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FOREWORD

to The Best of Abbie Hoffman

Abbie was one of the smartest—let us say, one of the quickest—people I ever met, and he was probably one of the bravest. In the land from which he originated, Worcester, Mass., they call it moxie. He had tons of moxie. He was also one of the funniest people I ever met. He was also one of the most appealing if you ask for little order in personality. Abbie had a charisma that must have come out of an immaculate conception between Fidel Castro and Groucho Marx. They went into his soul and he came out looking like an ethnic milkshake—Jewish revolutionary, Puerto Rican lord, Italian street kid, Black Panther with the old Afro haircut, even a glint of Irish gunman in the mad, green eyes. I remember them as yellow-green, like Joe Namath's gypsy green eyes. Abbie was one of the most incredible-looking people I ever met. In fact, he wasn't Twentieth Century, but Nineteenth. Might just as well have emerged out of *Oliver Twist*. You could say he used to look like a chimney sweep. In fact, I don't know what chimney sweeps looked like, but I always imagined them as having a manic integrity that glared out of their eyes through all the soot and darked-up skin. It was the knowledge

that they were doing an essential job that no one else would do. Without them, everybody in the house would slowly, over the years, suffocate from the smoke.

If Abbie was a reincarnation—and after you read this book you will ask: how could he not be?—then chimney sweep is one of his past lives. It stands out in his karma. It helps to account for why he was a crazy maniac of a revolutionary, and why, therefore, we can say that this book is a document, is, indeed, the autobiography of a bona fide American revolutionary. In fact, as I went through it, large parts of the sixties lit up like areas of a stage grand enough to hold an opera company. Of course, we all think we know the sixties. To people of my generation, and the generation after us, the sixties is a private decade, a good relative of a decade, the one we believe we know the way we believe we know Humphrey Bogart. I always feel as if I can speak with authority on the sixties, and I never knew anybody my age who didn't feel the same way (whereas try to find someone who gets a light in their eyes when they speak of the seventies). Yet reading this work, I came to decide that my piece of the sixties wasn't as large as I thought. If we were going to get into comparisons, Abbie lived it, I observed it; Abbie committed his life, I merely loved the sixties because they gave life to my work.

So I enjoyed reading these pages. I learned from them, as a great many readers will. It filled empty spaces in what I thought was solid knowledge. And it left me with more respect for Abbie than I began with. I had tended to think of him as a clown. A tragic clown after ^{his} ~~the~~ cocaine bust, and something like a ballsy wonder of a clown in the days when he was making raids on the media, but I never gave him whole credit for being serious. Reading this book lets you in on it. I began to think of Dustin Hoffman's brilliant portrait of Lenny Bruce where, at the end, broken by the courts, we realize that Lenny is enough of a closet believer in the system to throw himself on the fundamental charity of the court—he will try to make the judge believe that under it all, Lenny, too, is a good American, he, too, is doing it for patriotic reasons. So, too, goes the tone of this unique autobiography. Comrades, Abbie is saying, “under my hustle beats a hot Socialist heart. I am really not a nihilist. I am one of you—a believer in progress.”

He was serious. Abbie was serious. His thousand jokes were to conceal how serious he was. It makes us uneasy. Under his satire beat a somewhat

hysterical heart. It could not be otherwise. Given his life, given his immersion in a profound lack of security, in a set of identity crises that would splat most of us like cantaloupes thrown off a truck, it is prodigious how long he resisted madness and death. He had to have a monumental will. Yet it is part of ^{our} the civilized trap of literature that an incredible life is not enough. The survivor must rise to heights of irony as well. This was not Abbie's forte. His heart beat too fiercely. He cared too much. He loved himself too much. All the same, we need not quibble. ~~We have here a document of a remarkable man.~~ In an age of contracting horizons, we do well to count our blessings. How odd that now, Abbie is one of them. Our own holy ghost of the Left. Salud!

—NORMAN MAILER
October 1989

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Children of The Pied Piper

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"The Communists," says someone at a

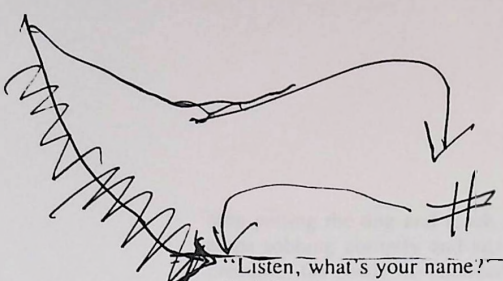
~~literary party, "at least had the decency to pack it in after seventy years. Capitalism is going to last seven hundred, and before it's done, there will be nothing left."~~

If there is reality to *American Psycho*, by Bret Easton Ellis—if, that is, the book offers any insight into a spiritual plague—then capitalism is not likely to approach its septicentennial, for this novel reverses the values of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Where *Bonfire* owed some part of its success to the reassurance it offered the rich—"You may be silly," Wolfe was saying in effect, "but, brother, the people down at the bottom are unspeakably worse"—Ellis's novel inverts the equation. I cannot recall a piece of fiction by an American writer which depicts so odious a ruling class—worse, a young ruling class of Wall Street princelings ready, presumably, by the next century to manage the mighty if surrealistic levers of our economy. Nowhere in American literature can one

point to an inhumanity of the moneyed upon the afflicted equal to the following description. I think it is best to present it uncut from the original manuscript

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Vanity Fair



"Listen, what's your name?" I ask.

"Al," he says.

"*Speak up*," I tell him. "Come on."

"Al," he says, louder.

"Get a goddamn job, Al," I say, earnestly. "You've got a negative attitude. That's what's stopping you. You've got to get your act together. *I'll help you.*"

"You're so kind mister. You're kind. You're a kind man," he blubbers. "I can tell."

"Ssshhh," I whisper. "It's okay." I start petting the dog.

"Please," he says, grabbing my wrist, but lightly, with kindness. "I don't know what to do. I'm so cold."

I ask him, "Do you know how bad you smell?" I whisper this soothingly, stroking his face. "The *stench*. My god..."

"I can't..." he chokes, then swallows, shaking. "I can't find a shelter."

"You *reek*" I tell him again. "You *reek* of...*shit*..." I'm still petting the dog, its eyes wide and wet and grateful. "Do you know that? Goddamnit Al, look at me and stop crying like some kind of *faggot*," I shout. My rage builds then subsides and I close my eyes, bringing my hand up to the bridge of my nose which I squeeze tightly, then sigh, "Al...I'm sorry. It's just that...I don't know, I don't have anything in common with you."

The bum's not listening. He's crying so hard he's incapable of a coherent answer. I put the bill slowly back into the other pocket of my Luciano Soprani jacket and with the other hand

stop petting the dog and reach into the other pocket. The bum stops sobbing abruptly and sits up, looking for the fiver or, I presume, his bottle of Thunderbird. I reach out and touch his face gently, once more with compassion and whisper, "Do you know what a fucking loser you are?" He starts nodding helplessly and I pull out a long thin knife with a serrated edge and being very careful not to kill the bum push maybe half-an-inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina and blinding him.

The bum is too surprised to say anything. He only opens his mouth in shock and moves a grubby, mittened hand slowly up to his face. I yank his pants down and in the passing headlights of a taxi can make out his flabby black thighs, rashed because of constant urinating in his pant-suit, the stench of shit rises quickly into my face and breathing through my mouth, on my haunches, I start stabbing him below the stomach, lightly, in the dense matted patch of pubic hair. This sobers him up somewhat and instinctively he tries to cover himself with his hands and the dog starts barking, yipping really, furiously, but it doesn't attack, and I keep stabbing at the bum now in between his fingers, stabbing the back of his hands. His eye, burst open, hangs out of its socket and runs down his face and he keeps blinking which causes what's left of it inside the wound to pour out, like red, veiny egg yolk. I grab his head with the one hand and push it back and then with my thumb and forefinger hold the other eye

open and bring the knife up and push the tip of it into the socket, first breaking the protective film so the socket fills with blood, then slitting the eyeball open sideways and he finally starts screaming once I slit his nose in two, spraying me, the dog with blood, Gizmo blinking trying to get the blood out of his eyes. I quickly wipe the blade clean across his face, breaking open the muscle above his cheek. Still kneeling I throw a quarter in his face, which is slick and shiny with blood, both sockets hollowed out, what's left of his eyes literally oozing over his lips, creating thick, webby strands when stretched across his screaming open mouth. I whisper calmly, "There's a quarter. Go buy some *gum* you crazy fuck-*nigger*." Then I turn my attention to the barking dog and when I get up, stomp on its front paws while its crouched down ready to jump at me, its fangs bared, and immediately crunch the bones in both its legs and it falls on its side squealing in pain, its front paws sticking up in the air at an obscene, satisfying angle. I can't help but start laughing and I linger at the scene, amused by this tableaux. When I spot an approaching taxi, I slowly walk away.

Afterwards, two blocks west, I feel heady, ravenous, pumped-up, as if I've just worked out heavily, endorphins flooding my nervous system, my ears buzzing, my body tuning in, embracing that first line of cocaine, inhaling the first puff of a fine cigar, sipping that first glass of Cristal.

Obviously, we have a radioactive pile on our hands. Canceled by Simon and Schuster two months before publication

at an immediate cost to the publisher of a \$300,000 advance, picked up almost at once by Vintage Books, and commented upon all over the media map in anticipation of Christmas, although the book will now not come out much before Easter, we are waiting for a work with not one, not two, but twenty or thirty scenes of unmitigated torture. Yet, the writer may have enough talent to be taken seriously. How one wishes he were without talent! One does not want to be caught defending *American Psycho*. The advance word is a tidal wave of bad cess.

The Sunday *New York Times Book Review* took the unprecedented step of printing a review, months in advance, on December 16. In the form of an editorial titled "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away with Murder?" it is by Roger Rosenblatt, a "columnist for Life magazine and an essayist for 'The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour,'" who writes in a style to remind one of the critical bastinadoes with which *Time* magazine used to flog the ingenuous asses of talented young writers forty years ago.

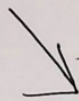
"American Psycho" is the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore. But that is unfair to sophomores. So pointless, so themeless, so everythingless is this novel, except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products, that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it certainly would be the funniest. . . . Patrick Bateman . . . is a Harvard graduate, 26 years old, is single, lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side, nurtures his



appearance obsessively, frequents health clubs by day and restaurants by night and, in his spare time, plucks out the eyes of street beggars, slits the throats of children and does things to the bodies of women not unlike things that Mr. Ellis does to prose. . . .

But his true inner satisfaction comes when he has a woman in his clutches and can entertain her with a nail gun or a power drill or Mace, or can cut off her head or chop off her arms or bite off breasts or dispatch a starving rat up her vagina.

The context of these high jinks is young, wealthy, hair-slicked-back, narcissistic, decadent New York, of which, one



only assumes, Mr. Ellis disapproves. It's a bit hard to tell what Mr. Ellis intends exactly, because he languishes so comfortably in the swamp he purports to condemn.

The indictment becomes more personal in *Spy*, December 1990, by a young—I assume he is young—man who calls himself Todd Stiles:

[Ellis] couldn't actually write a book that would earn attention on its merits, so he chose a course that will inevitably cause controversy and get him lots of press and allow him to pontificate, kind of like the novelist and critic Leo Tolstoi, on the question What is Art? *I am purposely exaggerating the way yuppie men treat women. That's the point, he will say. I meant to convey the madness of the consumerist eighties.* Not much could be more sickening than the misogynistic barbarism of this novel, but almost as repellent will be Ellis's callow cynicism as he justifies it.

In fact, Ellis has given a few indications that he is ready to justify it. For the "Arts & Leisure" section of the *Sunday Times*, December 2, 1990, he wrote a piece called "The Twentysomethings, Adrift in a Pop Landscape."

We're basically unshockable... This generation has been wooed with visions of violence, both fictive and real, since childhood.

If violence in films, literature and in some heavy-metal and rap music is so extreme... it may reflect the need to be terrified in a time when the sharpness of horror-film tricks seems blunted by repetition on the nightly news.

It is obvious. Ellis wants to break through steel walls. He will set out to shock the unshockable. And *Spy* writer Todd Stiles is right—we are face-to-face once more with the old

curmudgeon "novelist and critic Leo Tolstoi" (who not so long ago used to be known as Tolstoy). We have to ask the question once more: What is art? The clue presented by Bret Easton Ellis is his odd remark on "the need to be terrified."

Let me take us through my reading of the book, even though the manuscript I read was close to 200,000 words; the Vintage edition is bound to be shorter, for the novel is needlessly long—in fact, the first fifty pages are close to unendurable. There is no violence yet, certainly not if the signature of violence is blood, but the brain receives a myriad of dull returns. No one who enters the book has features, only clothing. We will learn in a while that we are in the mind of our serial killer, Patrick Bateman, but from the second page on, we are assaulted by such sentences as this: "Price is wearing a six-button wool-and-silk suit by Ermengildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie, and leather wing-tips by Fratelli Rossetti." On page 5, "Courtney opens the door and she's wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and silk satin D'Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik."

By page 12, Price is "lying on a late 18th century French Aubusson carpet drinking espresso from a cerelane coffee cup on the floor of Evelyn's room. I'm lying on Evelyn's bed holding a tapestry pillow from Jenny B. Goode nursing a cranberry and Absolut."

Bateman's apartment has "a long, white down-filled sofa and a 30 inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-con-

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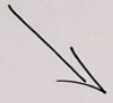
trast highly defined model... a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame); the audio includes built-in MTS and a five watt-per-channel on-board amp." We progress through Super Hi-Band Beta units, three-week eight-event timers, four hurricane halogen lamps, a "glass-top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin," "crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff," a Wurlitzer jukebox, a black ebony Baldwin concert grand, a desk and magazine rack by Gio Ponti, and on to the bathroom, which presents twenty-two name products in its inventory. One has to keep reminding oneself that on reading Beckett for the first time it was hard not to bellow with fury at the monotony of the language. We are being asphyxiated with state-of-the-art commodities.

Ditto the victuals. Every trendy restaurant that has suc-



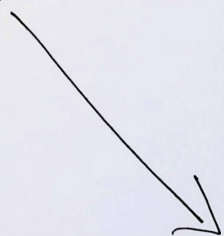
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ceeded in warping the parameters of the human palate is visited by the Wall Street yuppies of this book. For tens of thousands of words, we make our way through "cold corn chowder lemon bisque with peanuts and dill... swordfish meatloaf with kiwi mustard."

Themes will alternate in small variations. We pass from meetings at the office (where business is never transacted) to free-weight workouts in the gym, to Nell's, to taxi rides, to more descriptions of clothing, furnishings, accessories, cosmetics, to conference calls to expedite restaurant reservations, to acquaintances who keep mistaking each other's names, to video rentals and TV shows. We are almost a third of the way through an unending primer on the artifacts of life in New York, a species of dream where one is inhaling not quite enough air and the narrative never stirs because there is no narrative. New York life in these pages is circular, one's errands footsteps in the caged route of the prison bull pen. Bateman is living in a hell where no hell is external to ourselves and so all of existence is hell. The advertisements have emerged like sewer creatures from the greed-holes of the urban cosmos. One reads on addicted to a vice that offers no pleasure whatsoever. One would like to throw the book away. It is boring and it is intolerable—these are the worst and dullest characters a talented author has put before us in a long time, but we cannot get around to quitting. The work is obsessive—the question cannot be answered, at least not yet: Is *American Psycho* with or without art? One has to keep reading to find out. The novel is not written so well that the art becomes pal-



→ pable, declares itself against all odds, but then, it is not written so badly that one can reject it with clear conscience. For the first third of its narrativeless narrative it gives off a mood not dissimilar to living through an unrelenting August in New York when the sky is never clear and rain never comes.

Then the murders begin. They are not dramatic. They are episodic. Bateman kills man, woman, child, or dog, and disposes of the body by any variety of casual means. He has penetrated to the core of indifference in New York. Humor commences; movie audiences will

laugh with all the hysteria in their plumbing as Bateman puts a body in a sleeping bag, drags it past his doorman, heaves it into a cab, stops at a tenement apartment he keeps as his private boneyard, hefts it up four flights of stairs, and drops the cadaver in a bathtub full of lime. Smaller body parts are allowed to molder in the other apartment with the concert grand and the ashtrays from Fortunoff. To visitors, he explains away the close air by suggesting that he cannot find just where the rat has died. He gets blood on his clothing and brings this soiled package to a Chinese laundry. A few days later, he will curse them out for failing to clean his suit immaculately. The proprietors know the immutable spots are blood, but who is to debate the point? If you argue with a stranger in New York, he may kill you.

So, Bateman's murders are episodic. Nothing follows

from them. His life goes on. He works out in the gym with dedication, he orders shad roe and pickled rabbit's kidney with cilantro mousse, he consumes bottles of Cristal with friends, and in discos he scores cocaine. Over one summer, he has an idyll in the Hamptons with Evelyn, the girl he may marry, and succeeds in restraining himself from murdering her; he masturbates over porny videos, he tells a friend in the middle of an acrimonious meal that if friend does not button his lip, he will be obliged to splatter friend's blood all over the blonde bitch at the next table, and, of course, the speech is heard but not taken in. Not over all that restaurant gabble, not in all that designer din. When tension builds, Bateman kills in the same state of loneliness with which he masturbates; for relief, he hires two escort girls and tortures them to death before going off to the office next morning to instruct his secretary on who he will be available to on the telephone, and who not.

The murders begin to take their place with the carambola sorbet, the Quilted Giraffe, the Casio QD-150 Quick-Dialer, the Manolo Blahnik shoes, the baby soft-shell crabs with grape jelly. Not differentiated in their prose from all the other descriptions, an odd aesthetic terror is on the loose. The destruction of the beggar is small beer by now. A boy who strays a short distance from his mother at the Central Park Zoo is killed without a backward look. A starving rat is indeed introduced into the vagina of a half-slaughtered woman. Is Bateman the monster or Bret Easton Ellis? At best, what is to be said of such an imagination? The book is disturbing in a way to remind us that attempts to create art can be as intolerable as foul manners.

One finishes with an uneasy impulse not to answer the question but to bury it. Of course, the question can come back to haunt us. A novel has been written that is bound to rest in unhallowed ground if it is executed without serious trial.

So the question returns, what is art? What can be so important about art that we may have to put up with a book like this? And the answer leads us to the notion that without serious art the universe is doomed.

These are large sentiments, but then, we live in a world which, by spiritual measure, if we could measure it, might be worse than any of the worlds preceding it. Atrocities, injustice, and the rape of nature have always been with us, but they used to be accompanied by whole architectures of faith that gave some vision to our sense of horror at what we are. Most of us could believe in Catholicism, or Marxism, or Baptism, or science, or the American family, or Allah, or Utopia, or trade-unionism, or the synagogue, or the goodness of the American president. By now, we all know that some indefinable piece of the whole is not amenable to analysis, reason, legislative manipulation, committees, expertise, precedent, hard-earned rule of thumb, or even effective political corruption. We sense all too clearly that the old methods no longer suffice, if they ever did. The colloquies of the managers (which can be heard on any given TV night and twice on Sunday morning) are now a restricted ideology, a jargon that does not come close to covering our experience, particularly our spiritual experience—our suspicion that the lashings have broken loose in the hold.

In such a world, art becomes the remaining link to the unknown. We are far beyond those eras when the English

could enjoy the spoils of child labor during the week and read Jane Austen on the weekend. Art is no longer the great love who is wise, witty, strengthening, tender, wholesomely passionate, secure, life-giving—no, Jane Austen is no longer among us to offer a good deal more than she will disrupt, nor can Tolstoy still provide us (at least in the early and middle work) with some illusion that life is well proportioned and one cannot cheat it, no, we are far beyond that moral universe—art has now become our need to be terrified. We live in the fear that we are destroying the universe, even as we mine deeper into its secrets. So art may be needed now to provide us with just those fearful insights that the uneasy complacencies of our leaders do their best to avoid. It is art that has to take the leap into all the truths that our media society is insulated against. Since the stakes are higher, art may be more important to us now than ever before.

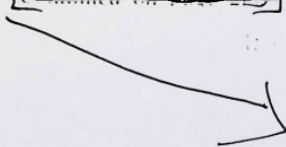
Splendid, you may say, but where is *American Psycho* in all this? Is the claim being advanced that it is art?

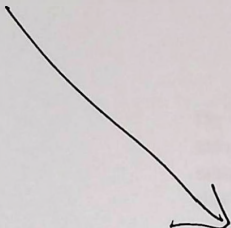
I am going to try an answer on these lines: Art serves us best precisely at that point where it can shift our sense of what is possible, when we now know more than we knew before, when we feel we have—by some manner of leap—encountered the truth. That, by the logic of art, is always worth the pain. If, then, our lives are dominated by our fears, the fear of violence dominates our lives. Yet we know next to nothing about violence, no matter how much of it we look at and live with. Violence in movies tells us nothing. We know it is special effects.

All the more valuable then might be a novel about a serial

killer, provided we could learn something we did not know before. Fiction can serve as our reconnaissance into all those jungles and up those precipices of human behavior that psychiatry, history, theology, and sociology are too intellectually encumbered to try. Fiction is indeed supposed to bring it back alive—all that forbidden and/or unavailable experience. Fiction can conceive of a woman's or a man's last thoughts where medicine would offer a terminal sedative. So Ellis's novel cannot be disqualified solely by a bare description of its contents, no matter how hideous are the extracts. The good is the enemy of the great, and good taste is certainly the most entrenched foe of literature. Ellis has an implicit literary right, obtained by the achievements of every important and adventurous novelist before him, to write on any subject, but the more he risks, the more he must bring back or he will leach out the only capital we have, which is our literary freedom.

We have to take, then, the measure of this book of horrors. It has a thesis: *American Psycho* is saying that the eighties were spiritually disgusting and the author's presentation is the crystallization of such horror. When an entire new class thrives on the ability to make money out of the manipulation of money, and becomes altogether obsessed with the surface of things—that is, with luxury commodities, food, and appearance—then, in effect, says Ellis, we have entered a period of the absolute manipulation of humans by humans: the objective correlative of total manipulation is coldcock murder. Murder is now a lumbermill where humans can be treated with the same lack of respect as trees. (And scream commensurately—Bateman's main tools of dispatch are knives, chain saws, nail guns.) Continued on page 22





Such a massive thesis does not sit well on underdeveloped legs—nothing less than a great novel can support a great, if monstrous, thesis. A good novel with too major a theme can only be crushed by the weight of what it is carrying. The test of *American Psycho* is whether we can ever believe the tale. Of course, it is a black comedy—that all-purpose cop-out!—but even black comedies demand an internal logic. If we can accept the idea that the political air turned flatulent after eight years with the hornpipe wheezes of the Pied Piper, we must also entertain the thesis that the unbridled manipulations of the money-decade subverted the young sufficiently to produce wholly aimless lives for a generation of Wall Street yuppies. But was it crowned by the ultimate expression of all these meaningless lives—one total monster, a Patrick Bateman? Can he emerge entirely out of no more than vapidness, cupidity, and social meaninglessness? It does not matter whether a man like him does, in fact, exist; for all we know there might be a crew of Patrick Batemans at large in New York right now.

The demand is not that Bateman be factual, but that he be acceptable as fiction,

Do we read these pages believing that the same man who makes his rounds of restaurants and pretends to work in an office, this feverish snob with a presence so ordinary that most of his casual acquaintances keep mistaking him at parties and discos for other yuppies who look somewhat like him, can also be the most demented killer ever to appear in the pages of a serious American novel? The mundane activity and the supersensational are required to meet.

Bret Easton Ellis enters into acute difficulties with this bicameral demand. He is a writer whose sense of style is built on the literary conviction (self-serving for many a limited talent) that there must not be one false note. In consequence, there are often not enough notes. Even with writers as splendidly precise as Donald Barthelme, as resonant with recollected sorrow as Raymond Carver, or as fine-edged as Ann Beattie, there are often not enough notes. A book can survive as a classic even when it offers much too little—*The Great Gatsby* is the prime example forever—but then, Fitzgerald was writing about the slowest murders of them all, social exclusion, whereas Ellis believes he is close enough to Dostoyevsky's

ground to quote him in the epigraph. Since we are going to have a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis, the author must rise to the occasion by having a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him. We pay a terrible price for reading about intimate violence—our fears are stirred, and buried savageries we do not wish to meet again in ourselves stir uneasily in the tombs to which we have consigned them. We cannot go out on such a trip unless we believe we will end up knowing more about extreme acts of violence, know a little more, that is, of the real inner life of the murderer.

Bateman, however, remains a cipher. His mother and brother appear briefly in the book and are, like all the other characters, faceless—we are less close to Bateman's roots than to his meals. Exeter and Harvard are named as parts of his past but in the manner of Manolo Blahnik and Ermenegildo Zegna—names in a serial sequence. Bateman is driven, we gather, but we never learn from what. It is not enough to ascribe it to the vast social rip-off of the eighties. The abstract ought to meet the particular. In these pages, however, the murders begin to read like a pornographic description of sex. Bateman is empty of inner reaction and no hang-ups occur. It

may be less simple to kill humans and dispose of them than is presented here, even as real sex has more turns than the soulless high-energy pump-outs of the pornographic. Bateman, as presented, is soulless, and because we cannot begin to feel some instant of pity for him, so the writing about his acts of violence is obliged to become more hideous externally and more affectless within until we cease believing that Ellis is taking any brave leap into truths that are not his own—which happens to be one of the transcendent demands of great fiction. No, he is merely working out some ugly little corners of himself.

Of course, no one could write if art were entirely selfless. Some of the worst in us has also to be smuggled out or we would use up our substance before any book was done. All the same, a line is always in place between art and therapy. Half of the outrage against this book is going to come from our suspicion that Ellis is not creating Bateman so much as he is cleaning out pest nests in himself. No reader ever forgives a writer who uses him for therapy.

If the extracts of *American Psycho* are horrendous, therefore, when taken ~~out of~~ ^{for} context, that is Ellis's fault. They are ^{for} the most part, simply not written ^{well} enough. If one is embarked ^{on a novel}

that hopes to shake American society to the core, one has to have something new to say about the outer limits of the deranged—one cannot simply keep piling on more and more acts of machicolated butchery.

The suspicion creeps in that much of what the author knows about violence does not come from his imagination (which in a great writer can need no more than the suspicion of real experience to give us the whole beast), but out of what he has picked up from *Son and Grandson of Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the rest of the filmic Jukes and Kallikaks. We are being given horror-shop plastic. We won't know anything about extreme acts of violence (which we do seek to know if for no less good reason than to explain the nature of humankind in the wake of the Holocaust) until some author makes such acts intimately believable, that is, believable not as acts of description (for that is easy enough) but as intimate personal states so intimate that we enter them. That is why

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we are likely never to know: where is the author ready to bear the onus of suggesting that he or she truly understands the inner logic of violence?

To create a character intimately, particularly in the first person, is to convince the reader that the author is the character. In extreme violence, it becomes more comfortable to approach from outside, as Bret Easton Ellis either chose to do, or could do no better. The failure of this book, which promises to rise occasionally to the level of the very good (when it desperately needs to be great), is that by the end we know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film. It's grunts all the way down. So, the first novel to come along in years that takes on deep and Dostoyevskian themes is written by only a half-competent and narcissistic young pen.

Nonetheless, he is showing older authors where the hands have come to on the clock. So one may have to answer the question: What would you do if you happened to find yourself the unhappy publisher who discovered this book on his list two months before publication?

I am not sure of the answer. The move that appeals most in retrospect is to have delayed publication long enough to send the manuscript to ten or twelve of the most respected novelists in America *for an emergency reading*. Presumably, a number would respond. If a majority were clearly on the side of publication, I would feel the sanction to go ahead. To my knowledge, that possibility was never contemplated. A pity. Literature is a guild, and in a crisis, it would be good if the artisan as well as the merchants could be there to ponder the decision.

This is, of course, fanciful. No corporate publisher would ever call on an author, not even his favorite author, on such a matter, and perhaps it is just as well. A

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lot of serious literary talent could have passed through a crisis of conscience. How to vote on such a book? The costs of saying "Yes, you must publish" are fearful. The reaction of certain women's groups to *American Psycho* has been full of unmitigated outrage.

Indeed, an extract from one of the most hideous passages in the novel was read aloud by Tammy Bruce, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, on a telephone hot line. The work is described as a "how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women... bringing torture of women and the mutilation deaths of women into an art form. We are here to say that we will not be silent victims anymore."

While it is certainly true that the fears women have of male violence are not going to find any alleviation in this work, nonetheless I dare to suspect that the book will have a counter-effect to these dread-filled expectations. The female victims in

American Psycho are tortured so hideously that men with the liveliest hostility toward women will, if still sane, draw back in horror. "Is that the logical extension of my impulse to inflict cruelty?" such men will have to ask themselves, even as after World War II millions of habitual anti-Semites drew back in similar horror from the mirror of unrestrained anti-Semitism that the Nazis had offered the world.

No, the greater horror, the real intellectual damage this novel may cause is that it will reinforce Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil. It is the banality of Patrick Bateman that creates his hold over the reader and gives this ugly work its force. For if Hannah Arendt is correct, and evil is banal, then that is vastly worse than the opposed possibility that evil is satanic. The extension of Arendt's thesis is that we are absurd, and God and the Devil do not wage war with each other over the human outcome. I would rather believe that the Holocaust was the worst

defeat God ever suffered at the hands of the Devil. That thought offers more life than to assume that many of us are nothing but dangerous, distorted, and no damn good.

So I cannot forgive Bret Easton Ellis. If I, in effect, defend the author by treating him at this length, it is because he has forced us to look at intolerable material, and so few novels try for that much anymore. On this basis, if I had been one of the authors consulted by a publisher, I would have had to say, yes, publish the book, it not only is repellent but will repel more crimes than it will excite. This is not necessarily the function of literature, but it is an obvious factor here.

What a deranging work! It is too much of a void, humanly speaking, to be termed evil, but it does raise the ante so high that one can no longer measure the size of the bet. Blind gambling is a hollow activity and this novel spins into the center of that empty space. □

1990

For
publication
notes

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from

LIVING PHILOSOPHIES

Edited by Clifton Fadiman
~~Double day, 1990~~

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COSMIC
Ventures

Start

Thirty years ago in Chicago, during an interview with Richard G. Stern and Robert Lucid, I was asked—I paraphrase the question—"What is your notion of God?"

I replied: "I think that . . . God is not all-powerful. He exists as a warring element in a divided universe, and we are a part of—perhaps the most important part—of His great expression, His enormous destiny; perhaps He is trying to impose upon the universe His conception of being against other conceptions of being very much opposed to His. Maybe we are in a sense the seed, the seed-carriers, the voyagers, the explorers, the embodiment of that embattled vision; maybe we are engaged in an heroic activity and not a mean one." A moment later, I went on to suggest that this was more noble and arduous as a religious conception than any notion of an all-powerful God who would take absolute care of us. It was the only belief, I proposed, "that explains to me the problem of evil. You see, the answer may well be—how to put it?—that God Himself is engaged in a destiny so extraordinary, so demanding, that He too can suffer from a moral corruption, that He can make demands upon us which are unfair, that He can abuse our beings in order to achieve His means, even as we abuse the very cells of our body."

Over three decades, I have not felt the need to change more than a few words of that speech. It has occurred to me since, despite my reputation as a male chauvinist, that God may be referred to as She as legitimately (for all we know) as He, or, even better, as They, if one can conceive of divinity as marriage between a god-like Male and Female, a marriage, indeed, which may not work a great deal better than the majority of ours! The jest is feeble because it is unprofitable to speculate about the particularity of God, but I still adhere to a thirty-year-old intuition that He or She is not Love (not Love alone, and not Love first) but Vision. God has a vision of existence more extraordinary, more humane, more incalculably splendid and beautiful, and conceivably more risky, than other visions of existence that

are at war with Him or Her or Them. God is, in this sense, a general trying to win a war across the heavens, and we are the wet and wounded infantry of that titanic war. God, as a general, has to give at least as much to the campaign as to the welfare of His troops. God, like a general, can be obliged to sacrifice us, or ignore us, since God, like a general, is powerful but not all-powerful. God, like a general (or the mother of a hundred children) is merely doing His or Her best.

This belief, which will hardly attract people in such numbers as to raise a subscription committee for a new church, is arduous, tough-minded, unsentimental and intellectually satisfying to me. It gives a reasonable explanation to the Holocaust. Two and more generations have come along since that catastrophe to ask the age-old question: How can Evil exist side by side with an all-powerful, all-good God? The pre-World War II answer that we were to exercise our free will to avoid evil was hardly satisfying. It intruded the unpleasant but inescapable suspicion that God was playwright, director, producer, and theater critic watching an enormous and now odious pageant He had created for His own . . . own what? Own amusement? diversion? . . . The mind grew confused. Once evil took on the dimensions of the Holocaust, however, God was either not All-Good or not All-Powerful. The second alternative seemed more reasonable to me; most certainly so, if All-Good was altered to All-Good-but-Embattled. On this last assumption, I have lived, considering all, with a kind of equanimity. It convinces me that life is hard, and the hereafter may be harder, but it offers its stern comforts as well. I do not have to see my life as absurd. We have a purpose in existence. It is to help to fulfill God's will, which is not pre-ordained. God is discovering the purpose of His will, even as we spend our lives looking for the purpose and meaning of our existence, and can measure each of our days by our support and/or betrayal of God. Do I speak of betrayal? If God is an embattled vision at war with other visions of existence in the universe, then we do not have to look far to find the devil. He or She is located somewhere in all those other visions of existence which now impinge on our earth. (That God can lose this war is the precise fear that will keep my religion from prospering.) Sometimes I

need look no further than the blank walls of corporate offices to decide where the devil nests, and sometimes I wonder whether the devil, like God, is also dying, and we are getting ready as a muddled mass man to live in the graveyard of the divinities and the diabolicals, but those are sentiments for the worst days. On a good day, I can still believe that the war is worthwhile, and it is not absurd to love my children and do my work, for I am blessed by a philosophy that does away with self-pity. The universe may not be fair from day to day, nor from century to century, but it is fighting to be just and awesome and beautiful in its endeavors, and we are the soldiers who may be lucky enough—at least some of us—to be born and born again, yes, reborn to pick up and pick up again the great battle of these apocalyptic visions. So we may be doomed and damned and often less than we should be, but at least we are not absurd, and need not hate the heavens for ignoring us. We can curse the General for leaving us in the rain, but at least we do not have to hate Him. He or She or They—when They get along—are out there, working and striving and on rare days even playing Their way toward the same goal. Which will extend itself once we get there. Which is as it should be. The universe is not determined, and the Vision will open—as all democratic visions should—into another Vision, and so we need never feel sorry for ourselves. In such a celestial war, our mistakes can teach God as much as our triumphs. It is nice to believe that we are here for this much purpose; that God, when He or She has the time, can even feel for our pain. It is even nicer to believe that some of the pain we bear relieves Their pain.

At this point, however, human masochism being what it is, one had better close up shop or the subscription for a new Jerusalem might even commence. I recommend my religion (to those who can bear it) for one reason. It flushes out self-pity, that quintessential and most personal human poison. It reminds us that something other than ourselves is going on in the turns and circuits of our existence, and it consoles us with the knowledge that this belief, if it is valid, is buried so carefully in all of us that we may yet perceive a millennium where we can worship the Lord (and the Lady) without a church.

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Harlot's Ghost

pp 1280-1281

Start

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looking

In the I-J-K-L, ~~and~~ standing there in the dark, ~~looked~~ across the intervening distance between himself and the next building, in a lighted office across the court, ~~he~~ saw one of his colleagues kissing a secretary. ~~Harlot~~ promptly dialed that office, and as he watched, the man separated himself from the embrace long enough to pick up his phone.

"Aren't you appalled by yourself?" Harlot asked.

"Who is this?"

"God," said Harlot and hung up.

The last time Hugh Montague had spoken to me about God was the last time I had taken the trip from Langley to his farmhouse on the eyebrow of the four-lane truck road. He had expatiated that afternoon on the theory of Creationism, his brilliance, one can certify, not at all diminished.

"Would you say, Harry," he inquired, "that two such words as 'sophisticated fundamentalist' make one oxymoron?"

"Can't see how it wouldn't," I told him.

"Intellectual snobbery," replied Harlot, "is your short suit. You would do better to ponder the meanings that can be extracted from apparent folly."

As so often, a flick into the eye of your ego was the price you paid for obtaining the products of his mind.

"Yes," he said, "Creationists rush to tell us that the world, according to the Bible, was commenced five thousand and some hundreds of years ago. It makes for merriment, don't it? Fundamentalists are such whole fools. Yet I said to myself once, 'What would I do if I were Jehovah about to conceive of this creature, man, who, as soon as I create him, will be hell-bent—given the equal opportunity I have offered Satan—to discover My nature. How can that not become man's passion? I have created him, after all, in My image, so he will wish to discover My nature in order to seize My throne. Would I ever have permitted such a contract in the first place, therefore, if I had not taken the wise precaution to fashion a cover story?'"

"A cover story?" I did not wish to repeat his words, but I did.

"A majestic cover story. Nothing vulgar or small. Absolutely detailed, fabulously complete. Just suppose that in the moment of striking that agreement with Satan, God brought forth the world complete. Five thousand and some hundreds of years ago, we were given an absolutely realized presentation of the world. God created it *ex nihilo*. Gave it to us complete. Everyone began to live at the same instant of Creation. Yet all were given a highly individual background. All had been put together, of course, from

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Vanity Fair
+ Howard John Press

How The Wimp Led The Leader

On August 2, 1990, it could be said that George Bush's media prospects were dire. The budget, prisons, drugs, inner cities, AIDS, crack, crime, and the homeless were exhibiting an obdurate, malicious, even perverse inclination to resist all solution.

There was also the \$500 billion S&L scandal. While one could not yet speak of it as a cancer upon the presidency—no, not so bad as Watergate—still, it was a damn chancre at the least, and the president's son, whether innocent, guilty, or somewhat smudged, was going to be treated by the media for the next six months as a blot on the Bush escutcheon. The media would not be media if they did not have the instincts of a lynch mob. George Bush knew that well enough. He had spent eight years in the advanced course in media manipulation under Ronald Reagan, and you could hardly not learn a lot from Ronald Reagan, who worked on the notion that most Americans would rather be told they were healthy than be healthy.

Since this condition can inspire a good deal of free-floating anxiety, Reagan also recognized that the media had acquired the power of a shadow government, ready to cater to all the dread in American life. If a widow encountered an ax murderer in her bedroom,

estimate
(if early pages)

the lady's blood went onto the television screens that night, and the blood was sometimes as red as the ketchup in the commercial that followed. Ronald Reagan, the survivor of more than fifty B-movies, understood that TV was the spirit of interruption—we were in the age of postmodernism, where anything could be connected to anything and sometimes gave you an interesting, that is, a new sensation. Ronald Reagan was ready to apply postmodernism to history and its retinue of facts. Henry Ford, who struggled with the concept when it was new, had said, "History is bunk," and was ridiculed; Reagan took the notion out of the swamps. History was not bunk but chosen statements.

If you were president, you could tell stories that were not true, yet they, too, could become facts in as much as denial of the statement didn't carry one-quarter the heft of the initial declaration. It came down to knowing how to feed the media. The media were a valve installed in the governing heart of the nation, and they decided which stories would receive prominence. Reagan recognized that one had to become the valve within the valve. Otherwise, certain catastrophes could produce headlines equal to spurting arteries. They could pump away the plasma of your reputation. When

241 Marines were killed in Beirut by one bomb carried in one truck by one Arab terrorist on October 23, 1983, Reagan gave the order two days later to invade Grenada. A catastrophe must immediately be replaced by another act so bold that it, too, may end in catastrophe—that takes moxie!

Grenada worked, however. Nineteen hundred Marines conquered something like half their number of Cuban construction workers, and the media were banned from reporting events firsthand for the three days of the campaign. Then America celebrated the victory. A phenomenon ensued. The American public reacted as if the victory in Grenada had removed the shame of Vietnam.

Only a political genius can turn a debacle into a media success, and George Bush had studied Ronald Reagan with all the intensity of an unwanted child for eight hard years, taken his snubs, suffered the nitty-twit positions Reagan left him in, and the wimp slanders prevalent in the press. George Bush was keen, lean, competitive, and wanted the presidency as much as any vice president before him. Without it, he had nothing to anticipate but an enduring reputation as the ex-vice-presidential wimp. Male pride is insufficiently appreci-

ated. It can approach earthquake force. George Bush was not to be stopped by the likes of Dole or Dukakis; George Bush knew that you win elections by kissing the great American electorate on the mouth—"I want a kinder, gentler nation"—and by kicking the opposition in the nuts.

Grenada may have demonstrated that the need for pride in one's patriotism was the largest unsatisfied love in American life, but the most feared nightmare in American life (now that the Evil Empire was benign) had to be the black criminal avenger whom good liberals were blind enough to let out of jail long enough to rape a white, doubtless Christian, female person. The case of Willie Horton was a real shitkicker's stomp, and the creative author, Lee Atwater, who happened to be an aficionado of black music, would subsequently develop a tumor in his head and die. Who can say how much he felt inwardly condemned for conceiving and carrying out such a caper on a people whose music he loved.

George Bush cut his thin thread of congressional liaison to the Democratic Party with Willie Horton (and that would cost him later, since Democrats do control Congress), but then, he did not know at the time that Michael Dukakis would prove leadfooted as a candi-

date. Bush saw the immediate world head-on. Win the presidency. Do not debate the efficacy of overkill. Swear allegiance to the first precept of Ronald Reagan: *Be as shallow as spit on a rock and you will prevail*. Bush prevailed and entered the postmodern American presidency of crack, crime, AIDS—we have the list.

On August 2, 1990, however, the Iraqis invaded Kuwait, and Saddam Hussein entered American life.

Before it was all over, there would be people to suggest—King Hussein of Jordan, for one—that Saddam Hussein was provoked into crossing the border by Mubarak of Egypt, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, the State Department, and presumably the C.I.A. This is, of course, paranoid, which by writer's rule of thumb means not within the parameters of my piece. We will assume for the purposes of this reconnoiter through recent history that it was no more than George Bush's good luck for Saddam Hussein to misread a few signs en route to gobbling the Kuwaitis. That sort of error would not have been difficult to make. Saddam was endangered at home by problems as deep as the need of other people to see him dead, and he was surrounded by sycophants who would never indicate that an unhappy matter could be the leader's fault, a condition which is tonic for

a leader's vanity, but does feed elephantiasis of the ego.

In addition, Saddam was a poet. "The mother of all battles" is a metaphor primeval enough to reach into the nightmares of every infantryman arrayed against him. No poet ever believes he or she is incapable of worldshaking moves. When you know the power of the word, you depend on it.

To strengthen this mix, the president of Iraq was a degenerate gambler. He had played all his life with table stakes larger than he could afford. That was his strength. Few men gain a sense of personal power greater than does a degenerate gambler who has not been destroyed by his vice. One tends to believe that God, or Providence, or some mysterious demiurge like Lady Luck, is enraptured with your presence on earth.

Hitler held to such beliefs; there may be no other explanation for him. So, by an extrapolation of his imagination, George Bush was able to speak of Saddam Hussein as Hitler, and that was certainly a page taken from the gnomic maxims of Ronald Reagan—a Muslim Hitler who comes to the stage as your foe can do a lot to save the American presidency.

Now, Saddam could conceivably have become as monstrous as Hitler. For that, however, he would

have had to acquire Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Emirates, then Iran and Syria (two formidably indigestible items) plus Israel—a major war—and Egypt, and North Africa. There may not be the rudiments of enough administrative ability in all of Islam to take care of such an empire, temperamentally supercharged, technologically Third World, oil-rich, and revolution-rife; yes, if you can conquer all of that in a decade, when Saudi Arabia alone is one-quarter the size of the United States, then you are the equal of Adolf Hitler and would doubtless exhibit the same cavernous disregard for the deaths of whole millions of people; yes, putting Saddam Hussein into the equation with Hitler was also a metaphor, but then, George Bush was even competitive about that. Saddam Hussein was Hitler, Q.E.D., and there would be no Munichs for George.

On a stripped budget, Hussein could have been stopped, probably, from moving into Saudi Arabia by sending over a division of Marines with naval and air support. The troops could have been kept—as they were, in fact, for months—hundreds of miles south of the Kuwait border. It would have been effective militarily if one wanted to avoid war; it would have drawn, precisely, a line in the sand.

George Bush, however, needed war. It would take no less than that to dig into the macho meat of B-movie sentiments. As Ronald Reagan had delineated, this was the real emotional broth of a majority of voting Americans—they had, after all, put in their time growing up on the narrative reflexes of B-movies, plus all the A-movies that happened to be no more elevated in sentimental vision than the B-movies. George Bush could avoid war by keeping a token force in Saudi Arabia—and who but the Kuwaitis would grieve for Kuwait?—but the prognosis suggested poor media potential; the action could downgrade itself into one headline blight after another. A task force underwriting such a limited peace in the Middle East would hardly be large enough to accomplish dramatic results. Incidents were bound to occur. Carousing soldiers would sooner or later be killed by Saudi policemen (which, in the absence of other news, would loom as large as a tank battle). Governing America in company with the media is like spending a honeymoon with your mother-in-law's ear to the door. George Bush's aim was hardly going to focus, therefore, on something as minimal as avoiding a war; his goal was to save his presidency. For that, nothing less than a major campaign would do.

Many a political leader has the ability to bear comparison to Napoleon for a season. Maggie Thatcher had the Falklands in 1982, and it gave her eight and a half more years of political life. The president, abetted by the skills of his secretary of state, had a few such weeks in August of 1990: showing precisely the sort of competence Michael Dukakis had advertised as his own first virtue, Bush and Baker succeeded between them in establishing U.N. sanctions against Iraq. Twenty-eight countries joined the coalition. A mighty and magnetic movement toward war got under way in America against an outraged liberal defense: "No blood for oil."

The liberals had the commonsense logic, the good ethics, the good morals, the anti-war pieties, the slogans, the demonstrations, and the inner conviction that they were on the side of the angels, but they were entering a trap larger and deeper than any of the moats ablaze with burning oil that Saddam Hussein had promised American troops. Intellectually speaking, liberal ideology had become about as stimulating as motel furniture. You could get through a night with it provided you didn't have to hang around in the morning. Liberalism was opposed to war, poverty, hunger, AIDS, drugs, corruption in high places, crowded prisons, bud-

get cuts, sexism, racism, and opposition to gay liberation, but it had not had an idea in twenty-five years for solving any of those problems.

George Bush, however, had heard the music of the Pied Piper. He knew that Ronald Reagan had launched America on a fiduciary way of life once practiced by Marie Antoinette and various members of the French, British, and Russian aristocracy. One spent lavishly for one's pleasures, sold one's cherry orchards (a transaction we are, at present, arranging with the Japanese), and looked for entertainments that would offer new zest for life not only to the people who were attending the ball but to the populace watching outside. Reagan established the principle: You cannot be a good president unless you keep the populace entertained. Reagan understood what hard workers like Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter did not; he saw that the president of the United States was the leading soap-opera figure in the great American drama, and one had better possess star value. The president did not have to have executive ability nearly as much as an interesting personality. A touch of the selfish or the unscrupulous—just a touch!—might be necessary to keep a hero interesting.

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Ronnie, of course, was perfect—the nicest movie actor ever to serve up his young manhood to losing the girl to the handsome guy who might not deserve her quite as much. His presidency was delivered from that hint of insipidity, however, by the presence of Nancy. She suggested more than a few touches of the cruel, the narrow, and the exclusive. So, they were interesting. You followed them. You kept waiting over eight years, like the rest of the American public, to see one small crack in the surface of their marriage. You never succeeded, but then, the rock-bottom aesthetic of the long-running soap opera is to keep the same anticipation alive.

George Bush, as the central figure in the new series, had a totally different problem. His wife was strong, decent, gracious, and an obvious helpmate, but George had to prove he was worthy of her. Overcoming the wimp burden could then prove a narrative asset. Given such parameters, he was not about to look for a draw with Saddam Hussein. Only wimps were eager to endure the headaches and the dull obsessional arguments that follow in the wake of a contest which ends without decision.

George Bush, in it for the win, knew that sanc-

tions, now that he had them, were not likely to work. How was one to keep Saddam Hussein encysted within the embargo for the two long years, or three, that starving him out was going to take? There were already trouble spots in the U.N. firmament—Syria, then the Soviet Union, Morocco, Germany, and Japan. And what of such uncommitted or barely committed nations as Iran, Afghanistan, Cuba, and China? Constant vigilance would be required to accomplish, yes, what? Hussein would flood the world press with pictures of starving Iraqi children. Any Red Cross food that entered the country would feed his Republican Guard. Hussein could live with famine in large parts of Iraq—he would be busy making certain that his internal enemies suffered the ^{hunger} ~~famine~~. Meanwhile, he could play upon the passions of the Palestinians, and provoke the Israelis. For that matter, when the time was propitious, what would ever keep him from starting a war with Israel? Every Muslim leader in the coalition would then have to hold down his own people. From George Bush's point of view, maintaining sanctions would be about as sensible as going into a brothel to announce, "I'll be in town for the next year. I want you girls to promise that during this period you won't pick up a venereal disease." No,

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the sanctions had to be seen as an instrument, a staging area from which to prepare the shooting war.

Bush, undeniably adroit at such a game, managed to maneuver the Security Council of the U.N. into agreement: If Saddam did not agree to pull out of Kuwait by January 15, 1991, then the allied armies, ultimately 750,000 strong, were authorized by the U.N. to engage in combat with Iraq. A vote of approval still had to be taken in Congress, however, and was on January 12, 1991.

During the TV hours of watching that debate in the House and Senate, our writer ~~at large~~ was to discover surprising sentiments in himself. He was on the side of war.

He could not believe it, but he felt a lifting of his spirit. A few days later, the sentiment was confirmed by a whole sense of excitement that the war had actually begun. For a man who disliked news shows, he now listened to generals with as much as half an open ear. He knew that if he felt himself viscerally allied with this combat, then nearly all of America would be gung ho over it.

It had gone beyond morality. Some cures can be found only in the art of the binge. Was this the phenomenon at work now? Did the country need a war?

Well, it had also needed Ronald Reagan, and Grenada, and Panama, and our writer had been opposed to all three. Where, now, was the difference? Perhaps it was that the country kept getting worse and worse. All the American revolutions seemed to have degenerated into enclaves of jargoneers who were not even capable of debate if their opponent did not employ their jargon. No, it was worse than that. When one forced oneself to contemplate the phalanxes of the left, one by one, it could be seen that no effective left remained in the country. The trade unions were bureaucratic when they were not corrupt; the sexual left was confounded, fragmented, bewildered, and AIDS was a catastrophe; little power groups fought over the remains of gay liberation. The thought began to intrude itself into the mind of many an American that, no matter how tragic individual cases might be, not everyone who came down with AIDS was necessarily entitled to a medal. Women's liberation, contributing to no cause but its own, had grown tiresome. Their agenda was sexist: women were good, and men were no damn good.

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Then there were the blacks. The Black Power movement of the sixties, intended to give blacks a more powerful sense of identity, had, in the absence of real social improvement, succeeded merely in moving whites and blacks even further away from each other. Encapsulated among themselves (in direct relation to how poor they were), the blacks were now divided between a bare majority who worked and a socially unassimilable minority who did not. Legions of black youth were marooned in hopelessness, rage at how the rich grew obscenely rich during the eighties, and self-pity. If there was a fair possibility that black people were more sensual than white people, then the corollary was that they suffered poverty more. Sensual people who are poor can drown in self-pity as they dream of how much real pleasure they could enjoy if they had money. It is a point of view that will draw you to the luminous inner life of drugs. Afterward, the luminosity used up, the habit keeps one chasing the high through crime, for crime is not only quick money but the heady rewards of risk, at least when risk is successful. Prison, the unsuccessful consequence, comes to be seen as a species of higher education. It is a way of life for young blacks that does not gear into the working black community, and it has

nothing whatever to do with the working white community. The Democratic Party had a hole in its flank from the spearhead of this problem, and the Republican Party had a hole in its head. Republican thoughts on the subject had run out long ago.

Mailer had decided that America—no matter how much of it might still be generous, unexpected, and full of surprises—was nonetheless sliding into the first real stages of fascism. The left, classically speaking, might be the most resolute defense against fascism, but what was the left now able to contest? No part of it seemed able to cooperate effectively with any other part, nor was it signally ready to work with the Democratic Party for any set of claims but its own. The Democratic Party was bereft of vision and real indignation, and, given the essential austerity of the Christian ethic, the Republican Party was never wholly comfortable with the idea that Americans like themselves ought to be that rich. They grew more and more choleric about the blacks. Their unspoken solution became the righteous prescription: If those drug bastards won't work, throw them in jail.

Of course, the jails were another disaster system. The best of them were overcrowded, and there were no

budgets for new prisons. If avalanches of new prisoners came along, the only place for them would be camps, guarded by the military.

This was merely a scenario, no more than one more doomsday scenario as long as the economy held. Money could still soothe some crucial margin of every American's exacerbated feelings. Let the river of money go dry, however, and what would hold the country together? There might be revolts in the ghetto, curfews in the inner cities, and martial law.

It was hard to believe that Bush or any other Republican or Democrat could offer a solution to the real problem, which was that standards of craftsmanship were deteriorating among the American work force. Our consumer products were not as good as they used to be. The Germans and the Japanese made better cars and better toasters. Their best engineers were working in consumer industries, while ours were being hired by the military-industrial complex. Given the shoddy show, one could blame corporate packaging, advertising, and TV; one could blame hedonism and its hangovers; one could blame drugs, blacks, labor unions; one could blame the Pied Piper. It did not matter whom you blamed. It was multiple choice, and all of the answers

might be correct. The fact was that America was mired in grievances, miseries, miscalculations, slave history, and obsessions; the economy was reflecting it.

In fact, Mailer was surprised by himself. Something deep in him—which is to say, no longer censorable—was now saying: “The country needs a purge, a fling, some sacrifice of blood, some waste of the blood of others, some colossal event, a triumph. We need an extravaganza to take us out of ourselves. We are Romans, finally, and there is no moral force left among our citizens to countermand that fact. So this war will be a crucial vacation from the morose state of American affairs. If it succeeds, the country may even be able to face a few real problems again.”

It was, at least, a perspective. A nation’s ego might be not unlike the human ego: when its view of itself was able to lift, there was more human energy available; yes, energy liberated itself best under the aegis of a happy ego. By that logic, America needed to win a war.

On the night in early March when George Bush delivered his victory speech to Congress, he was welcomed

with an ovation that rivaled any outpouring of approval Ronald Reagan had received in the same Capitol building—which is no small remark. He had not only won the war, but accomplished it with an astonishingly small loss of American life—a double victory for Bush. When it came to the sacrifice of one's own countrymen, the president was also a liberal. He had merely altered the slogan to "Virtually no blood for oil," and there was no more talk of tens of thousands of body bags having been ordered by the Pentagon.

The same could not be said, of course, for the opponent. There were no reliable figures for killed in action among the Iraqis; they may have lost 25,000, or was it twice that figure? In forty-two days, 88,500 tons of bombs and missiles were dropped or released by U.S. forces, a figure that does not include the combat sorties of the rest of the coalition nor U.S. and allied artillery. The overall tonnage then, one would estimate, came to well over 100,000 tons, more than enough to pulverize the will to fight of the Iraqi soldiers. Saddam Hussein's mother of all battles had been reduced to the child of ~~CONCUSSION~~ submission. Those of his planes which had managed to fly flew, in large part, to Iran; his tanks were buried deep in sand, yet not deep enough. Heat-seeking missiles

blew them up (since metal, it was quickly discovered, held the heat of the desert sun longer at night than the desert that covered it). A considerable portion of his Republican Guards, however, had never been committed to battle and so remained more or less intact for the family of battles that was going to take place in Iraq after the war. George Bush had taken the decision to accept a cease-fire before all of Iraq was left helpless. After all, what would there be in Baghdad then to oppose Iran? Iran in control of an Iraq without Saddam Hussein weighed in the balance as a heavier prospect for America than Saddam still in power with but one lung left.

So, of course, there were ironies. A war without ironies searing enough to brand one's moral flesh is not a real war. The triumph in the Gulf may in time be characterized by military historians as the massively prepared campaign that turned out to be no more than a technical run-through for war. One mighty coalition executing a brilliant military plan encountered no more than a desert horizon of prisoners who had been waiting for weeks to surrender. A technological Leviathan had overcome a magician of metaphors.

Other ironies followed. We had liberated Kuwait, but it was ecologically mutilated. The restoration

during daylight hours of blue sky for black sky was going to cost a fortune—would it prove to be as large as the disbursements on the war itself? Sea life in the Gulf might or might not recover from that oil spill seven or eight times greater than the Exxon *Valdez* disaster. The metaphors of the dark poet had proved dark indeed. Vastly less massive than Hitler on the historic scale, Saddam had been ready nonetheless to revenge himself on the God who had not supported him; Saddam waged fire and destruction against nature. He would pull down the walls of the oil temple. In disaster, Saddam would be awesome. No one inhabiting Kuwait over the next few years would be able to cease thinking of his active vengeance, present in every acrid breath. The wrath of hell was in one's lungs.

It had taken seven months of sleeping through nightmares for young American soldiers to find a balance between their morale and their fears. The stiffening of their resolve to be ready to die had turned out in the end to be no more than a gargantuan poker bluff. ~~They may have felt not unequal to those American athletes training for the Olympic Games in 1980, who could not go to Moscow because the Russians had invaded Afghanistan.~~ The Gulf soldiers were now going to live

with obsession: What would I have been like in combat if it had turned out to be as bad as the minefields, the burning ditches, the barbed wire, and the fields of fire that I contemplated in my dreams?

That was an obsession to live with for the rest of one's life. After all, many of these American soldiers had been obliged to put the will to fight together out of no more than a tautology of truisms: We've got to get the job done so we can all go home. If they found any higher moral sanction, it doubtless came from admiring the will to work under excruciating conditions that characterizes line play in the National Football League.

Of course, the soldiers seen on television had been carefully chosen for blandness of affect. This was one campaign the military was not going to lose to the press. So the most interesting war in two decades for Americans was obliged to wag along on TV with talking heads and zoom-aways of fighter planes taking off into the wild-rose yonder of the desert at evening. The Pentagon was the producer of this entertainment, and its ranks were composed of solemn people. They were no part of that consumer economy, now as subtly sleazy as all the half-rented suburban malls; no, the military had not acquired most of the best engineering minds for the

last two decades, and then brooded like serious men upon their own faults and shortcomings in Vietnam (first of which was that they had been too obliging to the press), to make the same mistakes again; no, the consumer economy might not show the happiest comparison with the Germans and the Japanese, but the military was prepared to prove that it was now, by far, the finest fighting force on earth.

Military men live within life-missions of pride. Since their activities take place inside the enclaves of national security, part of their ethic is to suffer in silence. Silently, the Pentagon had undergone the ravages of congressional investigation into why it spent \$600 on a toilet seat for one airplane and \$1,600 on a wrench for another; the military had had to live with the general public cognition that the B-2 Stealth bomber was a monumentally expensive disappointment. All the while, the generals were obliged to keep silent with the knowledge that if all else in America might be getting worse they were getting better.

How could George Bush not turn them loose? They were what we had to show for the Reagan years. From 1980 to 1988, the Pied Piper had spent \$2.1 trillion on the military—which is four times the amount of the

S&L scandal. Maybe we couldn't make cars and toasters anymore, but we had forced the Russians to spend, over these same eight years, \$2.3 trillion, \$200 billion more than ourselves, and the Soviets couldn't afford it at all. They couldn't even make decent soap.

The military wounded by the shame of Vietnam and fortified by the budget, had become a superior fighting force as a corollary to the main Reagan strategy, which had been to wreck the Russians economically. In that, we succeeded, but at the cost of handing over economic hegemony in the world to Germany and Japan while we enlarged the list of our unsolvable crises in the cities.

Now that the Soviet Union had folded as a foe, all we had to show was the state-of-the-art strengths of our forces. So George Bush used them the first chance he had. The technological display was full of stardust. The F-117A Stealth fighter with its laser-guided bombs hit 95 percent of its targets. In numbers, it was only 2.5 percent of the U.S. aircraft, but it managed to account for 31 percent of the successful hits on its first day. Endless nuggets of such sparkling statistics were now floating about in the vitreous fluid of the media. Yes, the air war, discounting delays from bad weather and ignoring all

lack of opposition, had been a massive success; the deep, if natural, fear of the Bush administration and the Pentagon that the ground troops might not be well motivated enough to fight the Iraqis did not have to be tested. George Bush had gone up to the great dentist in the sky, but none of his teeth had been pulled. We had probably dumped some amount like 200 million pounds of explosive on Iraq and Kuwait, and that came down to 10 pounds virtually per person for all of 21 million people. Of course, the bombs and rockets had not been directed against people, but all the same, the Pentagon was not releasing the figures. Those tonnages could yet take on the long shadows of overkill. The country preferred instead to enjoy the victory.

In an appearance before state legislators at the White House in March, George Bush went so far as to suggest that the ghosts of Vietnam had been exorcised, and the shame of the past had been overcome. The misery of losing a war to a Third World power could be forgotten. Our great win in the Gulf could replace our obsession with Southeast Asia.

George Bush, however, might encounter some subtle troubles with his thesis in time to come. If the nation was going to enjoy the fruits of victory, which is

to say a strengthening of the national ego that, one hoped, would be able to produce a new vigor for tackling our problems, then maybe the war in Vietnam ought not to be exorcised so quickly. The president was, after all, getting into the same slough of muddy reasoning as the liberals. They had decided in advance that the Gulf War was a repetition of Vietnam, and that had been a perfect example of American thinking at its most simplistic. Now the Bush administration was going to run with the same errors around the other end of the ideological line. When you got down to it, the only similarity between the two wars was that America had been in both of them. One, after all, had been combat waged in the jungle, and the canopy offered concealment of ground troops from planes and much-restricted access to tanks. Soldiers encountered one another face-to-face in deep shadows. In the Gulf, war had been fought in the open vistas of the desert against a mad poet who was hated by all too many of his own troops. In Vietnam, we were allied against a people ready to die for a leader who not only looked like a saint but embodied the travails of a long-delayed liberation. He offered the idea that their deaths would not be in vain, and that a more humane world would follow for their children.

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The Democrats had kept the war in Southeast Asia going eight years beyond its time, and then Nixon kept it going for another six, and by the time we left Saigon, there was no future left for anyone over there. Two million Vietnamese had been killed, and the cadres of power-for-its-own-sake filled the gap. More than a million new deaths would follow in Cambodia, and oppression was everywhere.

Of course, we had a bad conscience concerning Vietnam. It was part of the national honor to remind ourselves that we, a great and democratic nation, had been capable of monstrous deeds. It revealed to us that America might never come to maturity, nor develop a culture rich enough and sufficiently resonant to counterbalance our technology. No, we might end as computer hacks and body louts—the last superlouts in the history of the world—but if we had a national conscience, and it would yet prevail, then we were obliged to live with Vietnam and keep measuring the cost. Bury the ghosts of that war too soon and the last irony of the desert sands would be released. That great news machine, which eats our history as fast as it is created, might even move so fast that our power to enjoy the success of the war in the Gulf could also be covered over prematurely and we could

lose whatever good it was going to do our long-bruised view of ourselves. While it was a war that might yet make a difference for good or for ill in the tangled nests of the Middle East, it might also turn out to be no more than its own weight, a military exercise on a colossal level, panoramas of technical virtuosity in a moral thicket, and if that was all it was, then the news machine would damn sure eat it. The memory of Vietnam, however, is not going to disappear. Vietnam is embedded in our moral history. End

Of course, before the Gulf War can even show a tendency to disappear, our commander in chief is going to bring it back. George Bush has promised to remind us of its existence and what we owe the people who fought in it. He will have a special celebration for our returning veterans as soon as this coming Fourth of July.

On that occasion, he will remind us of his war. He will. He will.

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The Nineties ~~Republican Committee~~

Politics

By Heaven Inspired

~~Norman Mailer~~

32 pages



~~Unpublished~~
~~Unpublished~~
~~Unpublished~~

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

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estimated

28 pages



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

.....

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

their political vanity

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 outhouse, 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

(where the Democrats had held their convention)

none the less

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. (5)

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 celebra-

tory—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 T.V. 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."

I t 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

at Skene

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

It was part of his strategy. Perhaps it was the most honorable part. If every poll had shown that Quayle was a liability, if most of George's advisers had all but begged him to take on a new dynamite

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 Wasputude, 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 curtain 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 sounded 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. Trounced 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. All bad orations, whether by actors or politicians, have this in common: the speaker becomes exactly equal to his text—there is no human space between, no subtext to give resonance to the difference between the person and what he is saying.

Buchanan possessed a good deal of subtext. He was pleasant-faced and, in the beginning, mild-voiced, and no audience can fail to hang on every word of a killer speaker when he is pleasant-faced. So they took in each phrase and cheered with happiness at nearly every applause line. Patrick Buchanan was off to a fine start.

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.~~

Buchanan, having paused for the cheers he received, went on with the attack.

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

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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. (19)

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.

~~Step line Besides, his facts were off. The black~~

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~~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.

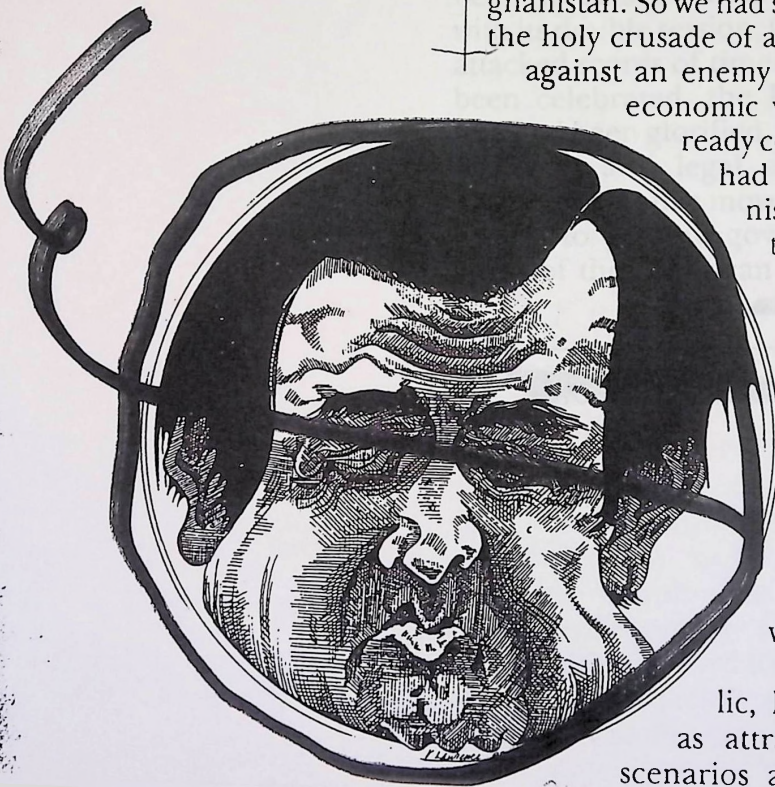
So it went. He gave credit to the Republicans for ending the cold war; he chided the Democrats. "Our liberal friends," he called them. What got liberals most upset were "two simple words: Evil Empire."

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 charnel 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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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

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 footbal

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 trimness 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 Astro-dome 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 so 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, how-

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ever, 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.

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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

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"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 Alfonse 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 partic-



way of stating that

the average homo-

sexual 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?

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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 extirpate—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 aces—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 city block.

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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 coruscated 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 L-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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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-

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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

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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

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

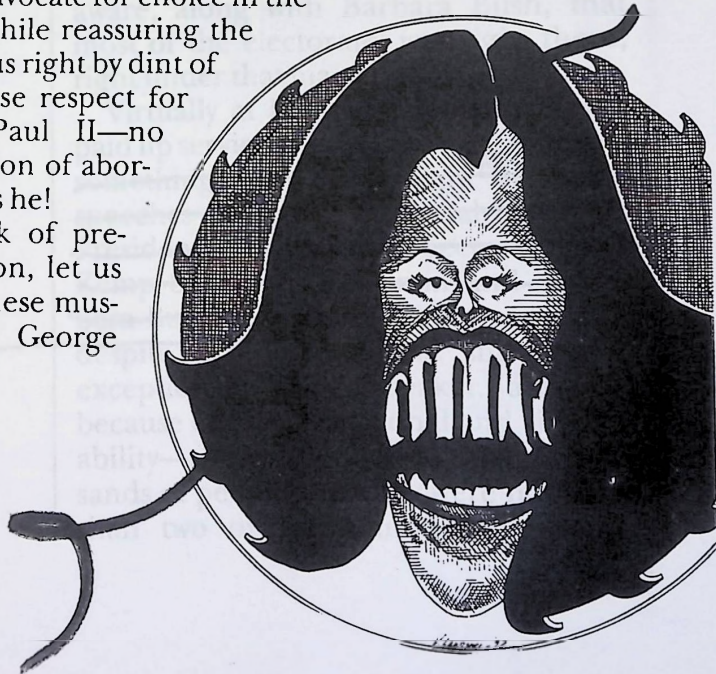
BARBARA BUSH: I don't know the answer.

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



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Bush to hack
away at the mat-
ter on our own.

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Concerning abor-
tion, 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 rhetor-
ical 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 emo-
tionally 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 ... Bar-
bara 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 thou-
sands of people as if they were not more
than two or three individuals sitting

but it)

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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 people etching upon our values of our quick history and, intrinsic~~

→ Intrinsic to us, ^{was} ~~our~~
~~American enter-~~ 2248
~~tainment. Our sym-~~

~~bols and our heraldry~~
~~were in~~ our American

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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 Victo-
ria 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 over-
powering King George, a fantasy of rich
national theatre. However, since Mr. and
Mrs. Bush partook of it as only WASP gen-
try and WASP vigor can settle into a set of
roles they are able to spend their lives liv-
ing out, ~~but will never have~~, a subliminal
nourishment was there for that part of
America which could hardly survive with-
out 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 reli-
gion beneath all other American reli-
gions—America itself. Well, thought the
Republicans, we'll win by an avalanche if
we can only keep the focus on Hillary ver-
sus Barbara, Hillary with her feminist
intelligence and her hairband.

~~For~~ the speech itself, little registers ^{from}
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:

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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 wrapped 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.

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The Republicans in the Astrodome were delirious. 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 ~~is~~ 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~~ ^{some} 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."

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~~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-Yi 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

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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 sparking 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.

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~~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

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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

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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

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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,

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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~~

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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.

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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 American people

~~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. •

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1993

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From The Rushdie Letters
Univ of Nebraska Press
~~Norman Mailer~~

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Dear Salman Rushdie,

I have thought of you often over the last few years. Many of us begin writing with the inner temerity that if we keep searching for the most dangerous of our voices, why then, sooner or later we will outrage something fundamental in the world, and our lives will be in danger. That is what I thought when I started out, and so have many others, but you, however, are the only one of us who gave proof that this intimation was not ungrounded. Now you live in what must be a living prison of contained paranoia, and the toughening of the will is imperative, no matter the cost to the poetry in yourself. It is no happy position for a serious and talented writer to become a living martyr. One does not need that. It is hard enough to write at one's best without bearing a hundred pounds on one's back each day, but such is your condition, and if I were a man who believed that prayer was productive of results, I might wish to send some sort of vigour and encouragement to you, for if you can transcend this situation, more difficult than any of us have known, if you can come up with a major piece of literary work, then you will rejuvenate all of us, and literature, to that degree, will flower.

So, my best to you, old man, wherever you are ensconsed, and may the muses embrace you.

Cheers,

Norman Mailer

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~~after the '57~~

As it grows
the flower
breaks
through the stone.

It has yet
to prove
itself
against
the clay.

Gray without grace
day.

~~from of~~

✓