video screen, for example—measure your success or failure. Virtual Reality is then a closed system, a facsimile of life. You have fewer choices, and the choices have been laid out for you in advance.

In life we encounter not only parameters but chaos. Closed systems forbid unexpected patterns, confusion and all that seems meaningless. They declare what the nature of reality can be. In that sense Communism was Virtual Reality and religious fundamentalism is still another spiritual settlement within a totally structured system. Obviously, if you live in such a matrix, it helps if you believe the parameters were established by a higher authority.

Ergo, Bush's decision to invade Iraq came from the Lord. Virtual Reality decided which conclusions we would obtain before we went in. We had all the scenarios in hand. We were prepared for everything but chaos.

Given our human distaste for chaos, Virtual Reality is the choice of every ethical system that looks for no difficult questions, especially if they lead to even livelier and more difficult questions. The emphasis is always to go back to the answer you had before you started.

So Bush laid out the parameters. There was a hideous country out there led by an evil madman. This monster possessed huge weapons of mass destruction. But we Americans, a brave and militant band of angels, were ready to battle our way up to the heavens. That was our duty. Safeguard our land and all other deserving lands from such evil.

Stocked with new heroes and new dragons, Bush was quick to sense that his presentation would be lapped up by half the nation—all those good Americans who were longing for the pleasure of being able to cheer for America again. He turned churchgoing into high drama. September 11 had transmogrified him from a yahoo out of Yale to an awesome angel. We were in a war against evil. A spiritual adventure, full of slam-bang.

Truth, it may have been Bush's political genius to recognize that the U.S. public would rather live with Virtual Reality than reality. For the latter, out there on the sweaty hoof, bristled with questions, and there were no quick answers. Whereas Virtual Reality gave you American Good versus Satan-ic Evil—boss entertainment!—evil was now easy to recognize. Everything from Islamic terrorists to hincty Frenchmen. Freedom Fries! Be it said that TV advertising, with its investiture into the nerves and sinews of our American senses, had long been delivering Virtual Reality into our lives—all those decades of sensuous promises in the commercials.



The welfare of the rich

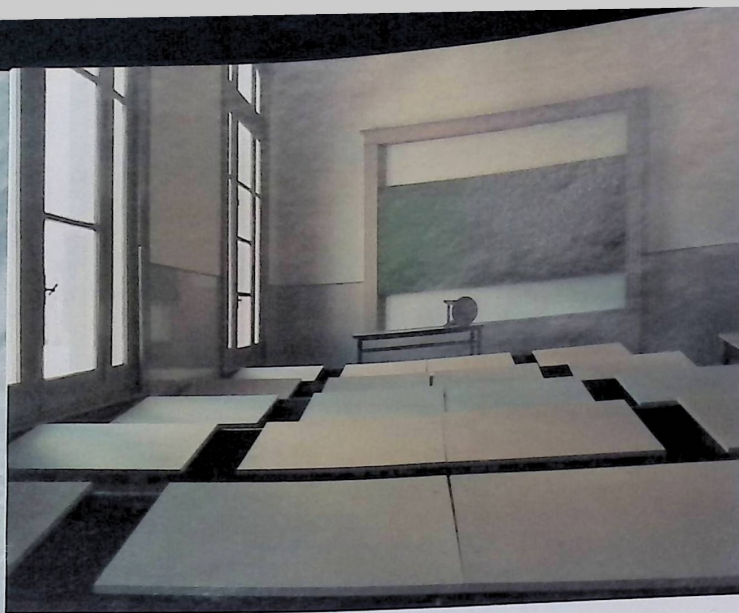
A Swedish multimillionaire, talking to his American guest, could not keep from complaining how steep were his taxes. Yet, by the end of the evening, warmed, perhaps, by his own good liquor, he reversed course and said, "Do you know, there is one good thing about all these taxes. I am able, at least, to go to bed and know that nobody in Sweden is tossing all night on an empty stomach. I can say that much for our safety net. I do sleep better."

Perhaps the time has come for Americans to stop worrying about the welfare of the rich. For the last two decades, the assumption has grown more powerful each year that unless the very well-to-do are encouraged to become wealthier, our economy will falter. Well, we have allowed them to get wealthier and wealthier and then even wealthier, and the economy is faltering. Apparently, the economic lust of the 1990s has unbalanced the springs. Might it not be unnatural, even a little peculiar, to concern ourselves so much about the needs of the rich? The rich, as Scott Fitzgerald tried to suggest to Ernest Hemingway, are not like you and me. They are not. They know how to make money. They do not need incentives. Making money is not only their gift but their vital need. That is their vision of a spiritual reward. Not only is their measure of self attached directly to the volume of their gains, but the majority of them know how to stay rich. They are highly qualified to take care of themselves in any society, be it socialist, fascist, banana republic or chaotic. Whether they live in a corporate economy relatively free of government, or with a larger government presence, they will prosper. They can withstand an American safety net. And they may even sleep better.

In the half century since World War II, Americans have seen the Corporation become more and more powerful, usually with the aid of the government. Under Clinton—to name one Democratic sin—there were unconscionable periods of Corporate Welfare. They took place even as we were stripping welfare from the poor. It was outrageous. By the end of the 1990s, it was out of control. An all-out competition began among top executives to see who could become the Champion of the Golden Parachute. The 1990s became a study in edema-of-the-ego among once-responsible CEOs. We have yet to measure the size of that damage to our economy.

Capitalism works best when there is true competitive pride in the quality of one's product. But marketing has now stepped in. The impulse to put your acumen, your daring, your prudence and your energy into making something better than it was before has given way to a lower desire. It has become more rewarding to market successfully a sleazy piece of goods. More skill is required at manipulating the public.

A basic choice has to be made. Are we Democrats ready to attack the Corporate Economy we all helped to create? It is open to attack for its marketing practices and its egregious profit taking. There is, by now, no real alternative to taxing the rich and ending the tax cuts. If we do not call on new imposts, we will not be able to create a health system for all, plus a safety net. So we have to reinvigorate the argument that a well-funded active government is not creeping socialism. Rather, the return of government as a major partner in our economic existence could bring some quietus to the greed, overmarketing and slovenliness of the Corporate Economy. Through emphasizing



taxation of the vices and indulgences of corporate business, we will also be able to claim that we are improving its capacity to make a profit. Indeed, this claim might have the added advantage of being true. Something in most of us, including the profiteers, is violated when the gap between rich and poor yawns before us. There is no way to justify the right of any executive to make 500 times more than his lowest-paid worker. That kind of inequity belonged to the Pharaohs. It could be debated whether a decent ratio is 10 to one, or 50 to one, but a disproportion of 500 to one pokes rudely into a spiritual core most of us still possess. It is time to say again: Let's tax the rich. Let's tax their incomes, their dividends, their offshore investments, their perks, their concealed expenses, their padded accounts, their promotional squanderings, their limousines, their boats, their airplanes, their entertainments, their death tax, yes, even their advertising.

Maybe it is time to recognize that there is a sculptor's art to taxation. The body of national production can be worked into better shape by judicious choices once the government becomes again a serious partner in the economy. Once again, let us not be paralyzed by the fear of being called socialist. We are not. Historically, we Democrats have been for small business, the family farm, the honest labor union, whereas capitalism, if allowed to become too free of the restraints of government, becomes Corporate Capitalism, plus agribusiness, plus corrupt unions, plus—not least—a manic stock market. Capitalism is unhealthy when most of the money is made from other money.

To restore the promise of American democracy, we would do well to search for the viability of small business, the return of the family farm, and the cleaner labor union. During the presidential campaign, we can do no more than hint at such claims. But is it too much to hope that we Democrats will come up with a candidate who will have the personal integrity to convince both liberals and some conservatives that, while they will not find support for each and every one of their favorite political desires, they will still have the satisfaction of working toward a less lunatic America? If even one tenth of the Republican vote were to move over to the Democrats, victory could be assured. The question opens: What could such a candidate offer to both sides that might excite them enough to pass over their parochial demands?

The devil has to be in the details. Tax write-offs, tax rebates, tax moratoria have been used repeatedly to enrich corporations, but our real need is to restrict tax relief to those enterprises that benefit the whole economy rather than a privileged corner of it. In a time of worrisome joblessness, why not reduce taxes for all businesses in direct proportion to the number of new jobs they create? Indeed, the obverse can also be effective. Any business that chooses to pare its working force to take in immediate profit could give up a proportion of the new and extra income in added taxes. If it ment's nose into every business, the answer is that American Capitalism brought this upon itself. As a system, it works considerably better than Communism, but it has its own built-in vices. Free Market is not an economic miracle. If Communism failed ultimately because the degree of self-human ego, so capitalism in its turn has demonstrated that greed is no magic elixir, but, to the contrary, greed is greed, and can drive its acolytes into economic hysteria. There is a human balance between self-interest and selflessness. It is not only possible, but likely, that a powerful desire is developing in America to become more honest about ourselves and less overheated in our patriotism. For what is excessive patriotism but unadmitted dread that all too much is wrong?

Children can hardly feel as ready to learn when everyone around them, including their teacher, is a hint ghastly in skin tone.



Education reform: Kill the noise, cut the glare

While it is sometimes remarked that the poor performance of children in public schools is linked to watching TV for several hours a day, another factor, more invidious, is not mentioned: the constant insertion of commercials into TV programs. There used to be a time in childhood when one could develop one's power of concentration (which may be the most vital element in the ability to learn) by following a sustained narrative, by reading, for example. Now a commercial interrupts nearly all TV presentations every seven to 12 minutes. The majority of our children have lost any expectation that concentration will not be broken into.

Our plank on education will, of course, parade forth the predictable nostrums—new schools, smaller classes, higher salaries for teachers. We can attack George W. Bush's program, No Child Left Behind, which shows no signs of working. Whatever programs we offer are bound to do less harm than No Child Left Behind, but the basic problem—TV commercials—will remain. It would probably do more good if a portion of the proposed funds for public school education could replace fluorescent lighting in just about every classroom with old-fashioned lightbulbs. The with old-fashioned lightbulbs. The (continued on page 198)



"Merciful heavens! Can you believe it, Marilyn? It's 50 years since the dawn of civilization as we know it!"

mailer (continued from page 94)

Is it possible to agree that abortion is indeed one form of murder and yet is still a woman's right?

unadmitted truth is that every human alive loses personal appeal under the flat illumination of a fluorescent tube. Children can hardly feel as ready to learn when everyone around them, including their teacher, is a hint ghastly in skin tone.

We are, of course, not ready to tell the electorate that TV advertising has become an albatross upon the American spirit with its instruments of persuasion—noise, disjunction, mendacity and manipulation. Is it possible, given the federal government's soon ravenous need for new kinds of funds, to consider a special tax on advertising? Since the radical right will, at once, be screaming that this is an attack on free speech, we could term it removal of a business deduction, a penalty for those advertising expenses that go beyond standard industry practice. However phrased, there is no reason for a healthy economy to need to encourage hyped-up marketing for shoddy products. One example we do not dare suggest, not as yet, is to take a good look at the heavy competition in marketeering among the fast-food chains. Very much alike are all of them, and they serve the same social purpose—inexpensive meals quickly available. If they could be encouraged to cease advertising against one another, our children might be spared untold hours of inroads on their attention (plus the accompanying inclination to grab a snack and get a little more obese). Besides, the money saved by the chains, given restrained merchandising, could go into the real risk of competition. Let it depend on the improved quality of their wares!

TO WAR ON ALL GARBAGE THAT DOES NOT ROT

If we are to appeal to conservatives and environmentalists alike, we could suggest that we are in need of an enlarged Food and Drug Administration to explore the long-term effects of non-biodegradables on public health. Plastic, after all, derives from what was once the waste products of oil. It might even be fair to say that plastic is the excrement of oil, but that would be an abuse of language. Organic excrement can nourish the earth, whereas plastics do not decompose for thousands of years if at all and never revitalize one acre of soil. Meanwhile, our children are raised from infancy with toys composed of synthetic materials in constant

contact with their fingertips and their lips. What does that do to them? Such research is, of course, a long way down the road, but our plank could address the ecological problems that plastic refuse presents to the environment. Why not suggest higher rates of taxation on throwaway items that inundate our town and city dumps, there never to decompose?

Of course, the depredations that oil brings to the environment may be the leading problem our civilization faces in the century ahead and therefore is larger than our present readiness to recognize problems that do not have ready solutions. If all too many Americans don't like any question that takes longer than 10 seconds to answer, it can be replied that we now have the President we deserve.

LET'S PAY FOR OUR VICES—BUT DON'T PUT ALL OF THEM IN CELLS

Prisons! The problem owes half its weight to drug laws of the early 1970s that criminalized marijuana possession. The fear then was that America would become a nation of young druggies. We didn't. We became instead a land of air, soil and river pollution. (The anal emissions of warehoused pigs took over our prairie.) Meanwhile, our prisons were overstuffed with young convicts. Since America is hardly ready to legalize drugs (and empty those prisons by half), there are some unhappy figures to deal with.

In 2003 our inmate population set a record—2,166,260. We have the ratio of incarceration you would expect from third world tyrannies. Our penitentiaries are loaded with drug offenders serving long sentences for minor infractions.

Can we dare propose that the nation, given the financial relief it would afford, begin to release a good number of minor offenders? A pilot program to explore the question is feasible, even for a convention plank. Some inmates might be released for drug treatment. Marijuana smokers, and petty dealers, could, for example, be given parole on the premise that they would pay a fine if caught continuing their habit or their trade; if they did not have the funds to meet the penalty, they would be required to perform community service for modest pay until the debt is satisfied. To counter the objection that government moneys were being disbursed

to excuse a vice, it could be pointed out that we invariably pay for such easy vices as cigarettes and whiskey. Do they or do they not kill more people than marijuana?

ABORTION: WHAT ARE A WOMAN'S RIGHTS?

Roe v. Wade probably repels more good conservatives than any other item in the liberal canon. Yet a serious and intimate recognition of the question could serve a new Democratic administration. Indeed, it is imperative. The present state of the argument strips all humanity from the equation. Those for the Right to Life see every pregnancy as God's will, God's intention: Ergo, the abortionist and his patient are both evil. Defenders of *Roe v. Wade* view abortion as a woman's right yet subtly their position by postulating that abortion is not killing a future human being if it takes place within the first three months, or in the first six months, or whenever. It is a stand to weaken one's intellectual self-respect.

Is it possible to agree that abortion is indeed one more form of murder and yet is still a woman's right? If God's will is flouted, it is the woman, not the society, who will pay the price. That would be a huge and indigestible political move if it were ever stated just so. Yet as a species, we humans commit murder all the time, not only in war but by way of the meat and fish and fowl we send daily to our machines of extermination. Every piece of flesh at our tables was slain.

Such an argument is obviously not suited for travel in public. Lambs and cattle are not to be compared to humans, and war protects our endangered land, etc. Since the Right to Life will continue to insist that pregnancy is the direct expression of God's will, let us approach that as the true field of battle for this debate. Sex, given its appeal, its mystery, its extravagances, its explorations, its commitments, its adventures—be they sordid or illuminating—sex by its unique entrance into our most private thoughts, compulsions, pleasures and, yes, terrors, is for most humans an arena where we are aware of a presence that seems divine, but we are also sensitive often to another presence. Some fornications feel diabolically inspired. The question is begged in its entirety when we say "God's will." A pregnancy can seem a blessing to one woman and a nightmare to another. Most women are haunted by the fear of losing a child in their womb, but there will always be a minority who find themselves drawn to abortion. They are haunted by an opposite terror, the fear that they have conceived a monster.

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If that becomes a woman's deepest sentiment within a pregnancy, who has the authority to declare she is in error? She is, after all, convinced that her oncoming creation is evil. This may be the extreme case, but what of the woman who knows that her vanity is still so consumed with the need to maintain her youth and freedom that she senses how badly she would rear her child? A woman can have an honest recognition that she is too selfish or too timid or in too desperate a situation to bring an infant into the world. That much self-honesty can become the first step in becoming more human or, at least, more adult. For rare is the woman who has an abortion without suffering her private horror.

The counterattack to the Right to Life is that no man has the authority to forbid abortion until we come to the end of all wars. Otherwise, since God is always on our side in war, it must be God's desire that we look to exterminate strangers en masse. Such slayings are highly organized, of course, but they are first cousin to terrorism. We are killing people we know nothing about. We are also destroying full-grown humans into whom God may have put much interest and much intent.

GAY MARRIAGE: FAMILY VALUES?

Civil marriage for homosexuals is one more problem to divide liberals and conservatives. The prejudice runs deep. Most heterosexual men and women feel they have paid a life price to duty and responsibility by the act of getting married. So their resentment is profound. Why should gays enjoy the pleasures of the sybaritic yet have the civil and economic protections of marriage as well? The answer—and it will take more than one presidential election before these matters can be discussed openly—is that mutual comprehension and tolerance between heterosexuals and gay people may begin to come into being only after gay couples have taken on the yoke of

marriage and, by adoption, children. Indeed, the saving irony to convince a few conservatives is that the desire among certain homosexuals to seek out the constraints of marriage does speak of an innate pull toward domestic cohabitation.

Besides, there is a more forceful argument. It is that in a democracy, everyone feels the need to find out who they are, what they are and in which ways they can live and identify themselves. Is this not the theme underlining the Pursuit of Happiness? It is worth adding that every child adopted by a gay couple no longer has to spend his or her years in an orphanage. If that child might face special difficulties because the parents are gay, the question to ask is whether the problems encountered will prove more dire than growing up in an institution.

THE BUSH CREDO:
WAR IS MORE GODLY THAN WELFARE

It is still an outrage. Compared with other industrial powers, we do not have a comprehensive safety net. Indeed, much of the brouhaha over affirmative action is but the visible tip of the iceberg. Relatively restrained, the opponents of affirmative action give barely a hint of the deeper aversion many of them feel toward blacks and, to a lesser degree, Hispanics.

The real target has always been social welfare. There were men and women on the right who were enraged that whole sections of the population seemed content to raise large one-parent families and live off the government. Since their anger was often fueled by their own hard lives, they found it obscene that others did not have to work as conscientiously.

Let us eschew the bona fide reply that not all idle hands were happy to live with welfare. Once again, it is worth taking up the right-wing argument on its merits. They would be the first to say that work is a blessing. Let us assume it is. By such logic, the real suffering for those on welfare is, precisely, that they are deprived of that blessing. For the average human, white or black, man or woman, it is probably more difficult to live on the

dole than to work. Boredom and shame do the work instead on the soul.

Can we stare into the center of the real moral issue? A nation indifferent to social welfare, a land so fevered with free market that it would forgo all safety nets, a country without concern for its poorest members, deserving or undeserving, has become a society with distorted values. Whether one is full of belief in higher authority or feels no belief, the basic notion, all flaws granted, is that democracy is still a system which assumes all human beings are of value. The concept is noble. But if the emphasis is on own rights at all costs and we have become so swollen in our egomania that we are different to the homeless sleeping on the street, even furious at the fact of their existence, what kind of freedom are we offering to the tyrannized of other countries? Boggled down in the grease-slick sands of Iraq, we have transported ourselves to a future of large taxation to still purpose. We will have to pay off Bush extravagances. Why? Was it, at worst, if all else failed, we could keep our budget deficit so big that we would never be able to provide a safety net? One of the answers to why we are at war in Iraq may be there. The harshness in the voice of the talk-radio motormouths gives a clue.

FOREIGN POLICY:
GET US OFF THE DANCE FLOOR

We are at a major turn in our history. It is possible that the Republican and Democratic parties are at the edge of an upheaval of ideologies, a schism in our two major political configurations that will bend every one of our nostrils Left or to Right. Will old-line GOP social conservatives be in serious contention with their own radical right? Will there be existential Democrats in rebellion against the rigidities of political correctness?

Ever since FDR, the Democratic party has been internationalist. So were most Republicans. The power of the corporate center enabled them to withstand intense isolationist sentiments of their own ranks.

Following the end of the Cold War, the triumph of the Corporate Economy encouraged a vanity until recently that the Corporation is a morally estimable body. One manifestation of this sense of superiority is physical presence. The world is now teeming with aesthetically neutered monuments—precisely, those high-rise hotels and offices that surround every major airport and capitol in the world, those monotonous, glassy behemoths coming forth as the virtuous architecture of the new corporate religion, an El Dorado of technology.

One fundamental error has begun to rock the globe. It was assumed by us that the most powerful of these corporate entities, that is to say, America, knew what was best for the rest of the world. The U.S. was ready to solve the problems of every nation, all of them, all the way from old Europe to the flea- and fly-bitten turpitudes of the third world.

It could be remarked that the men who set sail with Columbus in 1492 had more idea of where they were going. The best to be said for the gung-ho capitalists of the Bush administration is that they taught us all over again how extreme vanity is all you need to sail right off the edge of the world.

You cannot bring democracy to tyranny by conquest. Democracy can be neither injected nor imposed. It comes into existence through a long rite of passage. It has achieved its liberty by the actions of its own martyrs, rebels and enduring believers. It is not a system, it is an ennoblement. Democracy must come from within. Brought into oppressed nations by way of external force, it collides with all the habits those tormented populations were obliged to develop, those humiliating compromises that came from submitting to an ugly and superior force. Now all of that has been jammed into an abruptly ground-up gruel of chopped psychic reflexes, even as a strange people arrived from outside in mighty machines with guns attached, new people whose motives one could not trust. How could one? The prevailing law within a tyranny is to trust nobody. There have been too many shameful adaptations within oneself, as well as decades of long-swallowed rage. The recollection of humiliations early and late has been incorporated into the psychic core. Existence has been imprisoned too long in the Virtual Reality imposed by the tyrant.

We did not have an administration who could comprehend that. We came in with

our guns, our smiles and our assumption that democracy was there to hand over to these Iraqis. Our gift! Our form of Virtual Reality, superior to yours!

The truth is, we don't belong in any foreign country. We are not wise enough, honest enough with ourselves nor a good enough nation to tell the rest of the world how to live—indeed, such a nation has never existed. But even if we were just so fabulous, so unique, other humans would still not be ready to savage their national pride for the dubious joy of receiving our crusade against evil. We would do well to become a little more aware of Christian militancy that marches into war against any evil but its own.

HOMELAND SECURITY: WILL WE EVER LEARN TO LIVE WITH ARITHMETIC?

The time has come to solve our own problems, our ongoing American problems. We have a direct need to focus on ourselves over the coming span of years and thereby become less displaced from reality. For we are the most mighty of all the nations, and we are secure. Despite all, we are relatively secure. We can absorb new terrorist attacks if they come. We do not need military invasions into foreign lands to protect us. From 1968 through 2000, the world suffered an average of 425 terrorist incidents a year, resulting in an average of 321 deaths annually. In 2001, however, came 9/11. Three thousand lives were lost. A huge number. Yet in that same period, 1968 to 2001, Americans suffered more than 40,000 deaths each year from auto accidents. So even in 2001, there were 13 times as many deaths resulting from auto accidents as from terrorist attacks. If it be asked why such focus is now being put on automobile mortalities, it is because such tragedies are not without analogy to losing one's life to a terrorist. You leave your home, you kiss your wife good-bye, and you are dead 10 minutes or 10 hours later. For those left to grieve, there seems not enough reason to such death. Not enough logic! More than any other event in our lives, our own demise excites just such a need for logic in those who remain. Lung cancer, we know, kills 155,000 people a year. That is nearly four times more than automobiles, but we can comprehend that. We are ready to decide that cigarettes or working with asbestos has something to do with it. But death without any grip on an explanation bothers people more. It does no good to tell ourselves that 2.4 million people die each year in America. We are fixed on the 3,000 lost humans of 9/11. They seem more important. In truth, they have been so important to America that we have come to what may be another point of no return. Will we continue to protect our freedoms, or will we conclude that all effort must go to saving ourselves from every conceivable form of terrorist attack? The second course pursued to



"And now—Silent Night."

conclusion will lead to nothing less than a unique variety of fascism. Brownshirts or Blackshirts will not be needed. Our only certainty is that whatever it will be called, fascism will not be the word. Should Bush remain in office, we can count on Virtual Reality to suggest the face of the new regime. But then, that is the essence of fascism—you must give the populace a version of cause and effect that has very little to do with how things are.

The question, then, is whether we will be brave enough to dispense with foreign adventures. We know, or we should know, that any nation looking to attack us has to face the might of our armed forces. Any nuclear attack from North Korea or Iran would be an absolute disaster for either. Our power to retaliate is awesome. When it comes to terrorist at-

tacks, however, we are also at the mercy of our deteriorating relations with the rest of the developed world. Military forays are not the answer—you do not wipe out terrorists with airplanes and tanks. Rather, we will be obliged to use that dreaded term!—collective efforts to build an international police force ready to guard against major attacks comparable to 9/11. Even the best of such collaborative organizations will not prevent small terrorist acts, any more than a local police force can root out all local crime. But to be able to counter a terrorist effort on the scale of the Twin Towers, a global police system with a worldwide network of informants can be developed. It is one thing for terrorists to succeed in suicide bombings; it is another for them to find the necessary cadres, skills and materials

to bring off an immense coup against the sophisticated forces of proscriptive that can be put in place. Al Qaeda took several years to prepare 9/11. Since we will, however, never be able to prevent all minor attacks, it is illogical to be ready to sacrifice our remaining liberties in order to search for a total security that will never come to pass. Terrorism, in parallel with cancer, is in total rebellion against established human endeavor. If democracy ever did begin to work in Iraq, the incidence of terrorist acts would, doubtless, increase. Suicide bombers are stimulated by the presence of the enemy, whether that presence is foreign soldiers or a political system that is anathema to their beliefs. Should Islam ever take over America, our own Christian fundamentalists would be the first to become terrorists.

American freedom now depends on what we learned in elementary school: We must live with arithmetic! Over the last three years, 850 Israelis have been killed in suicide bombings, ambushes, sniper attacks and gun battles. That, in rough calculation, is one Israeli in 200,000 for each of those three years. If we in America were to suffer at the same rate, we would, given our population, which is roughly 50 times as great as Israel, suffer approximately 14,000 deaths a year. That comes to one-third of our American time of life from automobile accidents. Short of a major disaster, we are not likely to face 14,000 such deaths a year. We do not have the daily problems that Israelis have with Palestinians and Palestinians with Israelis. We have more freedom to explore into what we can become as a nation.

FIGHTING THE MIND THAT IS INSIDE THE BRAIN

Karl Rove, the man whom many consider the mind inside George W. Bush's brain, is on record with his hopes for a 20-year reign of the GOP. If that is not to take place, the need of the Democrats—it is worth repeating—is to be able to appeal to the best and most thoughtful of the conservatives. The time has come for us to understand that not everyone is right is on the hunt for more money, more power, more conquest and more worship of the flag. Not every conservative is for suburbs scourged by black-faced malls, nor is every conservative ready to cheer every corporation that puts its name on a new stadium for professional athletes. Not every conservative believes that our God-given mission is to needle the serum of democracy into nations with no vein for democracy. Not all there are conservatives who believe that the U.S. has been boiling up an unholy brew under the lid of the corporate pot, conservatives who believe that educating our children is degenerating into a near autistic mess, conservatives who do not think that all the answers to crime can be solved by building more prisons. No, there are even conservatives who



"I was enjoying the party. Why do you have to be the first one to get off in the new year?"

would argue, just like Democrats, that no matter how much we spend on our schools, they don't seem to be working. There are conservatives who have sensitive feelings on these matters—as sensitive as the Democrats', by God. Yet, neither side knows how to speak to the other.

Still, this variety of conservative—decent not bigoted, open to discussion rather than given over, body and soul, to talk radio—is also aghast at the uneasy but real possibility that George W. Bush might be the worst and most unqualified president America has ever had. Yes, such conservatives, whatever their number, are in the same state of inanition and ideological impotence as all those Democrats who cannot believe where the country is going. Let us as Democrats consider the possibility that such conservatives can also be part of a future in which Democrats draw their political sustenance from the best ideas of Left and Right. At present, that is not easy to believe, but there are new political conceptions in the air, ideas that have not been hardened into the iron load of ideology that sits upon the elephant's head and the donkey's saddle. This country was founded, after all, on the amazing notion (for the time) that there was more good than evil in the mass of human beings, and so those human beings, once given not only the liberty to vote but the power to learn to think, might demonstrate that more good than evil could emerge from such freedom. It was an incredible gamble. All society until then had assumed that the masses were incapable of exercising a wise voice and so must be controlled from the top down.

That wager has remained alive through the two centuries and 20-odd years of our national existence, and often it has seemed that the result was affirmative. Now doubt is with us again. In 2004 we will face what could become the most important election in our history. Since our candidate will never have funds to equal the bursting coffers of an opposition inflamed by power, bad conscience and all the Virtual Reality of religious fundamentalism itself, the election will be a most furious contest between their money, self-righteousness and mental rictus scalding down on us, versus our hope that moral revulsion still exists in more than half of our voting public, enough to let us succeed, despite all our own impurity, in overthrowing the corporate colossus on the other bank. May our wit be clean, our indignation genuine and our ideas new enough and fine enough to pierce the caterwaul of political advertising that will look to flood our campaign down the river and over the falls.

