

NOTEBOOK

Thunder on the right By Lewis H. Lapham

It is muddleheaded to say, I am in favor of this kind of political regime rather than that: what one really means is, I prefer this kind of police.

—E. M. Cioran

During the first weeks of the autumn election campaigns I noticed that when I turned on the radio and heard three or four people talking about politics, I couldn't tell the difference between the show's host, the congressman who had dropped by to drum up votes, the caller in Worcester disgusted with welfare cheats, and the caller in San Diego who wanted to bomb Baghdad. By late October I understood that the distinctions didn't matter. Everybody was as angry as everybody else, and all present belonged to one or another of the parties of virtue and conscience. As often as not the host turned out to be a friend of Pat Robertson's, the callers—Della in Worcester and Bob in San Diego—had both learned their politics from the paintings of Norman Rockwell, and the candidate, although he had served in Congress for twelve years, miraculously had avoided the sloughs of corruption that had engulfed so many of his fellow pilgrims on Capitol Hill.

Once having established their various states of innocence, the guests proceeded to the great task of calling down the wrath of Moses or Teddy Roosevelt on the heads of their innumerable enemies. The catalogue of their resentment provided the text for most of the season's five hundred election campaigns, and well before the end of September the angry voices on the radio had become indistinguishable from the television commercials in which the candidates for federal, state, and municipal office—like schoolboys delighting in the hate speech so long forbidden in the universities—scrawled dirty

words on a succession of blackboards for which they paid, in the major media markets, as much as \$70,000 a minute. Campaigning for the Senate in Tennessee, the Republican candidate (a heart surgeon named Bill Frist with little to recommend him other than the magnificence of his inherited fortune) demanded "term limits for career politicians and the death penalty for career criminals." Running for governor in Florida, Jeb Bush, the son of the former president, indirectly charged the Democratic incumbent with murder; and in New York State the Republican candidate for comptroller, Herbert London, portrayed his opponent as a black racist likely to favor sending Jews to death camps.

Every now and then I made note of a remark that embodied the spirit of the campaign, and among these I find two that strike me as memorable. First, from Cal Thomas, a syndicated newspaper columnist with whom I found myself in conversation on C-Span almost a year before the election. Summing up the already prevalent feeling of revulsion for the federal government and all its smiling lies, Thomas said, "We ought to just put a full-body condom over the entire city of Washington and flush it out to sea." Second, on the last weekend of the campaign, Congressman Newt Gingrich of Georgia (now Speaker of the House of Representatives) fitting the news of tragic murder in South Carolina to the specifications of self-serving political slogan. Taking note of the arrest of Susan Smith, the woman who drowned her two small children in a lake, Gingrich attributed her crime to the swarm of evils let loose upon the land by left-wing English professors and a prolonged Democratic majority in Congress. The poor woman's confusion, he said, "vividly reminds every

American how sick the society is getting and how much we have to have change . . . [and] the only way you get change is to vote Republican."

The bitter slanders reflected a perception current among the propertied classes, predominantly white and suburban, that they were being robbed of their birthrights by a feckless government allied with the armies of the urban poor. Together with the citizens calling in their complaints to Don Imus or Rush Limbaugh—Della from her successful boutique and Bob from his profitable boat marina—even political candidates who had grown old in public office presented themselves as victims of a world they never made (one that had arisen mysteriously out of the mists of the 1960s behind the lyrics of a Bob Dylan song), and they gladly confirmed everybody's fondest fears of class warfare between the haves and the have-nots. Few politicians put the point so bluntly, but they knew which side to choose and, whether Democrat or Republican, they took their uncompromising stands—bold as eagles, brave as lions—under the beach umbrellas of the big money.

On November 8 the sum of the electorate's well-nourished grievances found expression in the vote that since has become the revelation of the reactionary dream of paradise regained. For the first time in forty years the Republican Party gained command of the House of Representatives; together with a majority in the Senate, the party's candidates won gubernatorial elections in California, Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York as well as control of eighteen state legislatures previously held by the Democrats. On the Democratic side of the ballot incumbent officeholders fell

like rotted pears from wind-stricken trees, but among the Republicans not one sitting governor, senator, or congressman lost an election.

Understood as a popular referendum against what since 1964 has been variously known as the Great Society, the New Covenant, and the "L" word, the vote announced the loss of belief in the proposition that government, any government, can call into being the virtues of a civil society or the energies of high civilization. The vote matched the temper of a season in which the late Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's book *The Bell Curve*, a patchwork of dubious statistics and bogus theory, became a best-selling sensation on the strength of its good news that destiny was genetic, cognition hereditary, and most black people justly sentenced at birth to lives of poverty and crime.

The post-election sifting of the vote confirmed the pre-election impression of panic among the possessing classes—for the first time since 1970 more votes were cast by Republicans than by Democrats; in at least half of the six hundred elections to national, state, and local office, the whippers-in of the Christian right herded the faithful to the camp of the victorious Republican candidate, and in California, Proposition 187 (the one denying money and government services to illegal aliens) carried by a margin of 3 to 2.

As was to be expected, the grand masters of the Republican fraternal lodges read the entrails of the election as proof of a happy return to the aesthetics of Cecil B. De Mille and the politics of Calvin Coolidge. But although I could understand the rejoicing on the right as a euphoria not unlike the rapture of the deep, I expect that among the general public the feeling will prove short-lived, like the excitements associated with the smashing of champagne glasses and the tearing down of goalposts. Maybe it is unreasonable to ask or expect anything else of an election in which only 39 percent of those eligible bothered to go to the polls and 75 percent of the voters didn't know the names of their own representatives in Congress. Closely trimmed to the

winds of rumor drifting through the headphones of the radio talk show hosts, the campaign gathered its emotional force from a series of imbecile non sequiturs cheerfully ignored by Della and Bob as well as by the celebrity host and the distinguished senator. As follows:

1. Populism in Cream

Much of the present unhappiness in the society, as well as most of the damage done to the nation's economy over the last fifteen years, descends from the Reagan Administration's policy of increasing the wealth of the rich and reducing the means of the poor. Given the ceaseless muttering during the campaign about the lack of money and the loss of jobs, the electorate, had it been interested in cause and effect, might have been expected to direct its anger against the marble facades of the American oligarchy—against the Federal Reserve that has been steadily raising the interest rate (five times in the nine months prior to the election) or the corporations that have been busily winnowing the rows of middle management or shipping their back offices to Malaysia. But instead of blaming the rich, the voters blamed the poor, venting their spleen on immigrants, criminals, racial minorities, and beggars—i.e., on the constituencies that can't afford a trade association or a high-priced lobbyist. The tone of the political advertisements aped the snide humor of the David Letterman show, the insults and put-downs—fatso, zit, liberal, wetback, etc.—meant to display the moral refinement of the politician paying for the jokes. The candidates made sport of poor people buying shrimp with food stamps; they said nothing about Wall Street speculators buying office buildings with tax-free junk bonds.

Several of the nation's leading newspaper columnists were at pains to point out that the trouble with the political season—its mean-spiritedness and absence of debate—followed from the country's straitened economic circumstances. The God-fearing American people were said to be out of money and out of compassion, feeling themselves under attack by tax collectors stealing their money

and dark-skinned immigrants stealing their jobs.

But little about the election campaigns suggested that they were anything other than expensive entertainments presented at the pleasure of the rich for the amusement of their admirers among the would-be rich, a series of diversions on the order of the amateur theatricals staged by the particular friends of Marie Antoinette at the Petite Trianon. The prominent candidates were for the most part individuals possessed of sizable fortunes (Mitt Romney, Ted Kennedy, Frank Lautenberg, Michael Huffington, Jeb and George Bush, Herb Kohl, Richard Fisher, and Bill Frist, etc.), and the audience to which they addressed their remarks was made up largely of the news media (i.e., the claue employed by the oligarchy to applaud its comings in and goings out) and those voters belonging to the wealthier echelons of the middle class. Far from being too poor to support its enthusiasm for politics, the country apparently was prosperous enough to spend upward of \$500 million on the staging of an event that ESPN might rate as an attraction comparable to the East Asian golf tour or a wood-chopping tournament.

2. The Prom King

I can't remember a campaign in which so many people expressed such violent feelings of disgust for a sitting president. The objections were seldom political. Instead of condemning Clinton's legislative proposals or theories of government, the critics complained of the flaws in his character and deportment. They wished that he wouldn't give so many speeches or eat so many cheeseburgers. They didn't like his wife, or the sound of his voice, or the look of his hair. They thought him weak or too much obsessed by bureaucracy. Republican candidates everywhere in the country sought to identify their opponents as Friends of Bill, as if by merely establishing the association they proved the Democrat guilty of a dingy passion for government acronyms or Gennifer Flowers.

The perceptions were contradicted by the facts. Clinton shaped his poli-

tics to the conservative temperament of the times, and no Democratic president in recent memory had so eagerly attempted to expose himself as a closet Republican. During the 1992 campaign Clinton avoided being too often seen in the company of feminists and black people, and as President he had lobbied into law the three Republican initiatives dear to the heart of President Bush—deficit reduction, the crime bill, and the North American Free Trade Agreement. His economic policies were as sound as the furniture in the boardroom of Goldman Sachs, but he made the mistake of thinking that the country was still interested in Democratic social policy, and by attempting to reform the health-care system he smeared his image as a good Republican and became the personification of big government, the inveterate busybody rummaging through desks and insurance claims, levying taxes and stamping death certificates.

Once having blundered into the morass of large-scale social reform, the President never could regain his footing as the Prom King elected to preside over what in 1992 both the voters and Clinton's corporate sponsors thought would prove to be a Republican government dressed up in the costumes of a television miniseries loosely based on the life of Andrew Jackson. The Democratic Party had been morally and intellectually bankrupt for twenty years, the remnants of its principles sold at auction at increasingly low prices during the Reagan and Bush administrations, and nobody expected Clinton to take seriously the slogans found on old Hubert Humphrey buttons. Most of the time he didn't, but once or twice he forgot who was paying for the orchestra, and despite his innate conservatism and fondness for golf, the political audience chose to see him as a lost flower child at a Grateful Dead concert.

3. *Uncle Sugar*

So many of the opinion polls showed the electorate so implacably opposed to the existence as well as the theory of big government that one would have thought at least a few

voters willing to give up their own particular subsidy—the tax deduction for home loan mortgages, say, or Social Security payments, or student loans, or Medicare. Della and Bob remained silent on the subject, and so did the candidates touring states and towns dependent upon the military budget or posing for photo opportunities in picturesque wheat fields enriched with the fertilizer of federal money. The damnable entitlement always proved to be somebody else's entitlement—somebody certainly undeserving and probably ethnic.

About the uses of government the contradictions were so many and so blatant that even Representative Gingrich often got lost in the labyrinth of his own sophism. He objected to the reckless squandering of public money on the shiftless and ungrateful poor, but he favored extravagant transfer payments to the appreciative and industrious rich, and over the span of his fifteen years in Congress his own districts in Georgia received gifts of federal largesse almost as lavish as those sent to Arlington County, Virginia, and Brevard County, Florida.

Nor was Gingrich willing to relinquish the government's power to build the new Arcadia or justify God's ways to man. The Democrats upon whom Gingrich dripped the acid of his contempt ("welfare liberals," "McGoverniks," "Stalinists," "enem[ies] of normal Americans") had made the mistake of trying to reconstruct the social and economic order. Presuming to change black people into white people and Spanish Harlem into Palm Springs, they had sought to rectify the mistakes of a careless Providence that somehow had neglected to provide equal shares of intelligence, beauty, and Microsoft Preferred to every child born under the American sun.

In the world according to Newt, the proposition failed not only because it was foolish but also because it substituted the lesser for the greater task. What was really important was the reconstruction of the moral order, nothing less than the "rescue of American civilization" from the pits of cynicism and despair into which it had been cast by hard-

ened feminists and marijuana-smoking guitar players. The government, said Gingrich, must bring forth the spiritual analogue of the New Deal, must repeal the decade of the 1960s, clarify the distinctions between right and wrong, take Sunday school attendance, recall the American people (if necessary by force) to the shelter of "traditional morals," and bend the coercive powers of government to the reformation of the American character instead of the reconstruction of the American economy.

4. *Past Perfect*

No day passed without one or another of the candidates saying that "it's time for a change." The phrase appeared in eight of every ten television commercials, the implication being that whoever bought the time was advancing boldly into a future certain to be filled with prizes like the ones handed out by Vanna White on *Wheel of Fortune*. But the phrase was as empty as every other phrase in the campaign. What was wanted was the appearance of change and not its substance: a parade of new faces, even if they were as vacant as glass (c.f., George Pataki, the governor of New York), and a rush of new words, even if they were nonsense rhymes.

Had either the voters or the candidates seriously considered the prospect of substantive change, the conversation presumably would have addressed specific legislative measures—about education, foreign policy, the deficit, health care, the GATT treaty, campaign finance, and the environment. But instead of modest and therefore plausible reforms, there was Gingrich's grandiose "Contract with America," and instead of debate there was gossip—about Oliver North's felonies or Chuck Robb's mistress, about "McGoverniks" wandering in and out of pornographic movies, about the moral decay in downtown Toledo and drug dealers scouting the perimeter of Greenwich, Connecticut.

By way of allaying every voter's worry that he or she may have to give something up, the candidates new to politics put forward their ig-

norance of Washington as proof that they were the last people on earth likely to know how to operate the machinery of government and thus, by definition, incapable of changing even so much as a light bulb in the House of Representatives. It was as if a heart surgeon were to say that although he knew nothing of scalpels or anesthetics, and objected to the arbitrary discrimination between an artery and a vein, he was the man to perform the operation because he had adhered all his life to "Hoosier hometown values" and once had saved an Airedale from being run over by a train. Elect me, dear voter, because I am an ignorant fool. Even better, dear voter, elect me because, like you, I despise the office in pursuit of which I already have spent \$24 million in promotional fees.

Campaigning for the Senate in California, Michael Huffington set the standard of absurdity to which so many of the season's campaigns so expensively aspired. With respect to his presence in Washington as a one-term congressman during the Reagan Administration, Huffington said that all anybody did there was pass around unintelligible pieces of paper, a charade in which he for one certainly meant to take no part. "I'm against Washington," he said, "always have been. Congress has been in session for two hundred years, and all they do is make laws."

Taken as a measure of the popular and deep-seated preference for the joys of anti-politics, the belligerent non sequiturs of the fall elections all but guarantee another two years of legislative futility in Congress, which probably is the result that the voters had in mind. Gingrich confirmed the prognosis when he came to Washington three days after the election and said that as the probable Speaker of the House he was in no mood to bargain with anybody who didn't agree with his notions of America's moral reawakening. Speaking to a crowd of businessmen at the Willard Hotel, Gingrich offered his intransigence ("cooperation, yes; compromise, no") as a testament to his righteousness, and to a reporter from the *New York Times* he

said, "The White House can either decide to accommodate reality, or they can decide to repudiate reality. That's their choice."

Absent the prospect of useful compromise, and assuming that the new Republican majorities won't take much interest in President Clinton's "national conversation" or Hillary Clinton's "politics of meaning," what then will the members of the 104th Congress find to say to one another? Let the majority divide into the factions of the authoritarian and libertarian right, and with any luck it will fall to arguing about how best to close the Mexican border, or whether to send troublesome adolescents to boot camps or Indian reservations, or when to schedule public floggings and where to build the next prison, or which grade of boiling oil to pour on the heads of undocumented maids. Given the presumption that government can contribute nothing of importance to the building of a secular

commonwealth, what else can it do except distribute punishments and devise spectacles likely to excite the interest of a bored audience at the next election? It won't be easy to upstage the sensations of 1994. Possibly the congressmen will content themselves with the frequent openings of orphanages (loud applause when Gingrich cuts the ribbon), or with the ceremonial demolitions of federal office buildings (more applause and a release of balloons), or with costume balls staged in the courtyards of state prisons (dance music, the laughter of pretty women, Oliver North and Pat Buchanan both dressed as Napoleon). But the market for mass entertainment favors the trend toward violence, and in response to the clamor of the opinion polls I can imagine a party of committee chairmen outfitted by Banana Republic or Polo Sport, gunning for an endangered species of jackrabbit or Guatemalan on the Texas plains. ■

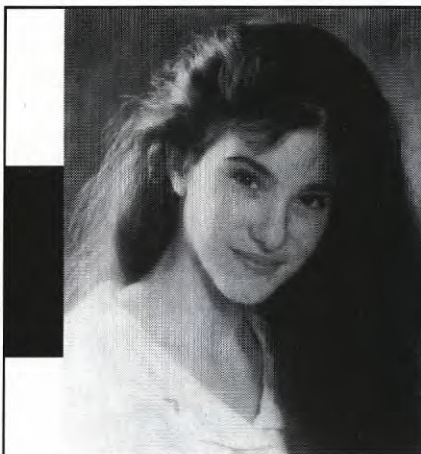


Photo by Kathy Morris

**Winner of the 1994
Drue Heinz
Literature Prize**

*Selected by
Alice McDermott*

Departures

Jennifer C Cornell

"These are stories that succeed without last-minute revelations or authorial summing up, that seem to contain the heart of each story not in some single line or climactic scene, but in every careful sentence along the way, so that the final image always appears to be both inevitable and inspired."—*Alice McDermott*

Cloth \$22.50

University of Pittsburgh Press

To order: CUP Services, Box 6525, Ithaca, NY 14851 (1-800-666-2211)