the weekly Standard

FEBRUARY 21, 2000

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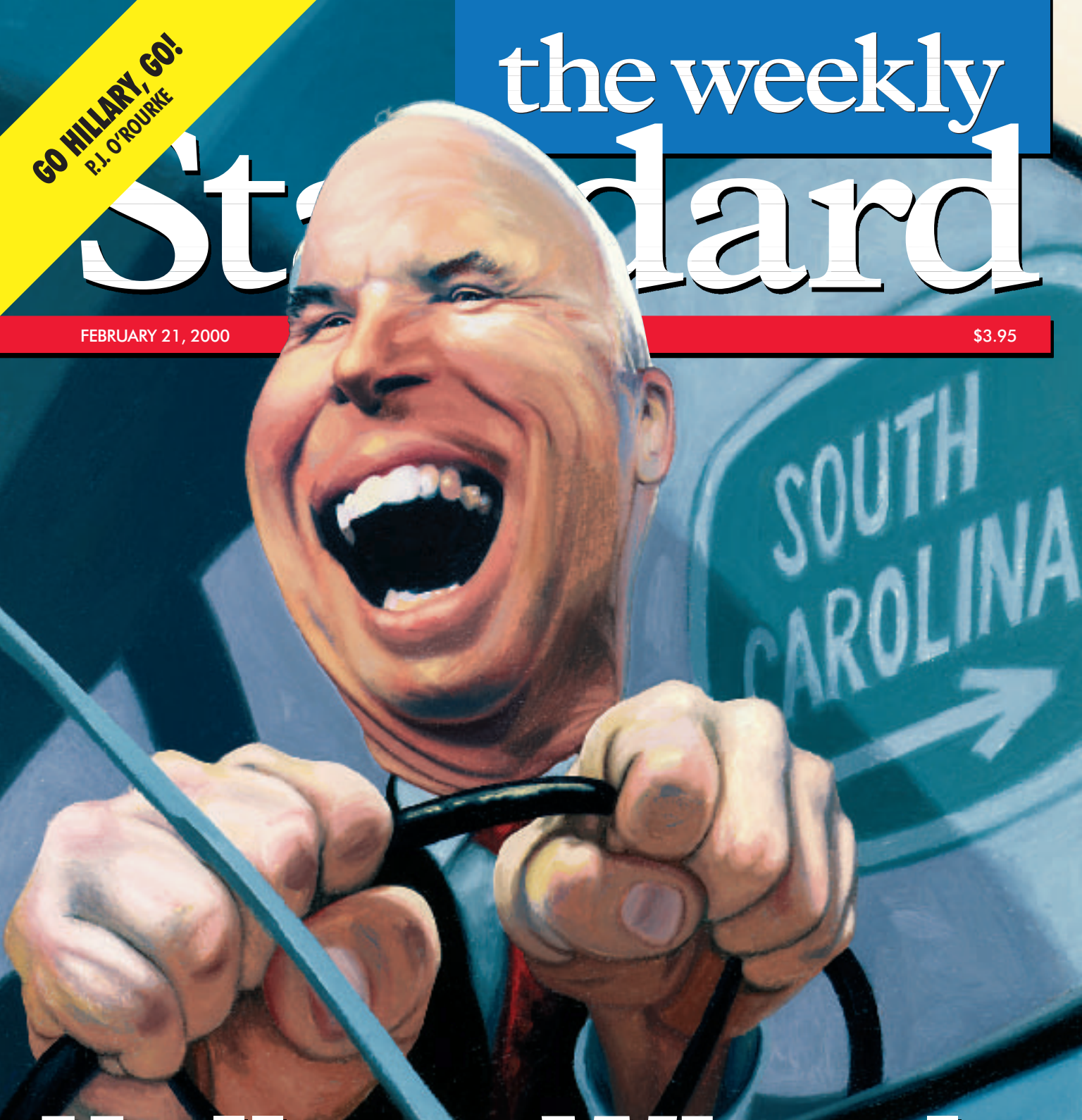
GO HILLARY, GO!
P.J. O'ROURKE



Hell on Wheels

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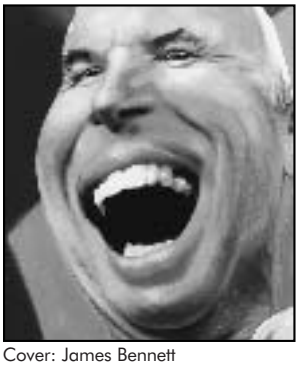

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the weekly Standard

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All the News that Castro Wants Printed

On Feb. 5, the *New York Times* gave a 160-word "brief" on page A20 to one of the bizarre moments in the case of 6-year-old Cuban refugee Elián González. The *Times* noted that his two grandmothers had admitted to "playfully biting the boy's tongue and unzipping his pants" during their reunion with Elián in Miami. Now, that's a nice way of putting it. What the grandmothers did, and joked about on Cuban television, was pull the boy's penis out of his trousers to examine whether it had "grown" since he'd been on American soil. And if the *Times* knows any grandmothers who bite their grandchildren's tongues—"playfully" or otherwise—we'd be surprised. The snippet closed with a quote from one Uva de Aragon of Florida International University who said such behavior was "the same as if she were tickling him or trying to see his muscles."

There could be an explanation for this weird behavior. (*Santería*, maybe?) But until we've heard it, we'll merely note that the last time Attorney General Janet Reno heard of such treatment of children, she ordered an attack on a religious compound that killed 80 people.

Three days later, the *Times* ran a mammoth front-page "news" story by Peter Kilborn, complete with three photos and a pull-quote, called "A Bumpy Path for Cuban Boy's Miami Kin." The story had little to do with Elián. No—it was a mere laying-out of the police records of those of Elián's relatives who want to keep him in the United States, including the drunk-driving convictions of two great uncles and the robbery convictions of two first cousins once removed. It closed with a quote from a professor that Elián's Cuban father "should win [the custody battle] hands down."

Kilborn's story was effectively a legal brief for returning Elián to Cuba. At least, there was no evidence of any attempt to discover the criminal records of Elián's family still in Cuba. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that "public records" aren't open to the public in Communist dictatorships. Ignoring that fact made the story reminiscent of the worst journalism of the Cold War, in which gullible journalists treated the tyranny of the Communist world as an excuse for incuriosity, and the freedom of the West as a tool-kit for beating up on it. ♦

She's No Tipper

Bill Clinton certainly got a lot of mileage out of cheap wordplay with the name of his hometown, Hope, Arkansas. So what could Hillary Clinton have been thinking, THE SCRAPBOOK wonders, when she kicked off her official candidacy for the Senate last week in the town of Purchase, New York?

Far be it from THE SCRAPBOOK to make easy jokes about riverfront land purchases, or purchasing a night in the Lincoln Bedroom. The Clintons, truth be told, are better known as freeloaders than as purchasers. Consider all the times they've vacationed gratis with their friends. Consider that Bill Clinton will probably be crashing at his presidential library after he leaves office. And consider that Hillary last week at one of her first campaign stops in Albion, N.Y., left no tip for the single-mom waitress after her free breakfast at the Village House diner.

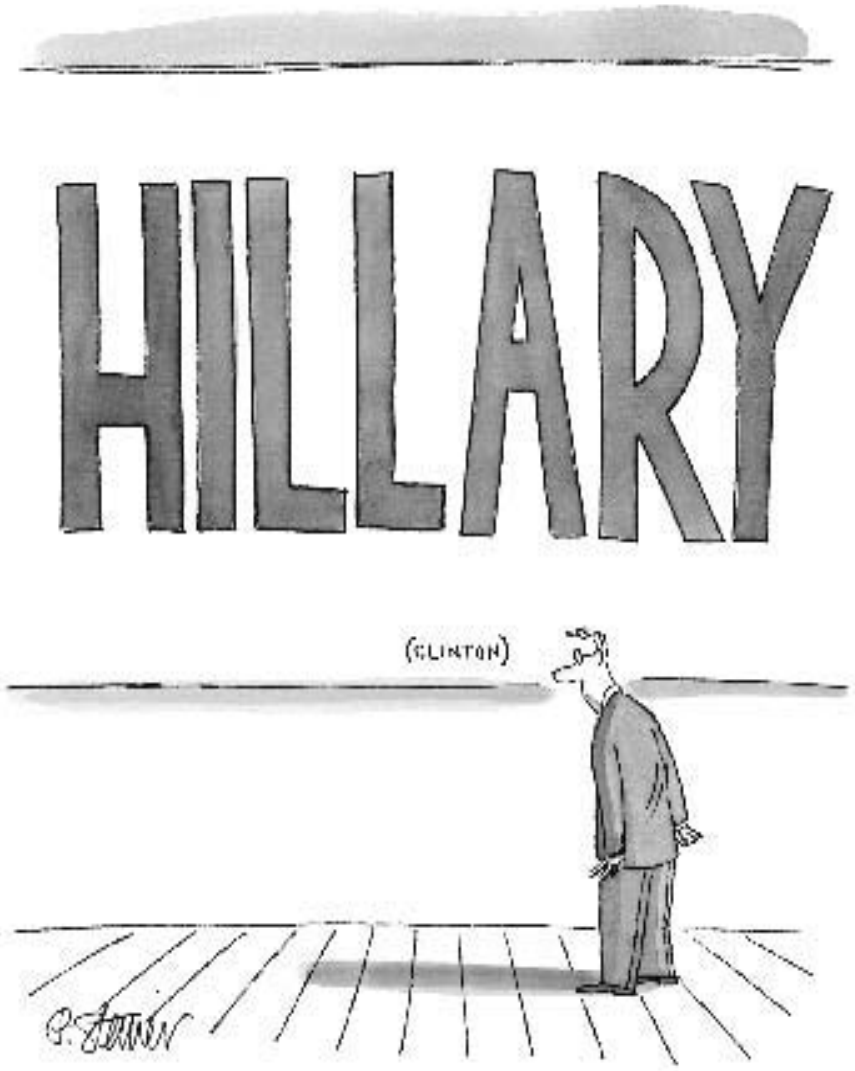
As Barbara J. Saffir reported in the *Washington Times*, "the locals have been talking about little else since Tuesday, when [Hillary] stopped for breakfast after making a speech about how New York's farmers 'are really hurting these days.'" The stiffed waitress "makes less than the minimum wage and pays for her own health insurance," Saffir noted.

Restaurant owner Alex Mitrousis said it was "an honor" to host the first lady. "She had two servings of eggs," Mitrousis recalled. After an order of oatmeal, scrambled eggs, home fries and rye toast, Hillary ordered an additional "two scrambled eggs with cheese," he said. "We're going to call it the first lady's special." ♦

From Holocaust to Blacklist

The politicization of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum proceeds apace. Two years ago, the Clinton administration roiled the administrative ranks of the museum by enlisting it for use as a prop for Middle East diplomacy, specifically for a photo-op tour of the facility by PLO leader Yasser Arafat. In the aftermath of that controversy, Walter Reich, the director who courageously opposed the Arafat visit, was ousted.

The overseers of the museum seem to have extracted from this whole experience the lesson that they can do whatever pleases them. Thus it probably should not have been surprising last week to see an advertisement in the *Washington Post* for a lefty documentary,



Scandalize My Name: Stories from the Blacklist, now showing at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Here's the summary from the ad: "Many American lives were damaged during the notorious McCarthy Era following World War II, with individuals' reputations and careers often attacked and shredded. Among those discredited by the House Un-American Activities Committee and ultimately blacklisted—prevented from fully participating in postwar American life—were many African Americans, including Harry Belafonte, Paul Robeson, Canada Lee, and Jackie Robinson."

Without unpacking the deep layers of mendacity here, it's fair to ask: And this has what exactly to do with the Holocaust? Once an institution starts lending its reputation to extraneous political agendas, it apparently finds it hard to stop. ♦

Forbes for Senate?

This turned out not to be Steve Forbes's election cycle. The indefatigable campaigner for flat taxes, medical savings accounts, and many other sensible conservative reforms pulled out of the race for the Republican nomination last week. Maybe, if he's not too sick of the grind, he will now consider the suggestion of many well-wishers that he turn his sights to his home state of New Jersey, which still lacks a serious Republican candidate for the Senate seat being vacated by Democrat Frank Lautenberg.

As David Frum argued in these pages last September, "Since World War II, there have been only four national conservative leaders: Taft, Goldwater, Reagan, and Gingrich. All four were practicing politicians and owed their leadership in some significant part to their political success. . . .

"There's no disgrace in testing the water and drawing back if it's too cold. Reagan weighed and rejected a presidential run in 1968, and it didn't seem to do his career any harm. On the contrary, it's an unwillingness to run for anything other than the big prize that kills a would-be president's prospects." ♦

Hollywood Hits Haider

When it comes to showing Austria that its right-wing coalition government will not be tolerated, the European Union doesn't hold a candle to Hollywood. "Austrians in Hollywood," a dinner to be held this month by Austrian consul general Werner Brandstetter and his wife, is facing a few no-shows. Army Archerd of *Daily Variety* reports that Wolfgang Puck, Theo Bikel, Billy Wilder, and Arnold Schwarzenegger—all of whom qualify as "Austrians in Hollywood"—have, for one reason or another, chosen not to attend. Even more devastating, some members of the Foreign Language Committee for the Academy Awards boycotted last week's screening of Austria's lone entry, *Northern Skirts*. The problem is, though the purpose of the boycott was to express outrage over Haider and his Freedom party, the movie revolves around a young group of friends of various ethnicities, living in Vienna, trying to make it big. Not exactly *Triumph of the Will*. ♦

Casual

The Quitter

By the time this appears in print I will be—my fingers freeze at the thought of typing the word—a non-smoker. Someone who doesn't smoke. A smoke-free person. The guy who used to chain at his desk all day but doesn't anymore.

I'm quitting for two reasons. First, I woke up the other day and realized that I've been smoking, heavily, for 17 years. I've had a wonderful time doing it, but it's getting easier to visualize what happens at the end. Second, and more pressing, I can't take the carping anymore.

Last week, at a single political event in New Hampshire, two different people I'd never seen came up to me, pointed at my cigarette, and said, "Don't you know that's bad for you?" After 17 years, of course, I've got a stock response ("You've got to be kidding!" in deadpan mock horror) but I'm sick of using it. Just as I'm sick of being unable to eat in certain restaurants, of being accosted by security guards for lighting up at the baggage claim, of being thrown out of bars in California for violating the state's lunatic anti-smoking laws (only one bar, actually, but it was unpleasant). I no longer have the will to fight the battle. The dark forces of Health have won.

It used to be that anti-substance abuse propaganda only steeled my resolve to pollute myself. When I was in high school there was a much-aired public service ad that opened with two kids sitting on a playground. The older one produces a joint, lights it, and tries to pass it to the younger boy. "Come on, Bobby," he coos in the most sinister possible way, "take a hit." No, says Bobby resolutely, putting up his hand. "Only dopes do dope." The older kid looks disgusted. "I thought you were *cool*," he snorts.

The moral, I guess, was supposed to be that Bobby did the right thing in the face of peer pressure. The moral I took away from it was: Bobby is a dork.

The last time I quit smoking cigarettes, I did my best to empathize with Bobby. There's nothing cool about hurting your body, I told myself. About two months later, I had to face the horrible truth: The anti-tobacco people are lying. Smoking really is cool. And I'm less cool for not doing it. I might as well mount the StairMaster, start yapping about my tech stocks and cholesterol level, and otherwise join the Yuppie horde. Without Camels, there's not a lot separating me from your average commercial real estate guy with a BMW and a health club membership.

Darren Gygi

So I started again. Which was probably inevitable. The main problem with quitting is not the physical withdrawal. Even the most addicted smoker stops berating his loved ones after half a year or so. The problem is that unlike, say, a sex-change operation, becoming a non-smoker is reversible. You're always a convenience store away from relapse.

This time around I know I need moral support, someone to face the agony of dorkiness with me. I've turned to my brother, the one who used to do PR for Philip Morris. We're quitting together. My brother may be the only person I know who smokes more than I do. He chains through who-knows-how-many packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day, and he does it with the gusto of a starving man trying to suck a milkshake through a straw. He *loves* cigarettes.

And he has an elaborate plan to stop smoking them. Like the New Yorker who goes camping and brings his portable generator, VCR, and pasta maker, my brother doesn't plan to rough it. He's already lined up an entire pharmacy's worth of chemical aids: nicogum, the patch, the nicotine inhaler, and some sort of pill—"It's *not* an anti-depressant," he keeps telling me—that is supposed to make you want cigarettes less. I'm just going with the gum, but I think we have a good shot at succeeding. With two of us quitting, we can keep each other honest.

On the other hand, it occurred to me recently, what if we don't? What if we collude and decide to jump off the wagon together? (We are brothers, after all.) I need something stronger to keep me from smoking, something to blackmail myself into abstinence. What I need, I've decided, is a slightly self-righteous public statement that my children could wave in my face if I ever started again. I'm counting on this to do the trick. My wife is posting it on the refrigerator.

Tucker Carlson

Feminist Follies

I guess I have both a higher and a lower opinion of modern women's attempts to look good than David Brooks expresses in "Our Bodies, Our Surgeons" (Feb. 7).

On the one hand, I think that it's healthy to want to look good to the opposite sex, and I also have selfish reasons for hoping that women do so. For both sexes the secret to looking good is also the secret to good health: Eat sensibly, drink water, and exercise regularly.

On the other hand, I don't think that women these days work harder to look good out of a sense of feminist "empowerment," but out of a sense of abandonment. Women these days don't know if their husbands will dump them or not (even conservative stalwarts like Bob Dole traded up), and so have to work harder to keep them (assuming they have a husband).

Don Schenk
Allentown, PA

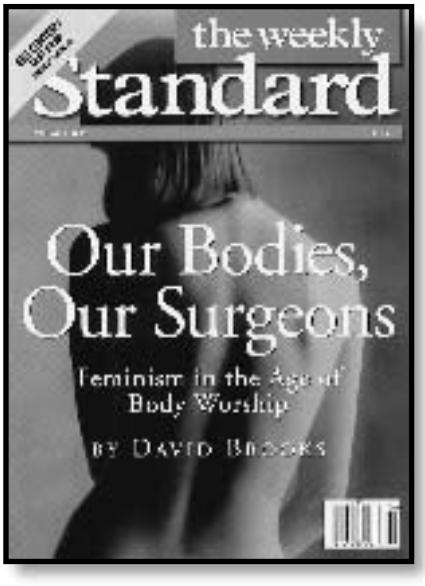
We subscribed to The Weekly Standard because of its perceptive and insightful articles. We trusted that the photographs would be of equal caliber. We were extremely disappointed to see the cover of your Feb. 7 magazine, which we thought was in poor taste and highly unnecessary. The cover story was equally inappropriate, however much David Brooks disliked the performance he attended. Why let something so disgusting take up valuable space in your magazine? Please be more sensitive to the multitude of conservative readers like us who expect a higher standard of decency from you. Thank you.

Chris and Lori Hooke
Ventura, CA

The Real Asimov

In an otherwise fine Casual column, John Podhoretz writes that "Isaac Asimov supposedly wrote 500 novels before his death . . ." ("On the McBain Beat," Jan. 31). Isaac Asimov certainly had over 500 books published before his death; however, not all of them were novels. Some were science fiction novels, some were anthologies of science fiction short stories (I cannot remember if the number includes only those works composed exclusively of his own work or if there are anthologies of which he was "only" the editor), some were collections of essays on diverse subjects (Asimov was an autodidact polymath), and some were the famous *Asimov's Guides* (long before we had elevated ignorance to a cult with *The Complete Idiot's Guides* and so forth, Asimov wrote several witty popularizations, including *Asimov's Guide to the Bible* and *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*).

Podhoretz goes on to characterize Dr. Asimov's subject matter as "surreal," which I beg to dispute. Given that the cover article for the issue in which this column appears is entitled "On To Mars," an issue on which Asimov was writing when the editorial staff of The Weekly Standard was still in diapers, I cannot help but sense a certain irony of which you seem unaware.



David G.D. Hecht
Alexandria, VA

Good News on Crime

The recent article by Andrew Peyton Thomas is a superb analysis of the criminal justice problem in America ("Completing the War on Crime," Jan. 24). But Thomas's case is even stronger than he thinks.

In referring to the prison we run in Houston, the first Christian-run facility in America, Thomas notes that out of the first 100 graduates, only 16 have reoffended. That would be an impressive statistic, but the actual figures are far more impressive. While many inmates have been released early (and thus do not count in the recidivism statistics), only 31 inmates have completed the entire 18-month course and thus have graduated. All are now being mentored in their community; none has returned to prison.

Thomas's conclusion is right: Other states and the federal government should be picking up on this faith-based approach to solving the crime problem. Spiritual transformation does make the difference and is the answer to the crime problem.

Charles W. Colson
Prison Fellowship Ministries
Washington, DC

To Mars and Beyond

I would like to commend The Weekly Standard and Charles Krauthammer for his article "On To Mars" in your Jan. 31 issue.

My father's job as an engineer on the Saturn V moon rocket brought our family to Titusville, Florida, in 1965. Our high school, located on the Indian River and U.S. 1, let us out for every Apollo-Saturn launch. It was truly an exciting time to grow up. The passé attitude that has enveloped the entire space program, at least on the part of the politicians and the general population, reflects the short-sighted, "gimme-a-quick-thrill" attitude that has permeated our society.

My father, who worked for a time on the space shuttle boosters when the Apollo program ended, quit in frustration, unwilling to work on a project that had no vision beyond going around in circles rather than building a permanent base on the moon.

Yes, we have quit looking at the stars and dreaming, and have instead retired to our 15-inch monitors to surf the Web and chase dancing icons. It is indeed sad to know that my own children will

never know the excitement those of us growing up on the Space Coast in the 1960s knew.

RICK JANKA
Longwood, FL

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER'S ARTICLE "On To Mars" was, in general, an accurate assessment of our national failure of will when it comes to funding "big science." Another prime example of this type of shortsightedness was the decision to mothball the superconducting super collider.

Pure scientific research is not engineering. No one is attempting to solve a specific problem but, rather, one is engaged in exploration for exploration's sake. The consequences often are of enormous benefit. Can anyone dispute that today's advances in aerospace and electronics were the direct result of our efforts to land a man on the moon in the '60s and '70s?

My one dispute with Krauthammer's analysis lies in his sequencing of events. While he acknowledges colonization of the moon as an important goal, I believe he fails to recognize this step as the sine qua non to planetary exploration. Our experiences and lessons learned from that effort, on a body some 238,000 miles from home, rather than millions, are the requisite "baby steps" before mankind strides to the planets.

A bold leader for the 21st century, recognizing that the battle against social ills and the quest for knowledge should not be viewed as an "either/or" proposition but should be seen as "both/and," would do well to marshal this country's will, both scientific and economic, toward the goal of establishing a permanent colony on the moon within the next decade.

A final point: Of what use was calculus in the 17th century when invented by Newton and Leibniz? At that time, practically none. But, of course, that purely mathematical endeavor led to deeper understanding of physics and chemistry, which then led to the invention of all manner of aerospace, chemical, and electronic devices which we now take for granted.

WESLEY PARDUE
Tampa, FL

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the weekly Standard

The New Democrats' Wretched Trifles

There are times when things are good and "societies rest and the human race seems to take breath," Tocqueville wrote. In such times, as in the American 1830s he was describing, a nation's civic affairs appear "firmly settled on certain fundamentals" and its people lose interest in the risk or possibility of any different future. "Great men seem to disappear suddenly, and minds withdraw into themselves." And "great political parties"—those "more attached to principles than to consequences" and "to ideas rather than to personalities"—are nowhere to be seen.

What pass for issues in such a satisfied era are mostly "wretched trifles" tossed back and forth in the course of "incomprehensible or puerile" factional quarreling. But the lust for public office remains permanently intense, Tocqueville noted. And because "it is difficult to turn the man in power out simply for the reason that one would like to take his place," politicians are eager to insist that they are about something nobler. That is to say, they are always "concerned to discover whether by chance there may not be somewhere in the world a doctrine or a principle that could conveniently be placed at the head" of their platform of trifles. Then they might pretend to represent more than just their own ambitions. Then they might claim to embody an actual Philosophy.

Alexis de Tocqueville would instantly recognize our "New Democrats" for what they are. It isn't much.

Were he alive today, amidst the generalized contentment that is contemporary America, Alexis de Tocqueville would instantly recognize our "New Democrats" for what they are. It isn't much.

Two weeks ago in Washington, Democratic Leadership Council president Al From held a press conference to report, as he is periodically wont to do, that President Clinton, the New Democrats' man among men, has been the dominant personality in American politics in the 1990s. Which is undoubtedly true. From went on to say that national discourse now revolves around a "vital center" of public opinion—which has almost never *not* been true—and that "a majority of Americans and the vast majority of independents and swing voters now embrace" this vital center. Which is true, if tautological. Then From issued what Tocqueville would think a bit of inevitable grandiosity. The New Democratic vital center, From proclaimed, "is not merely a halfway point between the old left and the old right." It is "a new center, a progressive center" grounded in "an increasingly coherent set of core principles and beliefs."

Which plainly isn't true. And never has been true in any serious respect, as is unintentionally made clear by Kenneth S. Baer's just-published *Reinventing Democrats*, a highly sympathetic history of the DLC and its allegedly distinct "public philosophy." Al From and his allies are intelligent and honorable men who became convinced in the early 1980s that the Democratic party's "liberal fundamentalism"—its libertarian morality, Washington-centered economics, and timidity about foreign affairs—was outmoded and wrong. But as Baer tells the story, the question how (or even whether) liberalism might have gone wrong as a political *idea* seems not to have concerned the new DLC. The organization was intent simply on persuading its fellow Democrats that the party's left-leaning orthodoxies, clearly expressed, were a losing political *strategy*. Winning, From & Co. argued, would depend on the ability of "New Democrats" to occupy the same mainstream territory lately so successfully colonized by Republicans.

It was the DLC's genuine insight that this project might be carried off purely at the level of headquarters rhetoric. The group did no grass-roots organizing or advocacy. It did no legislative lobbying in Congress. It was, Kenneth S. Baer explains, exclusively "an organization of political elites" designed to help other political elites appeal to already existing, half-articulated popular impulses. And after 1988, Baer reveals, it was also an organization almost entirely mortgaged to the career of its deliber-

ately chosen, perfect salesman. DLC chairman Bill Clinton, wheedler *par excellence*, would promise to "mend it, not end it." Clinton would propose that abortion be "safe, legal, and rare." Clinton would begin his 1992 presidential campaign by declaring—in a line lifted verbatim from a DLC pamphlet—that being a New Democrat "isn't liberal or conservative; it's both and different."

The essential emptiness of this "philosophy" is suggested by the ease with which it has since been adopted by the very same *old* Democrats who once reviled it as apostasy. In the formative late 1980s, liberal stalwarts like Ann Lewis, Ron Brown, Harold Ickes, and Sidney Blumenthal all derided the DLC as an appeaser of conservatism. All later went directly and happily to work for the appeaser-in-chief's administration—either because they decided Clinton didn't really mean it, or because they convinced themselves that keeping Republicans out of the White House was the most important principle of all. Even Jesse Jackson, who once called the New Democratic party an attempt to be "all things to all people . . . kind of like warm spit," has made himself the president's best friend. They are all New Democrats now.

Hillary Clinton, Senate candidate, says "I'm a New Democrat." She says government is not the solution to our problems. She proposes a million different ways government *can* be a solution to our problems, of course: *more micro-credit vouchers for Mom and Pop start-ups*! But those are just policy details. She, too, is New. The mood's the thing, and the slogan alone is sufficient to establish the mood.

Al Gore, presidential candidate, wins the endorsement of liberal fundamentalism's high church, the AFL-CIO. The very next day, he gives a DLC convention audience a screeching, old-religion sermon about how Republicans are having "private meetings" with "the right-wing extreme groups" and plan to turn the next three Supreme Court appointments over to "Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson." The DLC applauds. Then Gore spends the next few months slaughtering Bill Bradley for betraying the entitlement-program treasures of the New Deal and Great Society. The DLC applauds again. Al is their boy, as New as they come.

What can all this possibly mean?

It means nothing. We have had a "third way" presidency for seven years now. It has produced just a single large-scale, ideologically significant reform of law and social practice, and that only reluctantly: the repeal of cradle-to-grave welfare dependency. New Democratic politics has otherwise produced nothing but the cross-tabulated results of an endless stream of focus groups and telephone surveys: a 24/7 effort to figure out what voters want before they even know they want it—and then give it to them, so long as it's really small. Better nutrition labels on supermarket juice cans? The president is prepared to address the nation on the subject.

Apologies to Al From, but warm spit does not make for a "coherent set of principles and beliefs."

In the rich and happy and peaceful present, warm spit does make for popularity and success at the polls, to be sure. That is to be expected, as Tocqueville advised. And it might even be okay—for a while. The country is entitled to an occasional breather from the unsettling demands of genuine political thought and argument, after all. The vacation will cost us little. Until, that is, today becomes tomorrow. And tomorrow brings some renewed or novel difficulty. And we are once again obliged to figure out our collective troubles and argue among ourselves about the solutions and somehow make them work.

The New Democrats, having spent their Clintonian regency shining the public's shoes and fleeing controversy, will be useless when this happens; they have forgotten how to guide national debate—on purpose. Republicans, by contrast, have remained at least partly alive to the messy play of big ideas these past few years. Will they be willing to run that risk again? Or will they, too, succumb to the blandishment of third-way brainlessness? That, it seems to us, will be the key question in American politics for the rest of 2000. George W. Bush and John McCain—and soon enough, just one of them—will have to answer it. We hope they answer wisely. It would be nice to have at least one political party that isn't stupid by design.

—David Tell, for the Editors

The Anti-Boomer Candidate

We've had our first baby boomer president. McCain wants to save us from another. **BY DAVID BROOKS**

Spartanburg, South Carolina

JOHN MCCAIN was in a foul mood Thursday morning. His campaign bus, which usually rings with the sound of McCain cracking jokes and reporters singing the "Hallelujah" Chorus, was subdued. McCain snapped at one reporter, and the rest of his conversation was clipped. The problem was obvious. Despite huge, boisterous crowds, there was a sense that out in medialand the campaign was being buried under a barrage of TV and radio attack ads. The reporters' questions turned to the negative Bush ads, the negative McCain ads, Bush's money, the money McCain was about to raise from Washington lobbyists. McCain wasn't having fun, and there wasn't much straight talk. He complained sourly about the "push polls" the Bush campaign was using. "It's something I never thought their campaign would stoop to. It's real bottom-feeding." Campaigns use push polls to spread negative information about their opponents to voters under the guise of taking telephone surveys.

The first event was a town meeting in Spartanburg, where McCain was supposed to deliver a major education reform address. He has a tendency to drone through prepared texts, but he was animated and effective this time.

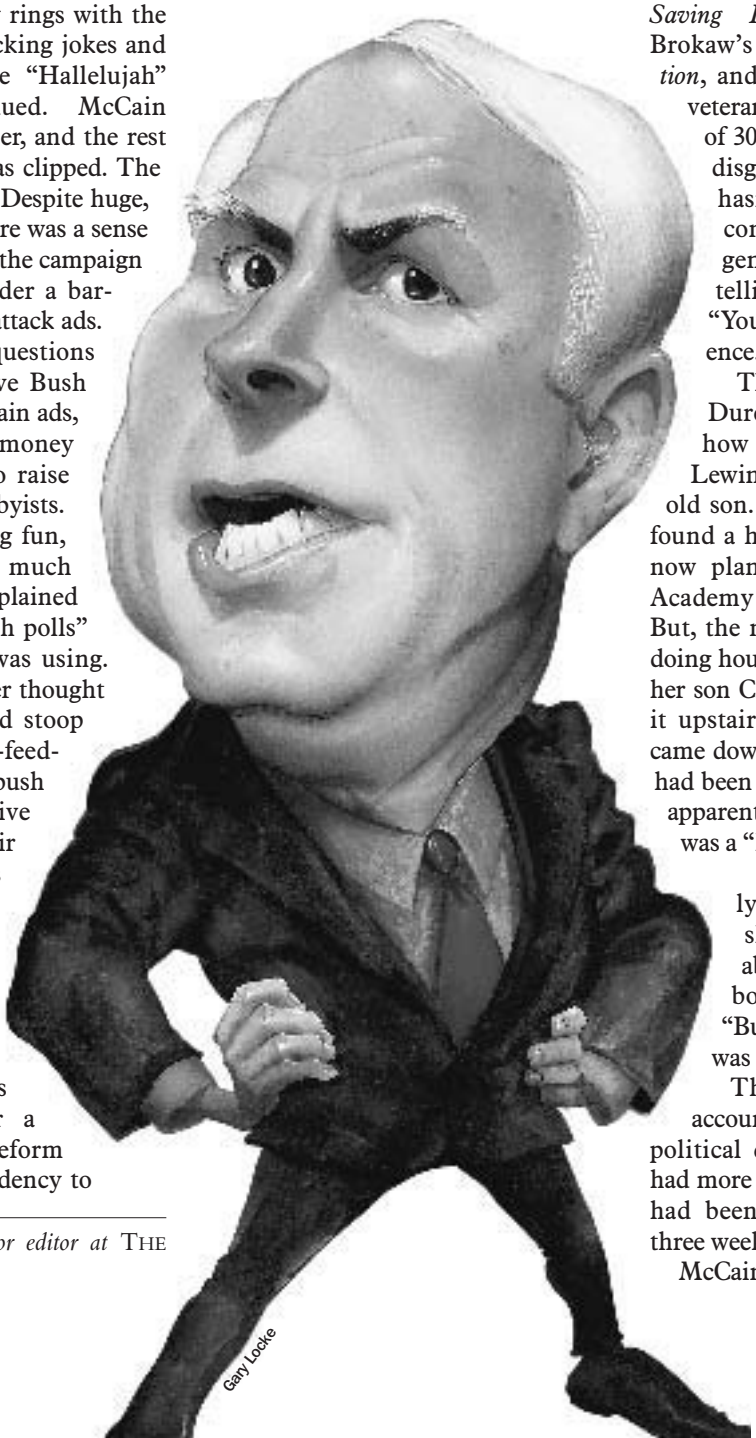
The question and answer period was typical of a McCain event. A teacher and Common Cause activist named Nancy Snow stood up and said she'd driven all night from New Hampshire to come and say how much she admired him. Another woman cited his war record and asked, "What made you love your country so much?" A former Forbes supporter got up and ripped the IRS. A Guadalcanal veteran lambasted Clinton-Gore ethics. McCain answered with a riff he normally uses to start his events, paying homage to the World War II generation. He cited *Saving Private Ryan* and Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation*, and then lamented that these veterans are "leaving us" at a rate of 30,000 a month. He said it's a disgrace that the United States hasn't kept the health-care commitments it made to this generation, and concluded by telling the Guadalcanal vet, "You honor us with your presence."

Then a woman named Donna Duren stood up. She described how hard it was to explain the Lewinsky scandal to her 13-year-old son. But, she said, her son had found a hero, McCain. The boy was now planning to go to the Naval Academy and become an engineer. But, the night before, while she was doing housework, the phone rang and her son Chris, a Boy Scout, answered it upstairs. A few minutes later he came down to her in tears. The caller had been a Bush push poller and had apparently told the boy that McCain was a "liar and a fraud."

"I was so livid I could barely speak," Duren said. But she explained to her son about push polling. And the boy apparently responded, "But I thought Governor Bush was a Christian?"

The woman finished her account and there was silence. As political drama, it could only have had more emotional impact if the boy had been a leukemia patient with three weeks to live.

McCain was taken aback. His sense



David Brooks is a senior editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

of honor, which is his greatest virtue and his greatest source of political capital, had been affronted. "What you have just told me will have a profound influence on me. The disillusionment of a young boy is something I don't take lightly." He stumbled through the rest of the meeting and then gathered all the reporters for a scrum on the lawn outside.

"I can't believe that someone from a good family such as George Bush wouldn't stop this," McCain said, calling for a moratorium on negative campaigning. Then there was a question about the education reform plan he had just offered. McCain tried haltingly to answer before breaking off, "I'm a little rattled, frankly, by what happened to that young boy." It was one of those moments when the candidate's sincere emotional response perfectly coincides with his political self-interest. He was playing it big.

Then we piled into the bus. McCain went elsewhere, and we reporters headed off across the state. A few hours later, as we were getting our first word of Bush's reaction to the episode—"If I found out it was somebody in my camp, they aren't going to be in my camp anymore. . . . Sounds like [McCain] spends a lot of time thinking out loud about my campaign"—a state trooper drove up behind the bus and pulled us over.

We hadn't been speeding. The state trooper was a former Marine who had idolized McCain since high school. He saw the signs on the bus and pulled it over so he could meet the senator. But McCain wasn't on the bus, and the trooper suddenly found himself on the side of the highway surrounded by cameramen, sound booms, and reporters. He begged us not to take his picture, but no luck. The next day his story was on the front page of the statewide paper, his conduct referred to the office of internal affairs.

The state trooper story ended up overshadowing the push poll boy in the in-state news coverage. But McCain's reaction to the boy is the more revealing about his campaign. When you are following the campaign, you get the sensation that there is something odd about it you can't quite put your finger on. But at an event like the town meeting in Spartanburg, the oddness finally comes clear.

American culture is usually refracted through the prism of the baby boomers. It is their experiences, traumas, and quests for fulfillment that take center stage. We're all so used to boomer narcissism, we no longer even notice how many of our movies, television programs, and political campaigns are geared toward this group. But the McCain campaign almost never talks about the baby boomers.

The McCain campaign talks about the World War II generation, and it talks about the current generation of students. In meeting after meeting, McCain talks about inspiring the young and honoring the old. Aside from his homage to the Greatest Generation, the one riff he highlights at every single event is the one about getting young people involved as active citizens. "The number one mission of the president of the United States is to inspire a new generation of young Americans to serve a cause greater than their self-interest," he declares again and again.

We've just had our first baby boomer administration. And, to put it mildly, the behavior of the Clinton-Gore administration indicts the boomers. The Clintonites displayed the flaws that have long been associated with this group: self-absorption, selfishness, a taste for immediate gratification, a tendency to be too easy on oneself. We've just had a decade of Newt Gingrich, too, with the same qualities. And we've had a decade of Hillary Clinton trying to create a politics of meaning for her boomer cohort. John McCain's manner and rhetoric are in stark contrast to all that.

John McCain is running as an anti-boomer. Though he is only a decade or so older than the top edge of that generation, his term as a POW marks him as someone whose life experience has been dramatically different from that of the average boomer. In fact, when you hear people talk about McCain's war record, they talk about him as if he were a World War II vet who just happened to serve in the Vietnam theater. He fits none of the stereotypes of the Vietnam soldiers laid down by *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon* or *The Deer Hunter*. He fits the pattern of the World War II generation. And on the stump he is much more comfortable with the young and the old than he is with those in the middle. He can tell geezer jokes with the oldsters, and he can go to MTV events and be cool with the kids. But he is less ebullient with those in between.

The McCain campaign isn't about self-expression or self-discovery. The candidate doesn't need to make up heroic rites of passage about the day he headed off to school. Instead, he describes almost every issue as a conflict between sacrifice, which is what the World War II experience now symbolizes, and immediate gratification, which is what Woodstock and yuppiedom symbolize.

McCain is explicit about this when talking about his tax plan. The Bush campaign gives you a big tax cut. That's immediate gratification, McCain says. But, he continues, America should use the money instead to secure Social Security for the younger generation and to pay down the debt so they won't be left with our debt costs. "You might think people would say about the surplus, 'Give me my money back,'" McCain tells his crowds, "but people like you say we have an obligation to the next generation of Americans. Let's pay down the debt. . . . It's a sense of unselfishness. It's a sign of the greatness of America."

On issue after issue, McCain cru-

sades against immediate gratification: against pork-barrel spending, against Internet porn, against the Clinton scandals, against big business lobbying. "When you serve a cause greater than your self-interest there is great redemption associated with that," he told students at Clemson. "America is the noblest country in history, and the greatest privilege we can have is to serve it."

As usual, John McCain is everything and its opposite. He is a Senate insider and also a reforming outsider, a policy maverick and also a man with many conventional Republican views, a crusader for sacrifice, but also a politician who can pander to pleas for increased benefits and a lower retirement age.

But this anti-boomer message is real. It plays with the old, and it obviously plays with the young. McCain's college crowds are enormous and devoted. This is a style of youthful political idealism that one usually sees only in the Democratic party, but McCain's kids are enthusiastic and they are conservative. The Clemson audience cheered his pro-life riff. They cheered when he condemned the gay lifestyle.

And one suspects the anti-boomer style may even play with the boomers. This is a cohort that is now approaching 50. They are thinking a lot about their parents, who are dying off. They are seeing their kids enter college. They are getting to an age where the language of self-expression and perpetual self-discovery gets a little tiresome. John McCain's hard experiences stand in contrast to their own good fortune.

After a prolonged period of affluence, maybe the electorate is drawn to JFK-style calls for sacrifice. On the ground here in South Carolina, the race feels extraordinarily close, with a strange disconnect between all the negative media warfare and the lofty face-to-face campaigning. And on a broader level, maybe the national obsession with the lives and obsessions of the baby boomers is finally ending. Maybe our long national nightmare is over. ♦

George W. Bush, Reformer?

After New Hampshire, W. decides imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. **BY ANDREW FERGUSON**

Greenville, South Carolina

IN THE BEGINNING was Compassionate Conservatism. That was last spring. Then there was Prosperity with a Purpose. And now, carrying his campaign's passion for alliteration deep into the piney woods of South Carolina, there is a Reformer with Results. Or, more accurately, there is a conservative reformer who achieves compassionate results by injecting a purpose into prosperity. It sounds more complicated than it is.

But this is what happens when you blindside a Bush—you get a cornucopia of complication, a muddle of messages. (The alliteration is catching.) Earlier this month, George W. Bush was blindsided in New Hampshire by the self-described "reformer" John McCain. In 1992, students of American politics will recall, President Bush was likewise blindsided by self-described reformers, first Pat Buchanan and then Ross Perot. The elder Bush's advisers responded in ways that will seem eerily familiar to the voters of South Carolina. The advisers back in 1992 decided that President Bush was a reformer too. They trolled the silty depths of the executive branch, dredged up a handful of policies that had languished there, and in a series of presidential speeches repackaged them as "President Bush's Four Pillars of Reform." For several weeks the president preached reform, incarnated reform, traveled the country to press his message of reform—PAC reform, education reform, health care reform, welfare reform. This election, the president said, was about reform, reform, reform. And then, just as quickly as they had appeared, the Four Pillars went *poof!* This election, the president said, was about trust.

Father and son have much in common. One difference between them is that the son can plausibly lay claim to having helped to reform segments of his state's social and political life. "In New Hampshire," the governor said, "I let others define me. That's not going to happen again." And so on the weekend following the New Hampshire debacle, Governor Bush huddled in Austin with his advisers and then emerged last week with a "retooled" campaign.

So here he is outside Greenville, in the common room at North Greenville College, surrounded by eager and enthusiastic and extremely Caucasian students. The format of this event has been dubbed "One on One with Governor Bush." It is the same format as the town hall meetings John McCain used to such seductive effect in New Hampshire—where Bush, by contrast, mostly gave speeches, followed occasionally by a question or two from the audience. In New Hampshire John McCain didn't use a podium. In South Carolina George Bush no longer uses a podium. McCain used a handheld mike and roamed a low-slung stage. Bush now uses a handheld mike and roams a low-slung stage. McCain gave brief introductory remarks, then took questions for an hour or more. Bush now gives brief introductory remarks, then takes questions for an hour or more. McCain always managed to work in a reference to Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation*, and express shock that "12,000 brave men and women in uniform are on food stamps." Bush

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too now recalls Brokaw's book, and declares that when he gets "to Washington, you won't have men and women in uniform getting food stamps."

Most important, McCain used his time trying to convince his audiences that he was a Washington outsider, a genuine reformer. Bush stands before a large banner—"A Reformer with Results"—and tells his audiences that he is the genuine Washington outsider.

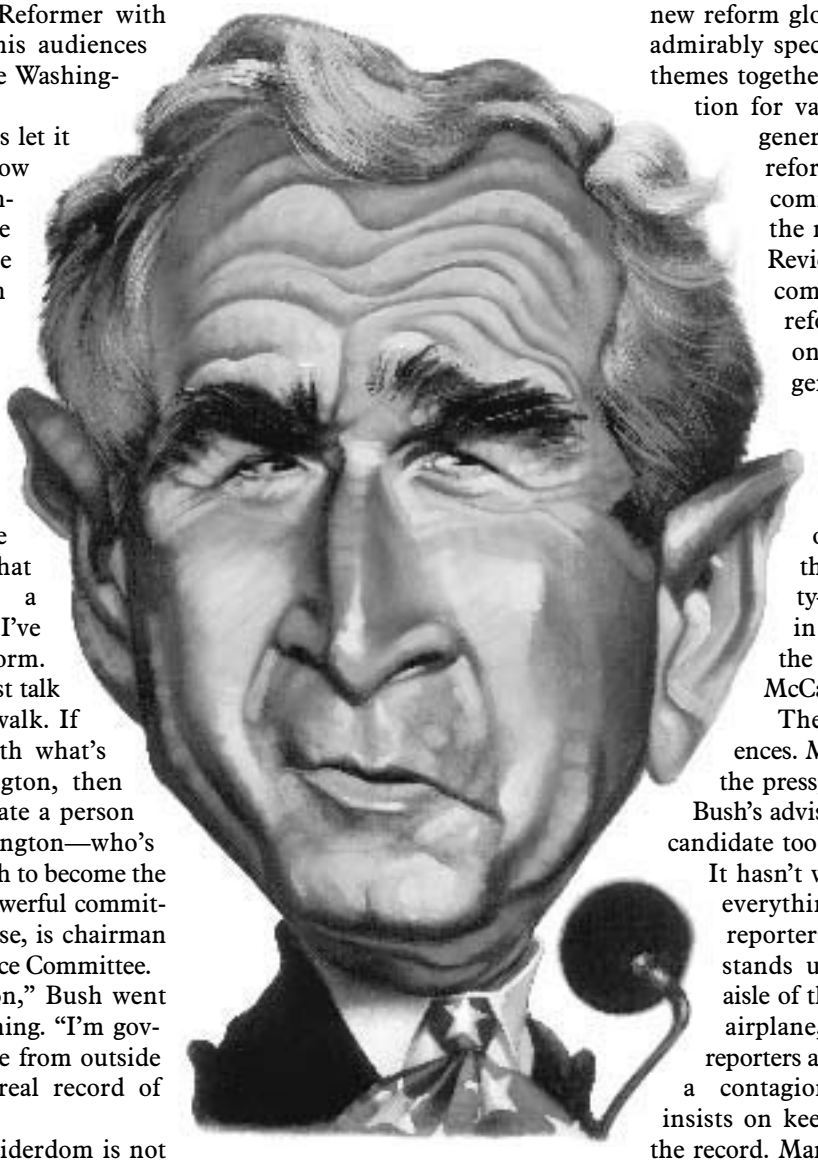
George W. Bush has let it be known: From now on, he will define himself. And apparently he has chosen to define himself as . . . John McCain.

But an even better John McCain—he's the John McCain that John McCain claims to be. With the banner as backdrop, Bush told the students, somewhat redundantly: "I'm a reformer with results. I've got a record of reform. That means I don't just talk the talk, I walk the walk. If people are happy with what's going on in Washington, then they ought to nominate a person who's from Washington—who's been there long enough to become the chairman of a very powerful committee." McCain, of course, is chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee.

"That's Washington," Bush went on, his accent thickening. "I'm governor of Texas. I come from outside Washington with a real record of reform."

The appeal to outsiderdom is not merely literal. Bush understands that "outsider" is a spiritual designation, one for which McCain does not qualify. "There's an old Washington habit of saying one thing and doing another. On the one hand, Chairman McCain"—it is always "Chairman McCain" now, never "Senator"—"he's saying he's going to reform the campaign finance and the special interests, and on the other hand he's saying to the special interests, 'Pass the plate.'"

The characterization of McCain as a double-talking insider is the crux of Bush's television and radio advertising in South Carolina, and McCain has taken the same tack against Bush. Both of them, of course, are absolutely correct. Even so, the "negative campaigning" has appalled the forces of righteousness and good government, who fail to notice that from stop to stop and speech to speech, Bush's message is almost thoroughly "positive," as the goo-goos define the term.



Thomas Fluharty

"I'm going to Washington with a reform agenda," Bush told the Greenville students, "and it says to the establishment we're not only going to reform welfare, we're not only going to reform education, we're going to rally the armies of compassion and people of faith all across America to perform their commonplace miracles of renewal." This is compassionate conservatism with a new reform gloss, and Bush can get admirably specific in tying the two themes together. Despite his reputation for vagueness and gaseous generalization, Bush the reformer speaks with a commanding fluency on the need for Independent Review Organizations as a component of HMO reform, for example, or on the long-term dangers of commingling income-tax revenue with the Social Security surplus, or on the proper dispersal of Title I funding to the states. The specificity—and the fluency—is in marked contrast to the charmingly untutored McCain.

There are other differences. McCain is accessible to the press, so in their retooling Bush's advisers decided that their candidate too should be accessible. It hasn't worked. McCain does everything short of bounce reporters on his lap. Bush stands uncomfortably in the aisle of the press section of his airplane, gazing over the reporters as if they were carrying a contagion. Moreover, Bush insists on keeping his sessions off the record. Many politicians do this, of course, when they are about to let drop some interesting piece of information. Bush's off-the-record edict has an interesting twist: He doesn't say anything worth quoting.

In public, though, Bush is much more voluble than McCain. Speaking to voters, McCain keeps his answers brief—for a "spontaneous" candidate he seems remarkably comfortable

repeating one canned response after another. Bush, on the other hand, has developed a bad case of logorrhea. During an event at an old folk's home last week he consumed an hour of Q&A time answering only four questions. One of those was about whether he thought the Yankees would "take it all" this season. He answered with eight minutes on defense policy. And he is not unwilling to contradict or challenge his audience. When one of the Greenville students asked him whether he was called by God to be president (Greenville is a Baptist college), Bush's response was not so much an answer as a reprimand. "I don't know what God's will is," he said. "And neither do you." He eloquently defended immigration against a pair of hostile questioners. But all his answers share a common trait: They are very long. "I'm sorry to be so long-winded," he often says. "But I get passionate talking about the things I believe in."

Long-windedness is only part of his problem. In redefining himself, Bush is trying to run an old-fashioned campaign. He presents proposals, cites specific issues, against an opponent for whom issues and proposals are an irrelevancy. McCain's allure is pre-rational; it is why he appeals to conservatives and moderates and liberals alike. McCain excites them with the hopped-up music of catchphrases —strings of words like "pork barrel" and "special interests" and "cleaning up government," formulations that could mean anything his listeners wish.

It is a strange campaign that casts George W. Bush as the intellectual. But there he was, as last week drew to a close, hosting a roundtable in the town of Newberry and presenting an elaborate scheme to reform the civil justice system. It included an ingenious proposal to extend the "excess benefit" provisions of the federal tax code to private lawyers who bring cases on behalf of state governments. This, of course, is talking the talk of the policy wonk. And in the spring of 2000, it may very well be the talk of a loser. ♦

Lobbyists for McCain

Denial and irony top the menu at McCain's D.C. fund-raising gala. **BY MATT LABASH**

Iron Triangle, D.C.

WHEN JOHN MCCAIN derides the "Iron Triangle" of "lobbyists, big money, and legislation," he makes it sound like a pedophile's convention in Waco in July: an uncomfortable place with nasty people where you wouldn't want to go. But it sure didn't feel that way at last Thursday night's Straight Talk reception—a $500-to-$1,000-a-head fund-raiser for the McCain campaign held at Washington's stately Willard Hotel.

A gaggle of camera crews awaited curbside, as if expecting starlets to emerge from their Oscar-night limos. "Who've you shot?" I ask one mustachioed cameraman. "A lady in a fur," he says, though he is clueless as to her identity. "Who are you trying to shoot?" I follow up. "Big-time lobbyists," he says intently. As no one is shouting out their names (quick!—there's Tom Korologos!), I ask the slightly peeved cameraman how he can tell who they are. He pauses, furrowing his brow as a few potential super-lobbyists slide by unphotographed: "They'll probably be wearing ties," he offers. "Or horns," says another crew member.

Such is the problem with lobbyists. They look human. They sound human. And yet, somehow, they're subhuman. Or so we're told with increasing frequency these days, as lobbyists, more even than the Religious Right or Reform party presidential candidates, have become the most ridiculed demographic in the 2000 campaign. And no one kicks their shins more often than McCain, which lends the proceedings at the Willard the sort of over-obvious irony political reporters deeply appreciate.

In fact, because of McCain's simultaneous campaign-finance jihad and coziness with lobbyists, he's drawn knocks from across the spectrum—from the *Wall Street Journal* to the Center for Public Integrity to, no surprise, George W. Bush. As the *New York Times* reported last week, 33 of the 46 members of McCain's "Victory Committee," who were sponsoring this $250,000 fund-raiser, are lobbyists. But while many question McCain's independence, it isn't clear who else, under such scrutiny, could pack a ballroom full of influence-peddlers, belittle them, then expect them to leave their money in the collection plate before returning to their snakepits.

Such contradictions are enough to set Bush supporters' teeth on edge. Alex Castellanos, who supervises ad buys for the Bush team, says, in what's meant as an insult, that McCain's recent surge has nothing to do with campaign finance reform, "it's about his character." (Only 9 percent of New Hampshire voters said campaign finance reform mattered to them.) "He's pulling the campaign finance reform wagon," explains Castellanos, "but if any other Republican tries to hook up to it, and they weren't in the Hanoi Hilton for six years, they'll find that wagon gets awfully heavy." As for McCain's tendency to use his own lapses to illustrate the need for reform ("It renews my vigor for campaign finance reform," he recently said after deflecting criticism for writing a letter to the

FCC on behalf of a supporter), Castellanos sees red: "That's like the criminal getting caught and saying we need tougher laws. It worked for Clinton, it's working for McCain: 'Stop me before I fly in the corporate jet again.'"

The Bush team can perhaps be forgiven a little self-pity, as it was only in June of last year that Bush rode triumphant into the Washington Hilton, plying a roomful of lobbyists with hot dogs and popcorn, and collecting $2 million as the heir apparent. "Young love is easy," says a wistful Castellanos, "marriage is hard."

Since then, two things have become clear: (1) McCain has a better caterer, serving sesame chicken, pasta primavera, and Gulf shrimp the size of a small child's head, and (2) Republican moneymen are now engaged in the time-honored practice horseplayers call "dutching": Pick more than one winner, get a smaller return, but make sure you finish in the money. One can see such jockeying taking place even among McCain's closest supporters. Look carefully through the list of hosts of the Straight Talk reception and you will uncover the forked-tongued fickleness of election-year politics. One of McCain's national campaign co-chairs, two of his National Campaign Steering Committee co-chairs, and 11 of his 46 Victory Committee sponsors have also given money to other Republican contenders—primarily to Bush.

But what would one expect from lobbyists, right? In the frescoed, chandeliered ballroom of the Willard, they seem so intent on ingratiating themselves to McCain, they don't even care he's not here in person. Instead, the candidate has beamed in with spotty audio from Charleston, South Carolina, and promises his paying customers in Washington that he will break the Iron Triangle. The same Iron Triangle now devouring the bountiful cheese island in the middle of the ballroom floor, now sloshing it down with serial cocktails from one of McCain's four open bars, as emcee senator Chuck Hagel joshes, "Don't pick up any of the crystal."

Say this for the lobbyists, they're good sports. They don't poison former senator Warren Rudman's vegetable puff when he loudly suggests that McCain may "put them out of business." They tell dim-bulb George W. jokes. They wear "McCain Voted Against My Bill!" badges. They deny their own identities. Much as prostitutes call themselves "sex workers" and Mafiosi are "plumbing contractors," almost all the lobbyists I talk to, in a roomful of a couple hundred, decline to outright identify themselves as such. Instead, the room is crawling with "consultants" who "do some government-relations work."

One of the few brave souls who will use the L word is Richard Hirn, a Democrat and self-identified "lobbyist" for the National Weather Service Employees Organization. Like many here, he professes to be for campaign finance reform, albeit his own version of it: "We would love to not have to pay to get access!" But when asked if he's concerned about pulling for a candidate who espouses marginalizing his vocation, Hirn shakes his head, unconcerned, over a half-empty bourbon, saying, "Politicians have to talk to somebody down there, or it's going to get pretty lonely."

Much as prostitutes call themselves "sex workers," lobbyists identify themselves as "consultants" who "do government relations work."

As the event winds down, John McCain's younger brother Joe, a silver-haired Scotch-Irish gale of bluster and tears, is entertaining onlookers, alternately crying when relating his brother's Vietnam captivity and cursing his brother's copper POW bracelet, which is "turning my damn arm green when I Brasso it." Since Joe thinks, as many in the media do, that brother John is "one of the coolest guys in the world," he is particularly sensitive that anyone would charge his brother with hypocrisy for hosting such an event. "This man had a chance to get out of POW camp seven times; he stayed for five and a half years because it was his duty. The Vietnamese tried to break him with clubs, iron bars, torture, beating, isolation; they tried to break down his character, his integrity. If he can withstand that, is he gonna be tempted by some guy in a blue suit with a fat wallet?"

One wants to ask Joe if he's ever heard of the Keating Five, but as with his brother, it seems inappropriate to disrupt the momentum. "He's been tortured and beaten by the best!" Joe continues. "What—some guy's gonna hit him over the head with a salad bowl in a fancy restaurant?"

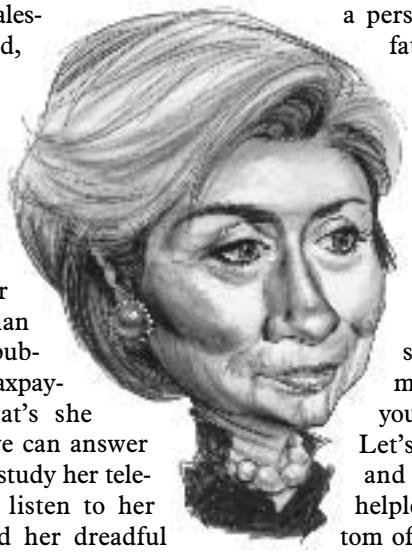
Joe finishes shoveling it thick when Carl Smith, a lobbyist with Higgins, McGovern & Smith who has known McCain since they flew together in the same fighter squadron, sidles up in full Straight Talk mode. With a warlike cackle, he kicks Joe hard in the foot. "You are a worthless scum-sucking pig," Smith bellows. Joe looks at him dismissively, saying to me, "He *is* the Iron Triangle." They exchange chummy ribaldries, but Smith quiets down soon, after putting former POW/Hanoi Hilton denizen Everett Alvarez in a headlock. "Hey Ev," Smith taunts, "Get a chiropractor for crying out loud; I'm tired of watching you limp."

Smith seems the ideal interview subject, bridging McCain's two worlds: the one in which his relationships were forged by duty, hardship, and service, and the one in which they are forged by open bars and $1,000 contributions. Smith remembers those worlds colliding, when he once lobbied his old military pal on a shipping matter. Suddenly, his cocksure smile is replaced with a puzzled grimace: "He handed me my ass." ♦

Hillary, You Can Run, But Please Don't Hide

Ah, so many reasons it would be good to have her in the Senate. BY P.J. O'ROURKE

I WANT HILLARY CLINTON to get that New York senatorship—the one Pat Moynihan had for years until he misplaced it after a long lunch. I'm sending $5 to Hillary's campaign fund. Make that $10, because she got gouged on the $1.7 million house in Chappaqua. Chappaqua? From Whitewater to Castle Grande to Palestinian statehood, Hillary has always been dumb about real estate—and a lot of other things, and why not? If you think about it, she's just another Suzy Loser with endless man troubles living in public housing at the taxpayer's expense. What's she know? Actually, we can answer this question if we study her television interviews, listen to her speeches, and read her dreadful book and appalling newspaper columns. Ouch! Brain cramps! Never watch a Linda Bloodworth-Thomason video on an empty cerebral cortex.



Fortunately a U.S. Senate seat is open. The Founding Fathers, in their wisdom, devised a method by which our republic can take 100 of its most prominent numbskulls and keep them out of the private sector where they might do actual harm. At any given moment a full five score of America's largest corporations are being spared Paul Wellstone as CEO. This could be the entire secret of America's economic advantage over Western Europe and Japan. Let Hillary loose in the free enterprise system and the New York Stock Exchange winds up like Madison Guaranty Savings and Loan. Our 401(k)s will be invested in Arkansas pea patches.

I also want Hillary elected because this would be a fit punishment for a person who has made a fatuous claim to be a mover and shaker, who believes she is a political colossus and who thinks the earth trembles from her great progressive strides. Into the tar pit of the Senate with you, you soon-to-be-extinct mastodon of PoliSci, you fossil in a pants suit. Let's watch you squeal and bellow as you sink helplessly to the very bottom of the seniority system ooze.

Furthermore, putting Hillary in the Senate keeps Rudolph Giuliani out. Rudy is a cold, angry, vengeful martinet of a man—exactly the person that we 263 million Americans who don't live in New York City want that town to have as its mayor. Rudy's what New Yorkers have deserved for years. He should stay mayor forever, if not of New York then of some other horrible city. Seattle leaps to mind. Ah, the Nose Ring Leash Law of 2003.

But saving the economy, bugging SoHo twits, and bringing snot-bobbers to heel are mere fringe benefits to a Hillary victory in November.

The real prize is a guaranteed six

Thomas Fluharty

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years of Hillary in high profile public exposure. Consider what this means to Republican fund-raising efforts. That little smirk of hers, that faint suggestion of a self-cherishing pout, is worth $30 million a year to the GOP, easy. Here is a woman who can give $30 million to fight the good fight without—literally—lifting a finger. A small change in the shape of her pie hole and we're rich.

We're rich. And we're smart. Suddenly we're thinking critically again. The theatrical craft, the special effects, the stage business of the New Democrats made us almost forget that liberalism has a plot. Hillary's role is to remind us of the scheme: Liberals plan to take everything and give it to bad actors as a reward for talking crap. Speaking of bad actors, we've lacked a villain. Pickled, lardy Ted won't do. Jeering Ted Kennedy is like making fun of Falstaff at the end of *Henry IV: Part II*. Lady-Macbeth-in-a-headband, however, will more than suffice. And what's that she's trying to get off her hands? Bill, probably.

Those hands of Hillary's will be busy in any case. Rest assured no mulligatawny of social legislation will be served up in the Senate without Hillary's thumb in the soup bowl. She has ideas about everything—school vouchers, minimum wage, earned income tax credits, college tuition, Social Security, Medicare, the national debt, and making "a mean tossed salad," to mention just a few of the subjects touched upon during her February 6 campaign kick-off event. Hillary has ideas the way Arkansas has cars on blocks. Ideas are to Hillary what sex is to her husband—something to be had indiscriminately and often and the results of which—thank goodness—go right down the drain. And every time Hillary gets one of these ideas she starts exercising the smugness muscles with which the liberal face is so richly endowed. Her mouth compresses in a suck-purse grimace. Her lips form a simper of sanctity. And then—oh, man, it's triple cherries on the $10 slots!—treasure just comes tumbling into the laps of the prudent and the wise. ♦

Darren Gygi

Happy Generic Presidents' Day

George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Chester Arthur—what's the difference? **BY GREG CROSBY**

WHAT HAPPENED to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln's birthdays? Oh sure, they're still noted on the calendar, February 22 and February 12, respectively. But we as a nation have been giving these two historical dates short shrift of late. And it's all because of Presidents' Day.

Even though it's been a bona fide national holiday since 1971, I am still uneasy with Presidents' Day. It reminds me of Secretaries' Day—except we don't run out and buy cards and flowers to send to President Clinton . . . well, not all of us at least.

Setting aside a day to honor all American presidents bothers me for a couple of reasons. First, I don't believe that every single one of our presidents necessarily deserves to be honored. Some may argue, however, that it is not the individuals we celebrate, it is the office, which brings me to my second objection. Why celebrate an office? We might as well have an Attorneys General's Day, or a Senators' Day. Or we might just wrap it all into one and call it Politicians' Day.

Presidents' Day, sandwiched as it is between Lincoln and Washington's birthdays, effectively shifts the focus from these two extraordinary presidents who truly do deserve to be honored, to a nebulous, generic, "*All* Presidents' Day." So it is that William Henry Harrison, Franklin Pierce, and Chester Arthur are thrown into the same celebratory soup as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Presidents all, but with no distinction made for individual accomplishments.

But we mustn't leave a single presi-

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dent out—oh, no. It wouldn't be fair. We cannot exclude anyone, you see, because we live in a time when being fair to all is much more valued than rewarding individual achievement. The problem is, when we honor all, we honor none.

But if we must be fair to all, then why stop with presidents? We could change Martin Luther King's birthday to Civil Rights Leaders' Day. And, to be all inclusively fair, shouldn't we alter Christmas, too? We could make it Religion Founders' Day. And why on February 2 do we honor groundhogs when we could be celebrating Rodents' Day?

Frankly, I miss the cultural and even the commercial aspects of Washington and Lincoln's birthdays. For one thing, the cherry pies. As a kid, I remember seeing cherry pie recipes in every magazine and newspaper just prior to February 22. The supermarkets and bakeries were well stocked with cherry pies, and Mom made one every year. What happened to all the cherry pies?

And there were Washington dollar sales and white sales in all the department stores. The one-cent sales on Lincoln's birthday (Lincoln head pennies, get it?) were a big deal, too, in my state, where Lincoln's birthday was a holiday. We still have the sales, but now they're called Presidents' Day Weekend Blowout Sales. Sounds charming, doesn't it?

Another thing I miss is the fun of having two separate days off—and on different days of the week each year. There was something excitingly wicked about getting a day off from school in the middle of the week, say on a Wednesday or Thursday, then 10 days later getting another day off. Sometimes one of the days would fall on a Monday or Friday and it was like a little bonus.

Presidents' Day is always on the third Monday of February, which means a three-day weekend every year. Which is nice, sure. Another excuse to get out of town for a couple of days. But in the process we've lost one of the birthdays. Some calendars note Presidents' Day as "Washington's birthday (observed)"—which means poor ol' Abe's day has gotten bumped.

More important, we don't hear the old stories anymore. Remember how "Honest Abe" would walk for miles in his bare feet just to keep his promise to return a book he'd borrowed? Or how little George took complete responsibility for chopping down the cherry tree?

Why stop with presidents? Shouldn't we alter Christmas, too? We could make it Religion Founder's Day.

These legends helped define our Founding Fathers as ethical heroes worth emulating. They demonstrated solid moral lessons, a sense of right and wrong, the importance of being honest, playing fair, and telling the truth. People respecting other people's property and trying to do the good and right thing.

Now, in our revisionist enlightened culture, we are told that our leaders were really flawed rogues, self-serving slave-owners, womanizers, adulterers, and maybe worse. Actually, Washington and Lincoln were good and ethical men. Two genuine heroes, besides, who helped create what has become the greatest country on earth. Their birthdays should be remembered and celebrated—separately—just as their talents, deeds, and accomplishments were separate and unique.

Things aren't all bad, though. We can take heart in that while we have lost the birthday celebrations for George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, we have at least gained a three-day weekend. Hallelujah! Where do ya wanna go? ♦

Learning to Love the National Debt

Devoting the surplus to paying it down could be bad for the economy. **BY DAVID FRUM**

IF AMERICANS do things his way, President Clinton vowed in his State of the Union, "We will pay off our national debt for the first time since 1835." This promise is now being treated as an unequivocally good thing. Alan Greenspan has endorsed it. Republican John McCain has adopted the Clinton debt-repayment as his own, down almost to the last comma, while George W. Bush is buying ads in South Carolina to emphasize that he'll devote more than four times as much money to debt repayment as to tax reduction.

Somebody should ask—So, how'd things go after 1835, the last time the sovereign debt of the United States was retired? The answer is: Not so good. Within two years of the 1835 debt repayment, the country plunged into the worst economic crisis of its first half-century of independence. And while debt repayment was not the sole culprit, it certainly made matters worse. Debt repayment is deflationary; and that is as true today as it was 150 years ago.

As Alexander Hamilton realized when he pointed out that a moderate public debt could be a public blessing, federal obligations function as money. Somebody who has a $1 million Treasury bill feels just as rich as somebody with $1 million in cash. The bill is virtually as liquid as cash. When the government takes money from people in the form of taxes and then uses those taxes to buy up and extinguish its bills, it is shrinking the money supply just as surely as if it made a bonfire of $100 bills on the Mall.

How fast would the money supply shrink? The U.S. public debt now stands at about $5.7 trillion. In comparison, the total amount of U.S. currency in circulation is only about $500 billion, of which rather less than half is probably held inside the country. In other words, the Clinton administration is now proposing to eliminate the equivalent of the entire currency supply—and then to eliminate it again next year, and again the year after that, every year for a decade. No wonder the bond markets have been jittery all week.

Defenders of the Clinton plan express hope that this monetary squeeze will reduce interest rates. It very well might. But low interest rates are not an end in themselves: They are valuable because they promote growth. If we achieve low interest rates in a way that depresses growth more than the low interest rates stimulate it, we haven't really achieved anything—just ask the Japanese, who have been slumping for a decade despite interest rates that are close to zero. The same thing could happen in the United States.

This may sound counterintuitive.

David Frum, a contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD, *is the author of a new history of the 1970s,* How We Got Here *(Basic).*

Peter Steiner

Mistrust of public debts and the bankers who finance them is strongly felt. Public-spirited citizens pay large sums of money to erect electronic "debt clocks" on street corners, on traveling flatbed trucks, and now on the Internet, to keep track of the ruin into which they perceive the country slipping, minute by inexorable minute.

But what has always mattered most is not the size of the debt in dollar amounts, but the size of the debt relative to the country's ability to pay. Look at what happened to the World War II debt, for example. In the summer of 1945, the United States was burdened by the most staggering debt in the nation's history: nearly $260 billion, which actually exceeded the country's gross domestic product. By the end of 1960, that debt had grown somewhat, to $290 billion. But as a percentage of GDP, it had plunged to almost half its level 15 years before.

The alternative method, the one tried in the 1830s, did not work nearly so well. By overtaxing the economy to repay the debt as rapidly as possible, President Andrew Jackson triggered a financial panic, which settled into a prolonged recession. The debt so laboriously discharged in 1835 mushroomed after 1836: By 1843, the United States had amassed a debt nearly as big as the one it had in 1832, when Jackson determined to drive the debt to zero. The experiment was never repeated.

Nor should it be repeated now. Repaying the debt will not do what President Clinton promises (and John McCain imagines) it will. It will not reduce the burden of America's Social Security obligations—they will remain as large as ever. It will not bolster the country's ability to pay those obligations—that depends on the speed at which the U.S. economy grows over the next 15 years, which in turn is affected very greatly by the tax rate on productive activity.

Overtaxing Americans to repay the national debt will actually lower the capacity of the United States to honor its commitment to Social Security. How does that make any sense? ♦

The American People Move Left

Why conservatives are losing and Gore and Bradley can run as liberals.

BY FRED BARNES

THERE'S A SIMPLE EXPLANATION for virtually all the political trends of 2000, including the declining appeal of tax cuts, the rising support for government programs, the popularity of the Democratic agenda, the less conservative than usual cast of the Republican presidential frontrunners and the more liberal cast of the Democrats, indeed, the success of John McCain and the failure of conservative candidates Steve Forbes, Gary Bauer, and Alan Keyes. The explanation? The country has moved to the left. No, it hasn't lurched drastically. But the political mood has grown perceptibly more liberal over the past year or two.

Conservatives should not dismiss the shift as merely a transitory function of a strong economy. True, there is a prosperity effect that has, for one thing, dampened enthusiasm for slashing taxes. But the mood swing is not entirely the result of good times. The bellwether issue that tracked the rise of conservatism from the 1960s to the 1990s was the death penalty. Support in Gallup polls surged from 42 percent in 1966 to 80 percent in 1994. Last year, those favoring capital punishment dipped to 71 percent, not a huge drop but meaningful nonetheless.

The most striking change is the public's attitude toward government. There is less worry that government is too large and tries to do too many things. In 1996, 61 percent of Americans surveyed by CBS News preferred "smaller government with fewer services," and only 30 percent favored "larger government with many services." Last fall, CBS asked again and found a dramatic change. This time, 46 percent wanted smaller government, and 43 percent preferred more government. Meanwhile, opposition to government regulation has diminished, and fewer Americans agree with the notion that government is always inefficient and wasteful.

The first politician to respond to the mini-revival in support for government was President Clinton, and he did so cautiously in 1996 with a slew of micro-programs at the federal level. This year, he proposed 73 small, new programs in the State of the Union address and 83 in his final budget. This tack—little big government—has proved politically popular. So much so that the two Democratic presidential candidates, Al Gore and Bill Bradley, have been emboldened to move beyond it, to Clinton's left. They've proposed sweeping and more costly programs in health care, child support, and income subsidies. Yet polls show voters regard them as solidly in the political mainstream.

George W. Bush and John McCain tailored their campaigns to a political environment that's less anti-government. The package of domestic policies Bush calls "compassionate conservatism" consists largely of tasks for government. He talks about limiting government, not slashing it. McCain's campaign is mostly about himself and not his policy ideas, but he's made one proposal that's surprising for a Republican. Rather than go for a large tax cut, as Bush has, McCain says two-thirds of the non-Social Security surplus should be used to pay down the national debt and shore up Medicare and Social Security. Polls say the public prefers McCain's approach.

Fred Barnes is executive editor of THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

Americans also seem quite happy with the candidates they've been offered. In 1992, only 40 percent said they were satisfied. Four years later, 57 percent did. Now, 70 percent say they've found a candidate who'd make a good president. And a sizable majority doesn't want much to change in Washington either, at least in a conservative direction. Sixty percent in a Gallup poll in January said Clinton's policies should continue or be replaced by more liberal policies. Only 33 percent called for more conservative policies.

Most of these trends—contentment, desire for slightly more government, satisfaction with presidential candidates—are at least partly and perhaps entirely the products of prosperity. Certainly the national mood is sky-high. Since 1974, Yankelovich Partners has been asking: "How well do you think things are going in the country these days?" This year, those answering "very well" or "fairly well" reached an all-time high of 80 percent. The highest in the Reagan years was 74 percent. People feel so good even their opinion of former presidents has soared. "Everybody is getting a bump except Nixon," says polling expert Karlyn Bowman of the American Enterprise Institute.

Yet prosperity hardly seems a sufficient explanation for the lost allure of tax cuts, the staple of successful Republican campaigns since the 1970s. After all, aren't federal taxes as a percentage of GDP the highest ever, higher even than during World War II? The answer to that question is yes, but it may be the wrong question. Nearly half of American households now own stock, and their tendency is to judge their tax burden against their net worth, not against their income. In the past, workers didn't see the money building up in pension accounts. Now, with 401(k) plans and IRAs, they do, and they also decide how it should be invested. And for the time being, anyway, they watch as their household wealth mounts.

Bruce Bartlett, a senior fellow at the National Center for Policy Analysis, explains what he calls "tax passivity" as the quite understandable result of taxes rising more slowly than net worth. "By contrast, because of progressivity, taxes rise faster than incomes," he writes in *Policy Review*. "That is why taxes as a share of GDP *plus* the rise in net worth have fallen, while taxes as a share of GDP have risen. . . . As long as net worth keeps rising at a healthy clip, people will probably remain relatively unconcerned about rising taxes." Besides, Bartlett says, paying down the debt is instinctively seen by many Americans as a tax cut, since taxes won't have to be hiked later to cover that same debt.

But it's not McCain's debt payment plan that best manifests the clever positioning of his campaign. It's his emphasis on character and biography rather than issues and ideology that makes his candidacy apt for the times. Prosperity, it turns out, is the enemy of ideology. Bush discovered this after being shellacked in the New Hampshire primary. For two days, he stressed that he's the conservative GOP candidate, McCain the liberal. This line of attack flopped, and Bush quickly abandoned it. "Ideology takes center stage when you've got a real crisis," says pollster Frank Luntz. "When problems are less extreme, people tend to look at smaller solutions." And at other things in a candidate, like personal traits. ♦

Ask Not . . .

John McCain belongs to our oldest political party–the party of Teddy Roosevelt and FDR, JFK and Ronald Reagan–the Patriot party.

By Noemie Emery

Who is John McCain, and what is his magic? Traditional terms don't explain the stampede. He does not fit neatly in the right-to-left spectrum, but is de facto head of the Patriot party—a dominant force in American politics, though one that is not easy to explain. It is an idea, but not an ideology; a principle, but not a program; a concept adaptable to various creeds. It is not even precisely a party, but a force that moves from one party to the other. Through the centuries, it has passed back and forth between the two parties, making the one it inhabits the governing force in the country. Few presidents have reached historic stature without being in it; without it, no party can govern too well or for too long. It has no health-care plan, no tax proposal, no 10-point programs. But it does have a platform, and these are its planks:

America is not merely a country; it is also a cause and a principle.

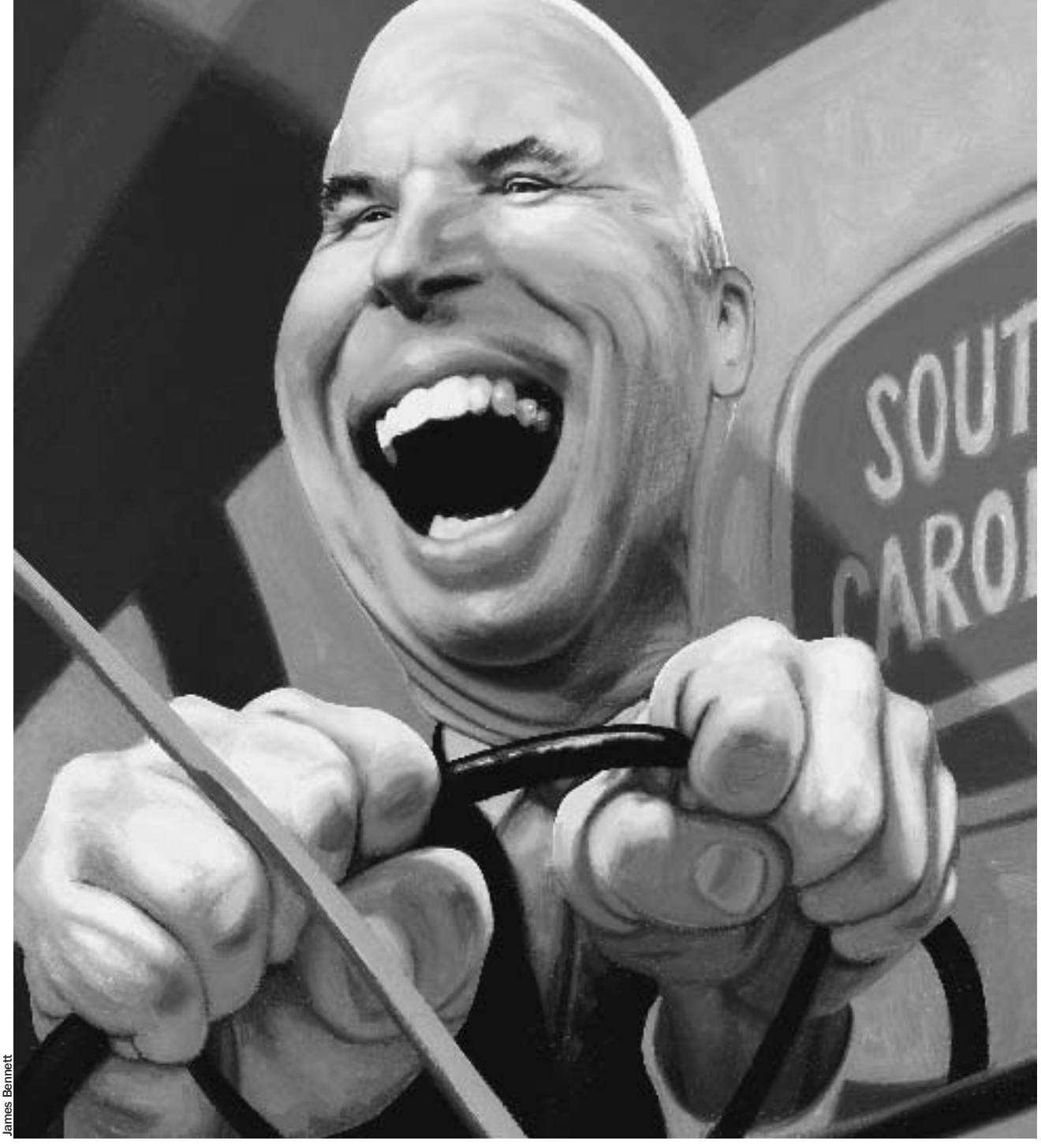
Pursuit of this cause requires, at home, a guarantee to all of *access* to success, wealth, and power; and abroad, world leadership and the defense of order and freedom.

American citizenship is a gift and a duty, and service a privilege. To deny this is to shirk one's duty to God and country.

The four charismatic presidents of the 20th century all belonged to this party, and have antecedents and cousins. The line begins with Alexander Hamilton, glory-hound and super-nationalist, who, when he failed twice to gloriously die for his country, still worked out a way in which he could. Hamilton was a hero to Theodore Roosevelt, whose only regret was that his own Spanish-American war was so negligible. This was not a problem for his fifth cousin Franklin, who faced crises so grave that he aged 30 years in his 12 years of service and died a frail old man at 63. FDR's ally in war was the ultimate glory-hound, the half-American Winston S. Churchill, who had the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" sung at his funeral. Churchill was a hero to John F. Kennedy, whose favorite programs—the Peace Corps and space race—were designed wholly to rouse an esprit de corps in the populace; and who gave the whole movement its signature slogan: Ask not what your country can do for you, but what *you* can do for your country. Ronald Reagan was hands-off on domestic policy (few libertarians belong to the Patriot party), but rates inclusion because of his foreign endeavors: He cleaned up the last part of our century-long international nightmare, as FDR, *his* hero, had earlier cleaned up the first. Different as all these men may be in party and temperament, they have many things in common. They have flair, courage, humor, and a sense of drama. They have high codes of public and personal honor. They may womanize, but are chivalrous towards and protective of women. They are stoic and reticent. They do not whimper when faced with torture or polio, Addison's or Alzheimer's.

On the down side, they can fly off the handle, have lapses of judgment, and exaggerate crises, or even invent them. Daring themselves, they tend to draw violence: Three were shot and died from it (Hamilton, and the two Kennedy brothers); two were shot and recovered (TR and Reagan); and one—Franklin Roosevelt—was shot at, and missed. (Churchill, the honorary English member of the Patriot party, famously observed that nothing is more exhilarating than to be shot at and not hit.) Such men are drawn to the armed forces, and to battlefield similes. They thrive under challenge and pressure and stress. The trumpet summons them, to the great crusades, long twilight struggles against evil empires, against great depressions, against complacency, against sloth and indolence, and even against fear itself. They rendezvous with destiny, and live in shining cities on hills. They enjoy being part of generations of whom much is demanded; offer blood, toil, sweat, and tears; and go to the moon, not because it is easy, but because it is hard. And always, they Ask not.

Noemie Emery is a frequent contributor to The Weekly Standard.



James Bennett

This type tends to transcend ideology. Reagan and Franklin Roosevelt were intensely partisan figures, men who defined, and were loved by, their parties. But Teddy Roosevelt and the Kennedy brothers are harder to categorize, responding to instincts of varying provenance. Patriot themes can serve the interests of liberal or conservative programs: They can fuel an arms build-up (the mission is to save and spread freedom), or a spate of new social spending and programs (the mission is to end human misery). On the other hand, they often meet fierce resistance, from both left and right. There is a kind of liberalism that disowns the idea of American virtue, resists the idea of American mission, and insists people only have needs, not duties. There is a kind of conservatism that conflates nationalism of any kind with invasive big government, and wants only to be let alone. At their extremes, liberalism and conservatism both edge off into selfishness, being about the dispersal—in tax cuts, or welfare—of purely material benefits. To some ideologues, this is more than sufficient, but history shows that it is not enough to inspire a party, enlist public support, or form a governing majority for very long. Patriot wannabes frequently founder, mistaking the message for mission. Ted Kennedy dropped the family torch when he turned into a mere

gimme liberal. "Reaganesque" tax-cutters who talk of nothing else never reach their man's magic. After the stardom and deaths of the two elder Kennedys, many young Democrats brushed their hair, brushed their teeth, walked on the beach with their coats off, and waited for lightning to strike them. But it never did.

The patriot theme is always appealing, but this time there is a sense of greater hunger in the air. There is not merely a status quo to invigorate. There is a blemish to actively heal. McKinley was decent. Hoover and Carter were inept, but decent. "Grandfatherly" was the worst pejorative John Kennedy could make himself say about Ike. But in Bill Clinton, we have one of the least decent men in American history, and possibly one of the least patriotic people in the whole country. On every character test of the patriot, he is its antithesis. He has put his own interests above those of his country, over and over. He has a pattern of picking on powerless women, and then trying to slander or threaten them. He dodged the draft, consciously, because he feared danger. He made more of a fuss over a minor knee injury than FDR ever did about polio. He bombed other countries to take our minds off his troubles. He is as without shame as he is without courage or conscience or honor. He is supremely self-seeking, in every conceivable sense.

Clinton is as without shame as he is without courage or conscience or honor. He is supremely self-seeking, in every conceivable sense.

His politics, too, are based on self-interest; the stroking and stoking of many small appetites. He does not lead citizens but rapacious consumers, whose sense of grievance he tries to exaggerate. His mode is to focus on the small glitch and call it a crisis, so that he can step in to cushion still further the already soft edges of boomer life. The TR-JFK ethic is that no obstacle is too great to be surmounted, and that people should want to do things that are difficult. The political theme of the Clinton-Gore era is that no annoyance, no matter how trivial, should have to be endured. Ask what your country can do for you, and then ask for more of it. But is this really enough?

The first man in a long time to suggest that it isn't has been John McCain. This puts him in line with an eclectic political brotherhood of TR, FDR, Reagan, and the two elder Kennedys. But FDR worshiped his Republican cousin; Reagan loved the ur-Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt; John F. Kennedy looked up to Churchill, his father's political enemy. Patriot themes can overcome traditional political divisions: Columnist Jack Newfield, an RFK acolyte, compares McCain to Reagan *and* to Bobby Kennedy, brothers under the skin. And they draw backers who are also eclectic, creating coalitions that defy reason and gravity. It is typical of the Patriot party that it breaks up and rearranges partisan lines. It also transforms traditional concepts of demographic and voting blocs.

People who complain that McCain and his fans skirt this issue or that seem unaware of the possibility that this time pride *is* the issue, and subsumes all the rest. Has anyone noticed that McCain can call Clinton a liar, and *Democrats* cheer him? Somehow McCain has found the voice that Republicans were looking for throughout the protracted impeachment and trial, and could never really get right. Something, or some combination of things—the history, the Hanoi Hilton, the wit, the irreverence, the long reputation for dissing his party—has made him an agent through which moderates, independents, and even some liberals are willing to channel their anger. (It is astonishing that after years of waiting for the left and the center to turn on Clinton, some conservatives are convinced it's a liberal plot when they do.) McCain does not seem "mean," or "obsessed," or a "partisan" figure. No one in his right mind would call McCain a "prude," or "repressed," or "jealous" of Clinton. When McCain attacks Clinton, he doesn't sound vengeful, or petty, or like a moralist trying to impose his religion on others. He sounds like a patriot, appalled at what has been done to debase his country. And ours.

This was always important, but it now seems more vital, in view of what has emerged in weeks past. For years, it appeared Al Gore would be the "clean" Clinton, embodying the policies without the moral deficiencies, and therefore a plausible national leader. But that was before the Gore campaign revealed itself as one of staggering lies and rhetorical thuggery. It now appears plain that Gore is not Clinton Clean but Clinton Continued. The great defining moment of this campaign may prove to have been the incident in New Hampshire, when a happy clique of Gore supporters (including the governor's husband) splashed mud on Bob Kerrey, and called him a cripple. Gore's spokesman cheerfully condoned this behavior. Gore, of course, lied, and denied it. Bob Kerrey is the John McCain of the Democrats. Al Gore is Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton is the un-patriot. And the un-Clinton is John McCain.

How does one flush out Al Gore and Bill Clinton? Ask not. ♦

Croatia's Turn

The death of Franjo Tudjman and the free elections that followed have brought a new generation to power.

By Stepehn Schwartz

Sarajevo

A NEW ERA in Balkan history dawned on December 12, 1999, when Franjo Tudjman died. A former Communist general, Tudjman had shepherded Croatia to independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and so considered himself the "father of the nation." Croatia had not been independent for centuries.

During World War II, it had been an Axis puppet, the putative Independent State of Croatia. But this was nothing to be proud of. Led by an ultranationalist clique, the Ustasha, it sacrificed its Jews to Nazi savagery, turned over the Dalmatian coast to Mussolini, and slaughtered its Serbian minority.

Not surprisingly, these policies drove more than 200,000 Croats to join the Communist Partisans under Tito, who was himself half Croat, half Slovene. But it is the brutalities inflicted by the Croatian fascists that non-Croats have tended to remember.

Tudjman, who emerged as semidictator of Croatia after the breakup of Yugoslavia, did little to improve the image of his country. His army recovered territory seized by Serbs in the 1991-95 war, but gained its own reputation for ethnic cleansing. Croat commanders were summoned to appear before the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia in The Hague. Worst of all, Tudjman conspired with Serbian president and Balkan kingpin Slobodan Milosevic to partition Bosnia-Hercegovina. Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic said he felt as though he faced "a choice between lung cancer and AIDS."

Tudjman was not a programmatic anti-Semite, according to leading Croatian Jewish intellectuals, but he was certainly a crank. His weird writings minimize human suffering under the Croatian fascists with arguments over numbers, as if statistics were the issue, instead of genocide.

Stephen Schwartz's new book, Kosovo: Background to a War, *will be published in Britain next month.*

Tudjman sought to reconcile the Ustasha and Partisan traditions, and in this he claimed as his model Francisco Franco, the Spanish *caudillo*, who supposedly had brought the two sides together after Spain's civil war. But he failed to grasp the implications of embracing Franco. When the Spaniard Carlos Westendorp was European boss of postwar Bosnia-Hercegovina, Tudjman is said to have greeted him with the declaration, "I greatly admire your General Franco," to which Westendorp reportedly replied, "That is too bad. I hated Franco."

Despite these proclivities, Tudjman was useful to Washington. He put his army at the disposal of Clintonite diplomacy, and U.S. leaders tried to overlook his faults. When his defense minister, an unreconstructed Ustasha apologist named Gojko Susak, died in 1998, one of the eulogists and pallbearers at his funeral was none other than his former American counterpart William Perry.

When Tudjman himself died in December, the Croats celebrated, not by drinking long-hoarded champagne, as the Spaniards had at Franco's passing, but by turning out in their millions in the January 3 parliamentary elections to crush his political machine, the Croatian Democratic Union. Tudjman may have been the father of the nation, but the Croats were no longer children.

Their disillusionment was not difficult to fathom. Tudjman had squandered state funds on a presidential guard in fancy dress and elaborate symbols and banners. Croats seem addicted to flags; every city, county, party, union, and club has its own. But flags could not fill stomachs. Workers grumbled over late paychecks. People living on pensions starved. The value of the currency, the kuna, plunged.

Tudjman's party was bested at the polls by an incongruous alliance of former Communists, now styled Social Democrats, under Ivica Racan, and serious free marketeers in the Social Liberal party, led by Drazen Budisa. In Croatia itself, the coalition took 73 seats, Tudjman's machine 39, with the results for 5 seats representing Croats outside the country in dispute.

Despite this victory, the coalition seemed suspect to

AP/Wide World Photos

Stipe Mesic, newly elected Croatian president and (inset) Franjo Tudjman

longtime anti-Tudjman activists. Racan is wedded to impractical leftist fantasies, such as the inclusion in the cabinet of unpaid volunteers, while Budisa did jail time under the Communists. And until recently, the two factions cordially despised each other. As Croatia's rambunctious opposition paper *Feral Tribune* put it, "There was a time when Budisa was still a pronounced anti-Communist, and every connection with reformed Communists was an incomprehensible, almost obscene act for him, while to Ivica Racan everything about Budisa's party smelled of 'rotten liberalism.'"

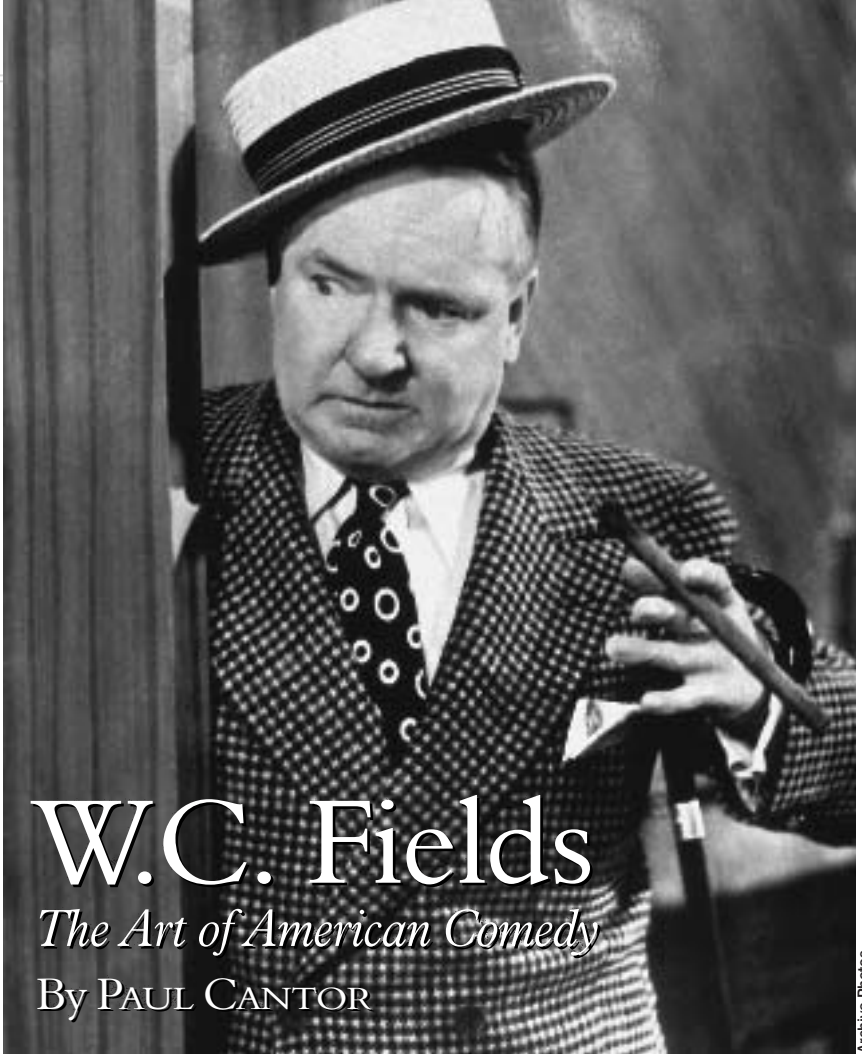
Under the pact that joined these disparate parties, Racan had the advantage: He had slyly chosen the prime minister's slot, leaving Budisa to run for president in the election slated for January 24. But after the coalition's exhilarating victory in the parliamentary elections, the voters took stock—and demonstrated their political maturity. Suddenly faced with the prospect of handing both leadership posts to a single slate, albeit a potentially unstable one, they started thinking that Budisa might not be the best choice for president after all.

"I do not consider Racan a dangerous man," commented Otto Lukacevic, a Croat media adviser who commutes between homes and jobs in Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina, and who was never a Communist. "But I consider the concentration of power dangerous. Croatia needs a balance."

Almost as soon as the opposition victory in the parliamentary elections was announced, Lukacevic said his vote for president would go to Stipe Mesic, a 65-year-old former Communist who served as the last president of the old Yugoslavia. Mesic leads the Croatian People's party, which, along with three other minor parties, did poorly in the parliamentary elections, despite its intellectual prestige. And when the votes were counted after the presidential runoff on February 7, Mesic was Croatia's new president.

This may or may not have been the best possible outcome. Budisa would have represented a cleaner break with the past, especially in economic matters. But he was personally distant, a librarian by profession, and lacked the common touch; he had the right ideas but the wrong style. Mesic knows how to reach the man in the street; his slogan—"Have coffee with the president"—sounds silly to outsiders, but worked for Croats. In addition, some observers, especially in Bosnia-Hercegovina, worried that Budisa might be slow to shake off the legacy of Croatian nationalism. Mesic is seen as a sincere friend of Bosnia-Hercegovina, willing to stop Croatia's meddling across the border.

With Racan prime minister and Mesic president, former Communists are still in control. But they are younger men than Tudjman and more practical. They have assumed a great responsibility. If they set the right example, they can make their country prosperous and admired. They can also help rebuild Bosnia-Hercegovina—and possibly even point chaotic Serbia toward salvation. ♦



Archive Photos

W.C. Fields

The Art of American Comedy

By Paul Cantor

The man we know as W.C. Fields was born William Claude Dukenfield, the son of James and Kate Dukenfield, in Darby, Pennsylvania, on January 29, 1880—though the date is disputed by his first biographer, Robert Lewis Taylor, who gives it as April 9, 1879. But this is typical of Fields's life. Over the years, he told so many stories, tall tales, and straight-out lies about himself that it is difficult to sort fact from fiction.

The result is that W.C. Fields has become a mythic figure, and the actor's persona has been confused with the man himself far more than it has been for any other great comedian of the era. No one ever believed that Groucho Marx was really a grouch or Charlie Chaplin a tramp, but everyone believes that W.C. Fields was really a drunk. In the excellent *Man on the Flying Trapeze: The Life and Times of W.C. Fields*, recently reprinted in paperback, Simon Louvish has done a heroic job of uncovering the real Fields. If you want to find out if Fields really drank too much, hated children, or squirreled away money under false names in banks all across the country, you must read this book. Louvish interviewed Fields's descendants and had access to a vast amount of documentary material, including the scrapbooks Fields painstakingly compiled throughout his career.

Louvish works hard to debunk the myth of Fields's bleak childhood, and he even shows that W.C. may not have hated his hometown of Philadelphia quite as much as legend has it (alas, his gravestone does *not* read: "All things considered, I'd rather be in Philadelphia"). Nevertheless, Fields's childhood was no doubt tough enough, and he dropped out of school at an early age. The young Dukenfield was determined to make something of himself, and that something turned out to be "W.C. Fields, juggler *extraordinaire*."

Fields may not have had the greatest technique of his era, but he was nonetheless its most popular and successful juggler, and up until World War I, he played all over the globe. That Fields was a marvelous juggler with a variety of objects, particularly cigar boxes, we can tell from the routines he incorporated into his movies. Still, no matter how proficient, a juggler is bound to make mistakes. Fields realized that a little comedy could help him out of tight spots, and it was as a comic juggler that he scored his greatest success. He had a favorite trick with five cigar boxes tied together by hidden strings; he first performed it to his audience's amazement and then revealed the secret to them. As Fields wrote in a 1904 magician's handbook Louvish uncovered in his exhaustive research: "The experiment possesses an advantage over many others, inasmuch as the performer nearly always brings the house down with appreciation for his almost miraculous dexterity, and afterwards secures a laugh so hearty as to nearly shake the foundations of the theatre when the audience see how they have been sold." Illusion—disillusion: Here in his early days as a juggler we already see in miniature the characteristic rhythm of Fields's comedy. He loved to cast a spell over an audience, but he took equal delight in breaking it.

Man on the Flying Trapeze
The Life and Times of W.C. Fields
by Simon Louvish
Norton, 564 pp., $18 paper

The outbreak of World War I made it impossible for Fields to continue his tours as a juggler, and he seized the opportunity to make the transition to the stage. He accepted an offer from the greatest theatrical impresario of the day, Flo Ziegfeld, and first appeared in the *Ziegfeld Follies* in 1915. Fields gradually became one of the biggest names on Broadway, appearing with Eddie Cantor, Will Rogers, Fanny Brice, and Bert Williams. Soon passing beyond the brief comic sketches he did as interludes in Ziegfeld's musical extravaganzas, Fields got to star in full-length plays in the

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1920s, many of them worked up specifically as vehicles for him.

It was in the course of these productions that he developed and perfected the persona that he was to display on screen, and indeed some of his films, such as *Poppy* (1936), were remakes of his plays. Particularly valuable for studying Fields's art as a comedian is the 1930 short film *The Golf Specialist*. Louvish prints the script of this scene as Fields wrote it out for a 1918 stage sketch called "An Episode on the Links." Comparison of this version with *The Golf Specialist*, as well as the final sequence in Fields's 1934 *You're Telling Me!*, which used the routine yet again, shows that, however spontaneous and zany Fields's comedy may have seemed, it was carefully scripted and meticulously executed.

Perhaps the greatest of Fields's comic routines was first performed as "The Stolen Bonds" on Broadway in 1928 and then immortalized in 1933 as *The Fatal Glass of Beer*, a short film Fields made for Mack Sennett, the king of Hollywood comedy in the silent era. *The Fatal Glass of Beer* is a condensed parody of a popular kind of nineteenth-century melodrama. These stories of moral reformation, of a man who succumbs to vice and learns to overcome it, clearly rubbed Fields the wrong way—especially when the vice was drink. But as comedy, *The Fatal Glass of Beer* transcends its immediate satiric target. The action shows Fields at his absurdist best, from his impossibly bad zither playing to his going off to "milk the elk." And, above all, Fields makes fun of movies themselves. As Louvish writes, "the staginess of the film, which made it, at the time, a box-office disaster, seems to show a wonderful contempt for the motion-picture conventions."

The overlap between Fields's stage sketches and films shows that there was no sharp break in his career. Like any good gambler, Fields hedged his bets. While he was making his debut on Broadway, he was still appearing in vaudeville. Similarly, Fields did not make the move from Broadway to Hollywood in one abrupt step, but tested the waters several times before committing himself. He appeared in a silent film as early as 1915, and by the 1920s he was starring in full-length versions of his Broadway hits. Just as World War I effectively brought Fields's vaudeville career to an end, the Depression and its devastating impact on Broadway finally convinced Fields to give up the stage and devote himself to a movie career. In 1930 he left New York and moved to Los Angeles.

The motion picture industry never knew what to do with Fields. Many factors conspired to prevent him from using his comic skills to their fullest in motion pictures. His comedy was often off-color, with sexual innuendo or double-entendre in the dialogue and sight gags that bordered on the obscene (most notably in the 1932 *The Dentist*). Fields's battles with the Hollywood censors were epic, and the changes they demanded in his scripts often blunted the edge of his humor. Being Fields, though, he learned how to make comedy even out of censorship: "This scene was supposed to be in a saloon, but the censor cut it out," he says to the camera in *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*.

Fields's quirky comic imagination required more independence than the studio system of his day was willing to grant. He was often teamed with writers and directors who did not share his vision, or given cameo roles in films in which he did not belong and in which he stands out like a sore thumb—or nose. A good example is the 1933 *International House*: Fields wanders into the film (or rather flies in on an autogyro), leaving us as confused as he seems to be about what he's doing in China. Even the pairing of Fields with Mae West in the 1940 *My Little Chickadee* did not work quite as well as expected, though it did produce some of his most famous and funniest moments. Fields and West display a bizarre kind of chemistry, but when the two are not together, the film drags.

The one truly inspired bit of casting Hollywood ever came up with for Fields was the role of Wilkins Micawber in the 1935 movie version of *David Copperfield*. So completely did Fields make the part his own that one might suspect that Dickens stole his lines for Micawber from Fields. It is even difficult to look at the famous 1850 Phiz drawings in *David Copperfield* without seeing Fields. The solution to these riddles is found in Louvish's biography. Though Fields had little formal schooling, Dickens was one of his favorite authors and Micawber one of his favorite characters. Fields modeled himself on Micawber almost from the beginning as he set out to create a comic persona, and especially as he shaped the distinctive comic rhythms of his ornate prose: Having patterned his image on a fictional character, he made that fictional character seem to have been patterned on him.

Some of Fields's problems in Hollywood resulted from his own limitations. He was around fifty when he finally committed himself to motion pictures, and adaptable as he was, he brought

many theatrical habits with him to Hollywood. Unlike Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, Fields never developed a truly cinematic imagination. His movies often feel as if they are merely filmed versions of stage plays. The fact that he sometimes appeared in films based on his Broadway successes did not help. For that matter, the plays Fields had appeared in were not exactly models of dramatic construction, and often consisted of comic bits strung together like his famous cigar boxes. Fields was fundamentally a sketch comedian. The plots of his movies often seem designed merely to provide an excuse for him to go into one of his favorite routines—the golf sketch, the pool sketch, the Pullman car sketch, the back porch sketch.

But we should remember that Fields never had creative control over his movies the way Charlie Chaplin did. To see the distinctive nature of Fields's comic vision, the best film to look at is *The Bank Dick* (1940). Fields got to write it largely by himself (under one of his marvelous pseudonyms: Mahatma Kane Jeeves), and the director Edward Cline gave him more freedom than usual to shape the movie.

The result is Fields's masterpiece. With generally faster cutting than in his other films, *The Bank Dick* is well paced, less stagey, and more cinematic. The multiple plots are beautifully integrated, with all of them coming together in the chase sequence at the end. Fields drew upon many of his favorite routines for the movie, but, as Louvish writes: "For the first time one does not get a sense of comic episodes strung together for the sake of convenience, but a coherent whole, knit together and flowing from point to point with inexorable logic." And in terms of its satiric targets, the film serves up a compendium of Fields's comic obsessions.

In *The Bank Dick* Fields plays the aptly named Egbert Sousé (he keeps stressing the importance of the accent mark to everyone he meets). The film begins with one of the dysfunctional family scenes that are Fields's trademark—the breakfast table from hell. Fields always portrayed family life as a nightmarish labyrinth of tensions between husbands and wives and parents and children, with in-laws, suitors, and other hangers-on thrown in to make things even more complicated and unpleasant. The many dysfunctional families in Fields's films no doubt reflect his own unsuccessful domestic life. He broke up with his wife after having one child and spent the rest of his days maintaining an uneasy relationship with her, largely in the hope of staying in touch with his son.

Sousé is the typical family man in Fields—henpecked by his wife and mother-in-law, mooched off by his children, and harassed by all sorts of outside forces, including snooping neighbors. Fields is particularly negative about the way women try to domesticate men, and Sousé must fight a constant battle just to smoke and drink. From a historical perspective, Fields's comedies represent a male reaction against what today would be called female empowerment in the first quarter of this century. Like many of Fields's heroes, Sousé is threatened with emasculation.

Sousé is haunted by the American Dream, the hope of striking it rich, of suddenly rising in the world, of becoming something other than the pathetic loser everyone thinks he is. For Fields,

Above, Fields chats with Joe the Bartender in The Bank Dick. *Below, he plays Wilkins Micawber in* David Copperfield. *Opposite page, Fields as the Vaudeville tramp juggler.*

Photos this page: W.W. Norton. Opposite page: UPI / Corbis-Bettmann.

the get-rich-quick scheme is specifically a way for a man to reassert his authority in his family. The Fields hero has usually been emasculated because of economic irresponsibility. Unable to bring home the bacon, he no longer gets to sit at the head of the table.

Sometimes the Fields hero is a misunderstood genius, like the inventor Sam Bisbee in *You're Telling Me!* (1934), with his revolutionary puncture-proof tire, or the memory expert Ambrose Wolfinger in *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935), with his eccentric but unfailing filing system. Sometimes the Fields hero is a con-man; a good example is *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man* (1939), in which Fields plays Larson E. Whipsnade, a circus owner always one step ahead of the law. Short one act, Whipsnade steps into the ring himself as Buffalo Bella—"the only bearded-lady sharpshooter in the world." Like all Fields's heroes, he will do anything to impress high society (especially when his daughter's fate is at stake)—anything, that is, except hold down a regular job. Instead of bringing home a weekly paycheck, the Fields hero usually plays for higher stakes and looks to make one big killing. His family despises him for not pursuing the normal middle-class route to financial solvency, but his great hope is that if just one of his schemes pays off, he will be back on top and secure in his masculinity.

In *The Bank Dick*, Fields weaves together several configurations of the American Dream. In the main plot, Sousé becomes a local hero by accidentally thwarting a bank robbery. In gratitude the bank president gives him a "hearty handclasp" and a job as a guard. The way he has the coward Sousé revel in his new-found reputation as a hero reminds us that Shakespeare's Falstaff was another source for Fields's comic persona—and not just because Fields, with his capacity for drink, was Falstaffian himself. Just as the number of highwaymen who attack Falstaff in *Henry IV* multiplies as he recounts the incident, the knife a bankrobber supposedly pulls on Sousé grows and grows in his retelling of the tale, until "the sword that Lee surrendered to Grant was a potato peeler by comparison."

Archive Photos

Fields with Mae West in My Little Chickadee.

Another element of the American Dream in *The Bank Dick* is purely financial. The boyfriend of Sousé's daughter, Og Oggilby (played by Fields's favorite screen dunce, Grady Sutton) ends up buying five thousand shares of stock in Beefsteak Mines at Egbert's insistence: "You don't want to work all your life—take a chance!" Though Oggilby at first appears to be in trouble—right after he "borrows" funds from the bank to buy the worthless stock, the auditor shows up—the mine proves to be a bonanza. A victim of the 1929 crash, Fields liked to satirize the world of Wall Street: With its high-pressure sales tactics, mad speculation, and wild ups and downs, it struck Fields as just another con game.

Indeed, in Fields's vision, America is one scam after another, and his greatest discovery was that show business itself is the biggest con game of them all. In *The Bank Dick*, he exposes the way movies pander to the masculine fantasy of becoming a hero and striking it rich in a Depression world in which obscurity and poverty had become the more likely fate for the majority of men. Fields makes explicit the connection between the American Dream and the motion picture industry.

In one of the subplots, a film company arrives in Sousé's hometown and gets in trouble when its director goes off on a ten-day bender. Drawing upon his self-proclaimed expertise as a director and screenwriter, Sousé takes over the film and is soon remaking it into a typical Fields vehicle: "I've changed everything—instead of an English drawing-room drama, I've made it a circus picture"—though, strangely enough, the only scene we see Sousé rehearsing is a football story. Fields is merciless in ridiculing all the Hollywood stupidities he had lived with, including the miscasting (the film pairs a very tall leading man with a very short leading lady).

But above all Fields shows how perfectly congruent the shabby dream world of a cheap Hollywood production is with the shabby dream world of small-town America. Indeed, the producer links the two forever when he complains: "We've got a thirty-six-hour schedule and a stinko script . . . and it opens in this very town the day after tomorrow."

In the concluding chase scene, Fields weaves together all the threads: small-town heroism, Wall Street, and Hollywood. Sousé once again becomes an inadvertent hero and gets a $5,000

reward for accidentally apprehending a bank robber a second time. In the process he saves Og's stolen Beefsteak stock, and the movie producer shows up to offer him $10,000 for a script idea he let drop. Sousé thus ends up a rich man, and we see him presiding over a mansion, finally commanding the respect of his family. Fields has the women in the family claim responsibility for Sousé's transformation. "What a changed man! You deserve a lot of credit, Agatha," his mother-in-law piously intones. "It hasn't been easy." But Fields leaves us laughing at the idea that money has actually altered anything about Egbert Sousé. He concludes the film with an image of Sousé following the siren call of his old friend Joe the Bartender: You can take the Fields hero out of the saloon, but you can't take the saloon out of the Fields hero.

In Fields's next—and in effect his final—film, *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941), he chose to drop his mask and for once play W.C. Fields. But since "W.C. Fields" was already one of Fields's creations, the character he portrays in the movie turns out to be not very different from the persona he had been playing for years. Although the movie is very uneven in quality, it continues Fields's satiric attack on Hollywood brilliantly. Most of the film consists of Fields trying to peddle an inept script to a producer at Esoteric Pictures. He makes fun of the crazy logic in Hollywood scripts, with the producer (played by longtime Fields nemesis, Franklin Pangborn) constantly interrupting Fields to point out the holes in the plot he is spinning, such as having a woman supposedly raised in seclusion on a remote mountain top in Russia launching into the latest American song-and-dance routine. Continuing his exposé of the motion-picture industry, he pans in one scene from sound stage to sound stage and reveals the cameras, boom microphones, and other studio paraphernalia that go to make the movie. The moment when some goose-stepping Nazi soldiers march right through a song production number by co-star Gloria Jean may have been the inspiration for Mel Brooks's "Springtime for Hitler" sketch in *The Producers*.

Never Give a Sucker an Even Break was not quite Fields's farewell to the screen, as he appeared in several cameo roles in later films before his death in 1946. But it provided his final word on Hollywood. Fields keeps interrupting the story with reminders of the phoniness and tawdriness of the cinema, but at the same time he still works the old magic and keeps us laughing at the absurd lameness of his own ideas for telling a story. It is the old cigar box trick, once again. As Fields reportedly described his situation on the West Coast: "We are sitting at the crossroads between art and nature, trying to figure out where delirium tremens leaves off and Hollywood begins."

With his successful careers in vaudeville, Broadway, and Hollywood, Fields could lay claim to being *the* representative figure of American show business in the first half of the twentieth century. He quite consciously and deliberately made himself into a star. He understood the constructed nature of celebrity and knew how to create a public image of himself. And he made the endless struggle to become someone else the theme of his films, as he debunked a variety of incarnations of the American Dream. His own ability to create illusions, which he found mirrored everywhere in Hollywood, made him obsessive about the hollowness and evanescence of celebrity, above all his own.

In the end, though, the joke was on Fields. For all his frustrations and unhappiness, his achievement as a comedian has turned out to be lasting, and ironically the very medium whose honesty he questioned—the motion picture—is what allowed him to create the images that have fixed him in the public eye forever. However cynical he may have been, Fields himself offers proof in his life story that there really is something to the American Dream after all. ♦

BOOKS & ARTS

Liberalism's Discontents

A collection of essays asks whether we betrayed liberalism or liberalism betrayed us. **BY PETER BERKOWITZ**

In January 1838, on an unexceptionable occasion, a fledgling lawyer delivered an exceptional address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois. The subject was "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions," and with awe and gratitude, Abraham Lincoln declared himself and his fellow citizens "legal inheritors" of "fundamental blessings" conferred by the Founders' establishment of a "political edifice of liberty and equal rights."

The Betrayal of Liberalism
edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball
Ivan R. Dee, 256 pp., $28.95

At the same time, Lincoln warned of danger, not from foreign invaders but from ourselves. Signs of "ill-omen" were all about: "I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs for the executive ministers of justice." To defeat the menace from within, it would be necessary to muster "sober reason" to mold "*general intelligence, sound morality*, and, in particular, *a reverence for the Constitution and law.*"

Of course, these days, we enjoy unprecedented prosperity, a lengthy peace, unrivaled military might, and

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broadly extended civil rights. Yet surveying contemporary American culture and politics, Hilton Kramer, the editor and publisher of the *New Criterion*, and Roger Kimball, the managing editor of the *New Criterion*, nonetheless see numerous signs of ill-omen. From rampant political correctness in the universities to pervasive vulgarity in popular culture, from declining standards and neglected discipline in our public schools to shallowness and cynicism on the Supreme Court, from failed social and economic policies at home to confusion about our mission abroad, Kramer and Kimball perceive increasingly dire disarray. They do not pretend to have a solution, but they are quite confident that the root of the problem lies in our liberalism.

In *The Betrayal of Liberalism*, Kramer and Kimball collect the long-running series of essays on the topic from the pages of the *New Criterion*. By "liberalism," the editors and their distinguished group of contributors mean the political tradition that first arose in seventeenth-century England and made the protection of individual liberty and not the pursuit of virtue or the attainment of salvation the highest goal of politics.

Toward the liberal tradition, their stance is one of acute ambivalence. Sometimes they write as if the liberal tradition itself is guilty of undermining the preconditions for civilized life. And sometimes they write as if an otherwise good liberal tradition had been stabbed in the back by the supposed liberals of our time. Roger Scruton in his essay on Rousseau and Kimball in his essay on Mill come closest to suggesting that the liberal tradition as a whole represents a disastrous turn for the human spirit. Other contributors seem instead to admire the moral aspiration that gives the liberal tradition its animating spirit—the dedication to individual liberty and equality before the law—while criticizing contemporary liberalism for the illiberalism they see practiced in its name.

In education, contemporary liberalism favors a progressive approach that encourages students to learn by doing and to acquire knowledge by discovering it for themselves. But, argues Scruton, this renders children ridiculously unfree: It gives them a false feeling of independence while making them dependent on a teacher who must carefully manipulate the child's environment to give the child the illusion that his achievements are all his own; it deprives students of the accumulated wisdom stored up in history and literature; and it leaves students undisciplined, bereft of the benefits of routine and rigor.


Hilton Kramer


Roger Kimball

Ivan R. Dee

In law, contemporary liberalism has evacuated moral judgments from constitutional questions. In the process, argues Hadley Arkes in his contribution to *The Betrayal of Liberalism*, the Supreme Court has embraced a relativism that is incoherent and a menace to individual freedom. In *Planned Parenthood* v. *Casey*, the 1992 case that upheld a woman's constitutional right to abortion, the Court declared that "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of life." By proclaiming that the value of life is what each individual thinks it to be, the Court believes that it shows respect for women's rights. But in fact such a formulation leaves all rights more vulnerable by suggesting that at the heart of liberty is pure choice, rather than a notion of what it is about men and women that makes their choices worthy of respect by the law.

In religion, contemporary liberalism strives to separate church and state. But in the name of pluralism, it zealously promotes, as Jean Bethke Elshtain shows, its own brand of monism. While insisting on the worth of, and its openness to, all ways of life, contemporary liberalism exhibits open hostility to the claims of faith, demanding that religion, alone among systems of belief and forms of life, confine itself entirely to the private sphere. In so doing, present-day liberalism not only acts intolerantly, but also cuts itself off from a major source of insight into the human condition and denies a place in public life to a key institution that teaches the self-restraint on which morality in a democracy depends.

In foreign affairs, contemporary liberalism veers between an idealistic devotion to the worldwide promotion of universal principles of justice and a moralism that forbids any dirtying of its hands on behalf of national interests. As Robert Kagan points out, in the United States these contradictory impulses stem from an aversion to the exercise of power. And freedom itself is thus endangered, by the severing of the connection between our national interest and the vindication beyond our borders of the universal principles to which we proclaim allegiance.

Is the cause of these liberal betrayals the disruptions produced by capitalism? The arrogance of a pampered elite? The leveling forces unleashed by the democratic spirit? The editors and contributors nowhere say clearly. No doubt many factors are at work. Among the most basic is the inherent instability in the idea from which liberalism begins—the idea that all human beings are by nature free and equal. We are free in the primary sense, proclaims the

liberal tradition, in that no man or law can legitimately govern us unless we choose to be so governed. And we are equal in that, as beings endowed with the power to reason, we all share this fundamental freedom to choose the authority under which we shall live. At first, the liberal tradition understands freedom in political terms. Later it requires that custom, tradition, and religion submit as well to the authority of individual reason. Eventually, it demands that reason itself be seen as a matter of choice, a human invention that we should be free to take or leave as we please.

The liberal premise of natural freedom and equality seems to generate a sort of self-devouring skepticism that consumes every claim to authority that comes before it, including its own. This is how liberalism's fundamental premise—especially once it untethers itself from religious belief, traditional morals and custom—paves the way for postmodernism, both in its fatalistic vision of a world in which freedom is an illusion because our very humanity is socially constructed, and in its utopian fantasy that because our humanity is socially constructed we are free to remake ourselves from the ground up.

Kramer, Kimball, and their contributors generally avoid such abstract philosophical speculation. Their essays are written with an air of urgency and the desire to show how our politics can be rescued from some of its own worst practices. At the end of the day, their sober counsel is to search for ways to conserve what is best in the liberal tradition, not overthrow it. In offering this counsel, they follow Lionel Trilling, who, as Kramer and Kimball point out in their introduction, had warned fellow liberals back in the 1950s, in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, that they were increasingly prone to moral and intellectual complacency. Complacency and disdain for different viewpoints are not peculiarly liberal vices. But they are peculiarly harmful to liberalism, because liberalism depends for its vitality on the capacity of individuals to think for themselves and to draw on moral and intellectual resources from other traditions. If it is to win the battle against its illiberal tendencies, contemporary liberalism must cease to flatter itself and demonize its opponents. It must relearn that discipline, tradition, and self-restraint are preconditions for freedom.

Our predicament differs in obvious ways from the coming crisis that filled Lincoln with foreboding in 1838. Lincoln saw a great evil loose in the land, a lawlessness at war with the freedom and equality out of which the nation was conceived. Nowadays, our morals are corrupted by our fundamental beliefs themselves, from their radicalization and their extension into domains where they tend to sow confusion and discord. But this difference only increases the relevance of Lincoln's admonition to the Young Men's Lyceum: "The political edifice of liberty and equal rights" was not only built by, but cannot be maintained without, good character, sound judgment, and a reasoned respect for the principles of limited constitutional government. ♦

BCA

Ex Nihilo?

A philosopher argues that modern pop culture has embraced Nihilism Lite. **BY JONATHAN V. LAST**

The deepest, most fundamental problem of contemporary American culture can be summed up in three words: Nietzsche was wrong. If only the German had been right—if only the shedding of all our old nineteenth-century hypocrisies and our embrace of nihilism had created the dark, dangerous world of constant excitement he imagined—then, bad as things would be, they surely wouldn't be this bad.

Shows about Nothing
Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist *to* Seinfeld
by Thomas S. Hibbs
Spence, 192 pp., $22.95

Nietzsche is *the* philosopher of our times, Harvey Mansfield once said; "we are all now nihilists," James Edwards added in his 1997 *The Plain Sense of Things*. But when everyone's a Nietzschean, the result is far from what Nietzsche hoped for (though not far from what he feared). Mass nihilism turns out to be the flattening of man, the reduction and simplification of what it means to be human. And nowhere, says the philosopher Thomas Hibbs, is this diminished humanity found more clearly than on television.

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Hibbs's *Shows about Nothing* is an unexpected work—at least from a professor of medieval philosophy at Boston College whose last book was called *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa Contra Gentiles*. The problem with most critics of pop culture, especially conservatives, is that they don't actually know much about pop culture. They hunt and peck at a television show here, a movie there, and try to string together three examples, from which they can claim a trend—from three of which, in turn, they can claim the imminent collapse of Western civilization.

Hibbs is not that sort of critic. He has a resplendent knowledge of, and chagrined appreciation for, popular culture. From *L.A. Confidential* and *The Silence of the Lambs* to *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files*, he shows a clear command of the culture's foibles. Describing a *Seinfeld* episode in which Jerry becomes terrified of becoming "an orgy guy," Hibbs deadpans, "He would have to get orgy clothes, buy special oils, and so forth." Assessing the *Time* magazine cover that asked "Is Feminism Dead?"

and showed the lead character of the television program *Ally McBeal*, Hibbs notes, "The real problem is not with the character Ally, but with the world of *Ally McBeal*, a world in which . . . [feminism] is no longer credible." The everyday vices of the families in Ang Lee's stunning 1997 film *The Ice Storm*, Hibbs observes, allow the banality of evil to "find its finest contemporary expression."

But while he enjoys pop culture, Hibbs is also dismayed by it. He suggests that the criticisms made by conservatives are as incomplete as those made by liberals. Popular culture may subvert traditional virtues, as the Right claims, and teach violent lessons, as the Left claims. But the real danger comes less from the attack on actual morals than from the attack on the very *concept* of morals. Popular culture is an assault on both the Right and the Left, on every notion of reasonable politics and thought. It is the society-wide descent into soft nihilism.

Hibbs is too knowledgeable about the dynamics of American culture to claim that this descent is part of some grand plan by the moguls of Hollywood. Filmmakers and television producers don't have nihilism on the brain, and most couldn't even pronounce the name of Nietzsche. "Yet," he notes, "the absence of any explicit influence of philosophical nihilism on popular culture highlights the significance of the unintended convergence." What Hibbs seems to mean is that there is something about liberal democracy that pulls the culture—whether philosophically informed or not—toward a smooth and comfortable nihilism.

In classical tragedies, man was largely defined by conflict and struggle, in which, as Hibbs writes, the audience located "the grandeur of human life in the gap between aspiration and achievement." Classical comedies likewise lured the audience into sympathizing with the characters and expecting things to end well. But the popular dramas of our time subvert classical tragedy by simplifying the human capacity for good in a world that is complex and textured. We might describe it as a vision not of the banality of evil, but of the banality of good: In such films as *Forrest Gump*, admirable characters are required to be profoundly childlike, profoundly stupid, or profoundly dead.

Hibbs also notes that the late twentieth century uniquely made meaninglessness—"nothing," in the *Seinfeld* vernacular—a source for its comedies. In the British film *Trainspotting*, Ewan McGregor's character explains his heroin addiction: "I chose not to choose life." Hibbs points out that the "subversive deployment of our democratic language of choice and consent indicates we are already beyond good and evil."

The world of sitcoms is rife with this sentiment: "*Seinfeld*'s world is populated by Nietzsche's last men, who, when faced with the great questions and ultimate issues of life, blink and giggle." A quintessential *Seinfeld* episode featured a heated argument over whether people should be allowed to choose what toppings they put on their pizza. That argument parallels an exchange earlier in the episode over whether women should be allowed to have abortions. The problem isn't that *Seinfeld* is taking the wrong position in the abortion debate, but that it thinks all debate is stupid.

"On the surface, the exchange mocks both sides in the abortion debate," says Hibbs. "But the underlying motif is that of morality as farce. There is no higher or lower. Pizza, abortion—it's all the same."

Compelling as it is, the argument in *Shows about Nothing* fails to encompass all of popular culture. Yes, many contemporary tragedies lack the cathartic punch of even film noir, let alone Shakespeare or Euripedes. Several of them, such as *American Beauty*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *The Beach*, revel in their nihilism. Yet enough earnest films are made—*Seven*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Magnolia*, for example—that it is wrong to declare the whole culture given over to nihilism. For that matter, Shakespeare himself is being brought to the screen at a breakneck pace: The last five years have seen seventeen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, with three more due this year. And on some television dramas—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Law & Order*—characters are shown working to be better than the culture apparently allows them to be. Hibbs is right about the sitcom, which is temporarily hostage to the *Seinfeld* model, but cycles in television are as sure as the tides.

As for his thesis that liberal democracies breed nihilism through the abundance of comfort and safety, the only possible response is: Maybe. Hibbs demonstrates that there's a clear logic in nihilism that leads from the mad, exciting drama of Nietzsche to the flat, inhuman comedy of *Seinfeld*. But as the existence of certain other elements of popular culture suggests, it's not so clear that we absolutely *must* be nihilists, even in these late days. ♦

A giant devouring a man, from the British Library MS. Cotton Tiberius B.v. Harvard Univ. Press.

Heaney's Beowulf

An epic poem writ small. **BY MARGARET BOERNER**

There's a raging argument about *Beowulf* going on in the British press. Or perhaps that's not the way to put it. There's certainly a raging argument, precipitated when Jerry Hall—the former fashion model and wife of Mick Jagger, and a woman not previously celebrated for the beauty of her literary judgments—cast the deciding vote to give the prestigious Whitbread literary prize to Seamus Heaney's new translation of the Old English epic poem. But what it all has to do with *Beowulf* remains a question.

One judge pointed out that the Whitbread prize (set up by a British brewery) was supposed to go to the "most enjoyable book of the year," which obviously couldn't be anything to do with *Beowulf*. Another judge countered that the runner-up, J.K. Rowling's latest children's novel, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, is "derivative, traditional, and not particularly well-written." A British writer complained that *Beowulf* is merely "a boring book about dragons," while William Safire weighed in from America to predict the death of Western culture if *Harry Potter* were touted as anything other than children's reading—which seems to cast Jerry Hall in the role of Beowulf himself, saving us all from the monsters.

Beowulf
A New Verse Translation
by Seamus Heaney
Farrar Straus & Giroux, 208 pp., $25

In the midst of the brouhaha, however, there seems to have emerged a curious consensus that *Beowulf* is boring: either a dull classic we must—for the good of civilization—keep pretending to like, or a dull classic we can—after hundreds of years of hypocrisy—finally admit bores us to tears. It's all very odd, for you would think that if there were ever a story that *wasn't* dull, it would be the tale in *Beowulf*.

The plot is easily summarized. Young Beowulf—a favorite in his home court—sails to Denmark from southern Sweden to rid a splendid hall called Heorot of a giant in human form who for twelve years has come in the night to slaughter and devour anyone who sleeps in it. Beowulf and fourteen companions arrive in Denmark and are feasted in Heorot. That evening, as the visitors settle in, the giant Grendel enters, bursting the iron doors of the hall with a single blow, and kills one of Beowulf's companions. But the young hero rises up to wrestle the monster, and Grendel, his arm torn from his shoulder, staggers off to die.

The next day, his bloody tracks are found running off into a distant lake, and everyone celebrates—the Danish King Hrothgar and his court spending the night in Heorot for the first time in twelve years. But to everyone's surprise, Grendel's monstrous mother turns up to avenge her son and kills one of the Danish nobles.

Beowulf goes to the lake, swims down to find Grendel's mother in a vaulted chamber under the waves, kills her, and cuts off the head of Grendel's corpse to bring back in triumph. The whole court rejoices, and the king loads Beowulf with the interlocking gold rings that served as money. ("Ring" in Old English is *beag*, and King Hrothgar is thus given the title of "ring-giver" or *beag-gifa*—which generations of graduate students have mockingly rendered as "bagel bestower.")

Laden with bagels, Beowulf goes home to Sweden, where he eventually receives the throne and reigns in peace for fifty years. But then his land is ravaged by a *wyrm*, a serpent or dragon. With some companions, Beowulf journeys to the dragon's barrow, stands by its steaming entrance, and gives the dragon a challenging shout.

The dragon comes out breathing flames. Beowulf is almost overpowered, but the single companion who has not run away comes to his aid, and together they slay the dragon. This time, Beowulf is mortally wounded, but he lives to see the treasure brought out of the dragon's barrow—its *wergild*, so to speak. His people give Beowulf a splendid funeral pyre and celebrate him in the last lines of the poem (as Heaney renders them):

They said that of all the kings upon the earth,
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

Margaret Boerner is a writer and teacher in Philadelphia.

What a story! The only thing it lacks is a love interest. And what a hero! Beowulf is both magnanimous, like a good Christian, and magnificent, like a good pagan. But then, he can be both pagan and Christian, because the people who told the story were Christians who considered themselves the descendants of this pagan hero.

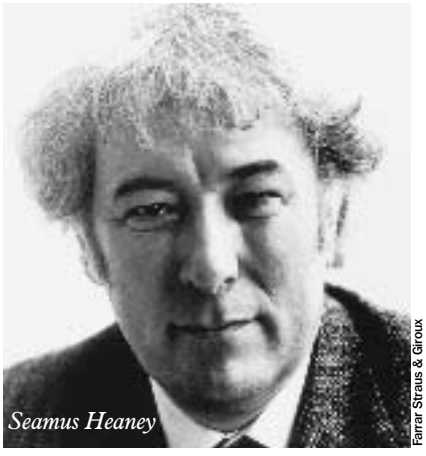
Beowulf survives in only one manuscript, written around 1000 A.D., but neither the author nor even the exact century of composition is known. It is written in the Anglo-Saxons' Old English, but there are historical names, places, and events preserved in *Beowulf* from before the pagan Germanic Anglo-Saxons overran the Celtic people of Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. Perhaps the poem is the sole survivor of a thriving epic tradition. Its Old English is a simple language and uses simple tenses in simple clauses for the most part. (There is nothing in *Beowulf* like, for instance, the complex grammatical tenses, moods, and voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*.)

Instead, to create its poetry, *Beowulf* uses a compact and weighty four-beat line that naturally divides into two. In the first half of the line, two formal alliterative beats—words beginning with the same sound—are used, and in the second half one more is used, usually falling on the third beat.

Thus the fourth and fifth lines of the poem read: *Oft Scyld Scefing Sceathena threatum / monegum mægthum Meodosetla ofteah*. Transliterated word for word, this means *Often Shield Sheafson [of] enemies crowds / [from] many peoples meadseats off-tugged*. Heaney renders it in modern English alliteration thus: *There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes, / A wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.* (It's too bad Heaney left out the *oft*; wrecking mead halls wasn't the only thing Sheafson did. But for the interested reader, this new edition prints the original text opposite the translation.)

Beowulf also uses a system of asides, digressions, references to future and past events, and epithets—*kennings*—that make the tale more formal and sophisticated. The sea is the "swan's road," for instance, and Beowulf the "prince of the rings." We know that the reciting of the poem was accompanied by a lyre, but we do not know just when the lyre was plucked, whether on the beat or during pauses in the lines. In his 1922 scholarly edition, Frederick Klaeber advises that "in order to appreciate the poem fully, we must by all means read it aloud with due regard for scansion and expression. Nor should we be afraid of shouting at the proper time."

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nationalist sentiments encouraged folklorists to claim a great deal for *Beowulf*, elevating it above such "artificial" southern European inventions as the medieval romance legends or the *Aeneid*. (The further north, the more authentic the folklore, it was claimed; on such grounds German scholars exalted the decidedly inferior *Niebelungen Lied*.) And since *Beowulf* was first taken up by the folklorists, some readers have chafed at its asides and digressions. The eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for instance, complained in 1910 that "the general impression produced . . . is that of a bewildering chaos." But the same could be said of the *Odyssey*; it's just that we know its cast of characters better: Circe is instantly recognizable; Wealhtheow is not.

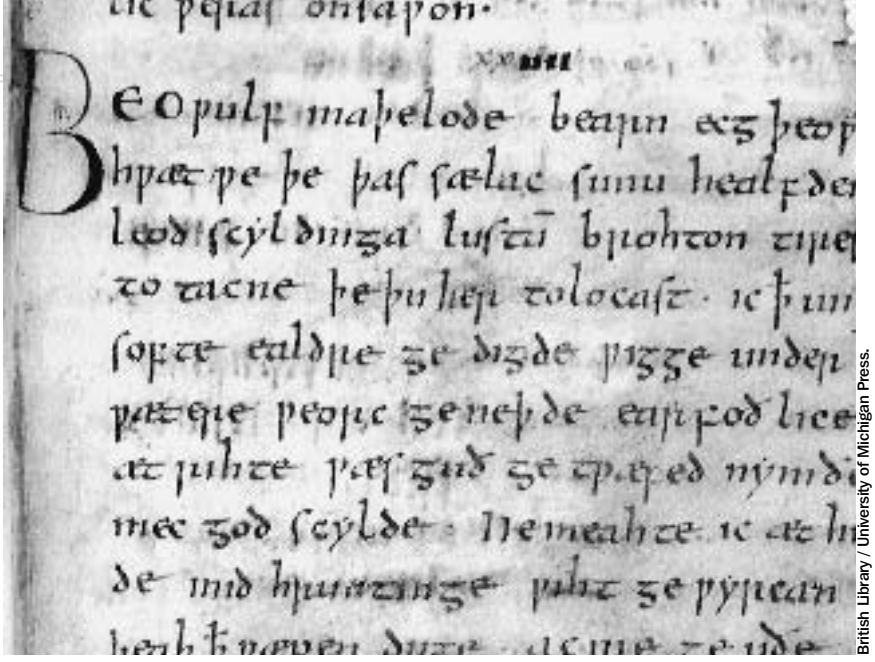

Seamus Heaney
Farrar Straus & Giroux

Cambridge University decided in the 1930s not to examine undergraduates in *Beowulf* on the grounds that it was not a great work and was not even written in English (English being defined by such critics as F.R. Leavis to have begun only after the Normans invaded in 1066 and finished off Anglo-Saxon). Oxford is presently in the throes of dropping the poem, and American universities have long rejected it as too difficult even for Ph.D. candidates.

Thus it is all the more peculiar that Seamus Heaney has chosen to translate *Beowulf*. Heaney is not English but one of the Celts driven out by the Germanic tribes. It's astonishing to realize that tiny Ireland has produced four winners of the Nobel Prize for literature, but it is perhaps even more astonishing to realize that Seamus Heaney is the first of them to be an Irish Roman Catholic. (The other three—George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, and Samuel Beckett—came from Protestant backgrounds.)

Heaney was born in 1939, the eldest of nine children of a farmer in County Derry in Northern Ireland. He was educated locally and attended college in Belfast, where he subsequently became a schoolteacher. But by 1972, after gaining some renown as a poet, he had moved south to the Republic of Ireland, and he has not lived in the North since. In 1981, he became a visiting professor at Harvard and in 1984 was appointed Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. Robert Lowell called him "the most important Irish poet since Yeats," and he is remarkably popular. His books of poetry sell in the tens of thousands, and "Heaneyboppers" flock to his readings.

Heaney explains his interest in *Beowulf* by saying he wanted to keep his English ear while he was teaching in un-English America. His translation (commissioned by the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*) was "a way of ensuring that [his] linguistic anchor would stay lodged on the Anglo-Saxon sea floor," a "region where one's language would not be a simple badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or official imposition, but an entry into further language." (A cynic might also observe that, however Irish he may see himself, Heaney has written and taught for forty years in English—and the readers and money to be garnered from the widely used *Norton Anthology* are also not to be sneezed at.)



British Library / University of Michigan Press.

A folio from the only surviving manuscript of Beowulf.

Often in his poetry, Heaney is a provincial concerned solely with the Irish land and his ancestors. He is regularly accused of having fled the troubles of Northern Ireland for comfort and success in the South, but his work is filled with images of the death of friends and family members, and he remains firmly rooted in the land.

When asked recently about his abiding interest in memorializing, he replied, "The elegiac Heaney? There's nothing else." In this sense, he is perfect as a translator of *Beowulf*—which takes elegy as its tone, a pervasive sense of loss, the individual being subject to a fate he cannot evade. At its close, *Beowulf* celebrates the hero in his very defeat, much as Heaney celebrates those who people his poetry.

But in other ways, Heaney is not at all the ideal translator for *Beowulf*. Perhaps no one nowadays can convey the unadulterated admiration for a male, physical, hierarchical hero that the poem requires. Truth to tell, Beowulf's main job is to beat up "spurned and joyless" freaks. As Heaney translates it,

> *Grendel was the name of this grim demon*
> *haunting the marches, marauding round the heath*
> *and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time*
> *in misery among the banished monsters,*
> *Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed*
> *and condemned as outcasts.*

Beowulf must then kill the creature's mother who *had been forced down into fearful waters / the cold depths, after Cain had killed / his father's son* and was *grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge* at her child's death. (The tale has been modernized by retelling it from the monsters' point of view by John Gardner in *Grendel* and Michael Crichton in *The 13th Warrior*.) Even the dragon begins its ravages because its barrow has been robbed; otherwise it would have continued its inherited job of guarding its treasure hoard for many more centuries.

Heaney is more accurate than some in rendering what the Old English means to convey. Translators frequently ignore the magnanimous/magnificent paradox of Beowulf; the 1963 translation by Burton Raffel, for instance—untrustworthy, but with a singing feel for the syntax and rhetorical strategies of the original—represses Beowulf's yearning for praise and translates the end of the poem as

> *No better king had ever*
> *Lived, no prince so mild, no man*
> *So open to his people, so deserving of praise.*

Heaney's Beowulf is better rendered as *kindest to his people and keenest to win fame*.

The Harvard Classics' 1910 translation by Francis B. Gummere is so artificial in syntax and diction that it can hardly be said to be modern English:

> *Lo, praise of the prowess of people-kings*
> *of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,*
> *we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!*
> *Of Scyld the Scéfing from squadroned foes,*
> *from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore.*

Heaney begins instead:

> *So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by*
> *and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.*
> *We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.*

This is solid, straightforward contemporary English. But even so, it isn't perfect. The first word of the poem is *Hwæt* (whence our word "what"). The obvious translations—*Lo* or *Behold* or *Hark*—were archaic even by the time Gummere was writing in 1910. But Heaney's *So* suggests that some of the story has already been heard—that it's beginning *in medias res*—which is not true. A word that means "Listen up" or "Look" is what's needed. Heaney writes that he used *So* because that is how some of his formidable Irish relatives—"big-voiced Scullions"—would begin conversations. Unfortunately, it is a Scullion who utters Beowulf's appraisal of his chances with Grendel:

> *If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;*
> *. . . Then my face won't be there*
> *to be covered in death: he will carry me away*
> *as he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied.*
> *. . . No need then to*
> *lament for long or lay out my body:*
> *if the battle takes me, send back my mail-shirt,*
> *this breast-webbing that Weland fashioned*
> *and Hrethel gave me, to Lord Hygelac.*
> *Fate goes ever as fate must.*

One expects better than these dull lines from a Nobel laureate. Heaney's kings might as well be local accountants. Heaney wrongly believes his Scullions' "small talk" will do the job, but *Beowulf* needs a translator more bloodthirsty and ceremonial than Heaney, like the young Thom Gunn or Sylvia Plath. In short, Heaney's translation is too domestic.

For all its virtues, this is not a *Beowulf* for the twenty-first century. *Fate goes ever as fate must* will not do to state the overwhelming sense of doom in the poem. Indeed, one fears that this bland translation by Seamus Heaney, now taking pride of place in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, is what convinced so many recent readers in England—other than Jerry Hall—that *Beowulf* is merely a boring book about dragons. ♦

and gather voter information while keeping to the highest ethical standards. So we're changing the wording of Question 2:

Q2. IF YOU KNEW JOHN McCAIN HAD SUPPORTED THE ARIZONA BILL TO BAN HUNTING AND RAISE TAXES TO SUPPORT GAY SEX EDUCATION FOR FIRST GRADERS, WOULD THAT MAKE YOU LIKE HIM MORE?
[ ] YES
[ ] NO
[ ] UNDECIDED

That question should only be asked of the United Hunters of America list. We know how everyone else feels about it. The responses "Who the hell is this?" and "I've a mind to call the po-lice!" should be entered under UNDECIDED.

We've rotated in a new Question 4:

Q4. WOULD IT MAKE YOU MORE OR LESS LIKELY TO VOTE FOR GEORGE BUSH IF YOU FOUND OUT HE WAS ABLE TO OFFER HIS SUPPORTERS MICROSOFT STOCK OPTIONS AND FREE GROCERIES FOR LIFE?
[ ] MORE LIKELY
[ ] LESS LIKELY
[ ] NOT SURE

"What na hayll's a stock option?" should be tabulated under LESS LIKELY.

Also, an important note on Question 5:

Q5. ARE YOU AWARE THAT JOHN McCAIN HAS RECEIVED THE ENDORSEMENT OF THE GROUP "INTRAVENOUS DRUG ABUSERS FOR SLOBODAN MILOSEVIC" (IDASM)?
[ ] AWARE
[ ] NOT AWARE
[ ] NOT SURE

Due to a phone screw-up, we weren't able to register IDASM as a lobbying group until this morning, and the endorsement isn't planned until 6:00 tonight. So in the interest of running a campaign that hews to the highest ethical standards, change "HAS RECEIVED" to "IS ABOUT TO RECEIVE." But just for today.

Since voter attitudes on incest are in flux, it might be good to have a question to figure out where they stand. So change Question 8 to read