BEAT THE DEVIL.

A Last Look at the Talent in the Room Perot: How I Learned to Love Him

It's too bad Ross Perot has such deplorable, regressive ideas for wiping out the deficit. In the final debate in Michigan the jug-eared little billionaire was first-rate with his remarks about the North American Free Trade Agreement.

To the evident embarrassment and confusion of his two opponents, Perot said the agreement would lower wages and de-baub the environment. For about five minutes, in front of a huge audience, "bipartisanship," as represented by Bush and Clinton, was revealed for what it is. And for that achievement (along with his discussion of Noriega and of April Glaspie and the origins of the war with Iraq) Perot deserves our thanks.

If I were a worker in one of those states where the jobs are about to be sucked south, I'd probably pull the lever for him.

Clinton as Dog

Counseled by friends of mature judgment, I tried to like Clinton. It's impossible. Listening to him is like having a pillow stuffed into one's mouth. He just can't stop talking.

He must have had a terrible childhood. The other day I was reading Adorno and Horkheimer's essay on stupidity in Dialectic of Enlightenment and came across the following:

Every partial stupidity of a man denotes a spot where the play of stirring muscles was thwarted instead of encouraged. In the presence of the obstacle the futile repetition of disorganized, groping attempts is set in motion. A child's ceaseless quere are always symptoms of a hidden pain, of a first question to which it found no answer and which it did not know how to frame appropriately. Its reiteration suggests the playful determination of a dog leaping repeatedly at the door it does not yet know how to open, and finally giving up if the catch is out of reach.

There is something doglike about Clinton, smacked on the muzzle, always coming back for more. Woof, woof, Paws up on your chest, eyes desperate for the nod of approval, tail going thump against the ottoman.

Never once, in three debates, did Clinton permit the word "justice" to pass his lips. Never once, in my hearing, did he disturb the airwaves with expressions of concern about the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the nonwhite and—for 99 percent of his allotted time—the nonmale. Even when he's making a relative amount of sense, as he did in the third debate when he attacked speedy deficit reduction and Perot's salvation-through-pain, he spoils it.

Clinton is the ultimate distillation of neoliberalism. He thinks of human liberation in terms of asset management. Asked about poor education or lousy health care, he speaks only of "competitiveness," never about how such blights constrain people from living happier lives. Asked about the debt crisis in Third World countries, he says it is a problem because it "has lessened their capacity to buy American goods and probably cost us 1.5 million jobs."

What did you do in the polling booth, Daddy? As Eugene Debs said, "It is better to vote for something you want and not get it than something you don't want and get it." G.B. Shaw had the same idea: "Get what you like or you'll grow to like what you get."

My friend Doug Lummis put it very well, at the conclusion of a manuscript on the philosophy of radical democracy:

Hannah Arendt has described eloquently how, when political action succeeds in generating real power, the participants experience a happiness different from the kind of happiness one finds in private life. . . .

Public happiness is not isolating but shared. It is the happiness of being free among other free people, of having one's public faith redeemed and returned, of seeing public hope becoming public power, becoming reality itself. . . .

The experience of public happiness is an exceptional one in the politics of our time, but not such a very rare exception. It has been known in many countries in this century, on every continent, in societies of every kind of political, economic and cultural configuration. It has been felt, if sometimes only momentarily, everywhere, and therefore it is possible everywhere.

Looking around, I don't see much anticipation of public happiness. Politically speaking, people here have forgotten how to be publicly happy, oscillating only between terrible fear and mild relief. Probably the most intense moment of public happiness this political year was experienced by those people who rose up in Los Angeles. You can't go through life just holding your nose.

ClintonSpeak

The other day in my garage I tripped over an old box of files. Out spilled Jimmy Carter's position statements from 1976. I sat down and leafed through them. How the political atmosphere has changed, for the worse. Although he hadn't the slightest intention of fulfilling such pledges, Carter felt it necessary to promise to break up the oil companies and find a Federal Reserve chairman in tune with his economic proposals—which mainly revolved around full employment. Carter blew it and I never cared for him much either, but next to Clinton he was a man of adamantine political principle.

With Clinton, it all boils down to that dreadful phrase, "investing in people," as in "investing in people, challenging the private sector to organize in new ways to increase productivity by putting business and labor, education and government on the same side, and making an intense commitment to be competitive in the global economy." This particular slab of Clintonspeak was served up at the Economic Club of Detroit last August, but he says the same sort of thing ten times a day. Harness "investing in people" to its equally repulsive stablemate, "policy wonk," and you experience the bleak mental landscape of the Clinton class.

Back to "bipartisanship" and its fealty to real power. When Sander Vanocur raised the issue of the Fed and the power of the Fed chairman in the first debate, all three candidates fell over themselves to extol the "separation" of the Fed from democratic control.

If he makes it to the White House, Clinton won't have much time. Capital is already threatening to strike. After his refusal to indulge in tub thumping about the deficit, Wall Street
reacted swiftly. By October 21 The Wall Street Journal was announcing on its front page that “bond prices fell sharply again on a growing belief that Clinton will win the election and step up spending to aid the economy.”

If you are going to panic capital, you have to fight capital. If you don’t, you’ll capitulate soon enough. Should Clinton go forward with the meager $20 billion stimulus plan calls for, the economy won’t revive and Wall Street will have him by the throat. His only chance is to order, in the first hundred days, a big stimulus of $100 billion or so. If not, it will be too late and he’ll end up in the same mess Carter did, and the Republicans will be back for another twelve years.

Investing in Clinton

“Although I’m voting for Bush out of loyalty, Clinton’s decisive support of the Cuban Democracy Act turned the Cuban-American community around.”

This was Jorge Mas Canosa, head of the Cuban American National Foundation, as quoted in an admiring column by Pamela Falk in The Wall Street Journal for October 16. The column was titled “Exiles Set Policy Agenda on Cuba for Next Administration.” According to Falk, the week Clinton declared his support for the Torricelli bill (a k a the Cuban Democracy Act mentioned above, which tightens the embargo on Cuba) he collected $125,000 in one night at a fundraiser in Miami’s Little Havana and got another $150,000 from a similar event in Coral Gables.

On another front, Clinton was a Likud man, which may help to explain why William Safire and A.M. Rosenthal have been promoting him over Bush.

Cap’n Bushy on the Burning Deck

Cap’n Bushy looked awful in the debates. Maybe it’s the thyroid thing. Added to which, he had the ultimate humiliation of Bishop Blumenthal questioning his war heroism in The New Republic. (I feel a tiny surge of proprietary pride about this matter, being I think the first person to discuss, back in 1988, the contradictions in Bush’s accounts of what happened over Chichi Jima.)

Bush always was dumb about economics, and his ignorance has caught up with him. His last chance to jump-start the economy came in March of this year, when the Democrats offered him a deal. They’d give him what he wanted, a renewed investment tax credit and lowered capital gains taxes, in return for a tax increase for some upper-income groups. (This, incidentally, is Clinton’s plan.) But with Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan at his elbow, getting everything wrong, Bush declined to vex the rich and so missed out on his last chance to have some growth by November.

Bush has had some sensational failures on his team. Greenspan is prominent; close behind comes Peggy Noonan, who strangled his presidency before it even came to term with the “Read my lips: no new taxes” line. William Kristol similarly sabotaged his boss, Dan Quayle, and the Republican ticket with the “family values” campaign.

Remembering that ill-starred theme of the Republican con-

vention, it is edifying to look back at Nazi social policy, as well described in David Schoenbaum’s Hitler’s Social Revolution and Robert Brady’s The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism.

On the subject of women and motherhood, Schoenbaum writes, “In the days before 1933, Nazis thought relatively little about the place of women in the Third Reich. . . . But what they thought tended to be conservative. The entire complex of attitudes National Socialism represented drove it inevitably to anti-feminism, distinguished as it may have been with patriarchal deference, moral self-righteousness, and the noisy glorification of motherhood.”

Otto Strasser, the Nazi newspaper editor, believed that women did not belong in politics. Hitler was of the same opinion, saying in 1935, “Equal rights for women mean they experience the esteem they deserve in the areas for which nature has intended.” This sounds a lot like Marilyn Quayle.

In the spirit of bipartisanship, there’s something for the Democrats here as well. “A broad, independent middle class is the guarantee for stable social relations,” ran one Nazi bulletin quoted by Brady. “National Socialism fights for the revival of the middle class.” The Nazis were speaking in the name of the small shopkeepers, faced with ruin by the big chains: the old conflict between the corner store and the Wal-Mart. Clinton, of course, is a Wal-Mart man.

Pause for a Smile: That Man Menashe

I’ve spoken in the past of Ari Ben-Menashe’s urges to gild truth, which have lured many a trusting journalist onto the path of folly. Ben-Menashe, erstwhile Israeli intelligence functionary, claims omniscience on Iran/contra, the origins of the Iraq war and pretty much every other dramatic chapter in late twentieth-century history.

Now the folks at Sheridan Square Press, who brought you the late Jim Garrison’s On the Trail of the Assassins, have published Ben-Menashe’s memoirs, Profits of War.

Tucked in the back of this volume is an erratum slip, which reads: “In the Afterword (p. 346), the author reports, as he had been informed for nearly two years, that Abimael Guzmán, the founder of Shining Path, had died in 1990. Less than a month before this book was published, the author was in Peru, and this information was again confirmed by high officials of Shining Path. However, on September 13, the Peruvian authorities announced that Abimael Guzmán had been arrested in Lima. If this is true, the author was apparently deliberately misinformed, although many Shining Path followers also believed that their leader had died.”

The interested reader seeking mention of Guzmán in the text finds an encounter between the former Mossad man and the leader of the Shining Path movement: “I was led into a farmhouse, which was guarded by a number of men clutching Kalashnikovs. In the living room a balding man who looked like a college professor stepped forward. . . . He did not smile as he introduced himself as Abimael Guzmán.”

Balding? Photographs of Guzmán in captivity disclose a fine head of hair.
Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.