

Chapter 13: Politics

In religion and politics, people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second hand, and without examination.

Mark Twain, *Autobiography*



I was a cradle Democrat. Everyone in my family was a liberal and a Democrat and so was everyone we knew (or so I thought – actually I was not quite right about that). Franklin D. Roosevelt (left) was highly thought of in our house – admiration for him was the originating point of our political attitudes, as he was elected when my parents were still in their mid-



teens. Also admired was Adlai E. Stevenson (1900-1965) (top right), the Democratic candidate against Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956. So was Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia (1882-1947) (bottom right), although he was nominally a Republican – no doubt my parents voted for him on the Fusion line. In 1956 my father was astounded that Stevenson didn't win. He said he didn't know anybody who voted for Eisenhower.



I remember going with my father in November 1948 when he voted for Truman at the armory on 93rd Street and Madison Avenue. Voting was by levers in a huge machine, and there was a separate set of levers to practice on – he had me vote for my favorite character in his bedtime stories (Mr. McGinty the Trouble-Shooter won). Then we went into the booth and he allowed me to pull the voting levers (at

his direction), and the special big red lever that opened the curtain at the end. After that I was a Democrat for the next 46 years. I wrote a letter to President Truman, complaining that Mary's bus was late. I suppose I thought he could do something about that – after all, he was the President. I was 8 when he left office in January 1953.

I developed a contempt for President Eisenhower, based in large part on prejudice and ignorance. There actually was a lot to



complain about with President Eisenhower, but I didn't understand what it was – all I really knew was that he was stupid (which he absolutely wasn't) and played golf when he should have been working (not so), and that he was a Republican (well, that part at least was true). I have since read that “studies show” people identify with a political party based on childhood influences, much as they do with religion. I was a Democrat for no reason I really understood – I just *was*, we all were.

I got interested in government and politics fairly early. That and my loathing for President Eisenhower and reciprocal fondness for Stevenson (based despite Stevenson's fine personal qualities on the same unexamined environmental influences) led me in 1956, at the age of 12, to present myself at the Lexington Democratic Club asking to join. As I remember it the Lexington Club was in an upstairs suite in a building on Lexington or maybe Madison Avenue somewhere in the 70s or maybe 80s (streets, not years). It was the local Democratic Club of the Upper East Side, and although I didn't know it at the time it was the first of the so-called “Reform” Democratic clubs in New York; these were the insurgent competitors of the “regular” clubs dominated by the old-style city political machine called Tammany Hall (founded in 1789).

The Tammany Hall machine was coming to the end of its power in the 1950s. Under the old system party politics were run by the clubs, one club per Assembly District (equivalent to the former wards), and district leaders ran the clubs and the districts. Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. had been elected in 1953 as a Tammany man, actually as a protégé of the last Tammany boss, Carmine de Sapio, but broke with Tammany and changed to Reform in 1961. Eleanor Roosevelt was a leading force in the change-over to Reform, taking her revenge on de Sapio for blocking her son Franklin Junior's plan to run for governor in 1954.

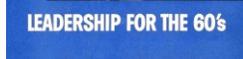
I didn't know any of this history then. All I knew was that I wanted to work for Stevenson.¹ The person in charge at the club the day I showed up consulted its constitution, made a phone call, and discovered (or decided) that there was no age limit and you didn't have to be a voter to join. He signed me up as a member. I loaded myself up with literature and buttons for Stevenson and local candidates, including Alice Sachs for State Assembly and Anthony Akers for Congress, and began campaigning. When I told my father he should vote for Alice Sachs he asked me why, and I had no idea why. I was somewhat green as a politician in those days.²

¹ Sure, if Ike were to run against Stevenson in 2012 I'd still be for Stevenson. But this time it would be strictly on the issues, of course. Plus I'd never vote for a Republican for President in a million years. But secretly I think now that, in the early Cold War years of the 1950s, maybe we were better off with Ike than we would have been with Adlai.

² The right answer would have been “she's a Democrat,” or if in a primary election then “she's a *Reform* Democrat.” But I didn't even know enough to give that answer.

Nevertheless I did campaign earnestly for Stevenson, going door to door on the Upper East Side, distributing literature, stuffing envelopes, and doing entry-level political grunt work. I liked it a lot. I also collected Stevenson buttons and wore them ostentatiously. I continued to wear a Stevenson button for some months, or maybe years, after the election was over. Never say die.

I was also an anti-Communist, in a typical Upper East Side Reform Democratic way. Most of what I knew about it then was that the Soviet Union was a tyranny (true), and that no country had ever gone Communist voluntarily (mostly true then), and that once a country went Communist there was no way out and no more freedom or free elections (true until 1989). That was enough to make an anti-Communist out of me. I still am an anti-Communist, and never went along with the tendency of some of my lefty friends to idealize such people as Mao Tse-Tung, Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro. Castro was a tyrant and a gangster and it would suit me fine to see him strung up. I scandalized my friend Peter Stander once by saying exactly this. People say Cuba has a high literacy rate – true, but they don't let you read anything that doesn't follow the Party Line. Down with Castro!³



In 1960 I supported Kennedy over Nixon, whom I had also learned to despise. I still despise Nixon – he deserved it a lot more than Eisenhower ever did. I was not able to participate in the election – see Chapter 8 – but I was delighted that he won and supported him enthusiastically as President. I liked his wit and style and liked it that he was a Democrat.

By the time Kennedy was in office (1961-63) I knew quite a lot more about politics and government and was able to follow some of the issues. I read the newspaper every day (the *Herald Tribune* and usually the *Times* also) and watched television news (the Huntley-Brinkley Report – good night, Chet).⁴ I watched the President's very entertaining news conferences or read the transcripts in the paper. I also read *The New Republic* and a number of other political magazines. For a teenager I was pretty well-informed politically. By the time I got to Columbia, politics and government was one of my major interests, and I concentrated in it there. See Chapter 11. I had theoretical hopes of a political or diplomatic career, but in practice I knew this could not happen – see Chapter 8.

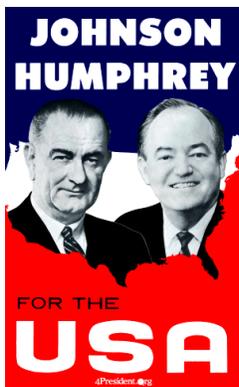
³ He has retired since I first wrote this paragraph. Well, down with his brother too!

⁴ As their sign-off ritual Huntley would say to Brinkley “Good night, David,” and Brinkley would reply “Goodnight, Chet.” At one time millions knew these phrases as well as they knew their prayers, or better.

I was hit very hard by President Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963. I was a college freshman and remember it all extremely clearly. I watched television for hours in the lounge at Furnald Hall, my Columbia dormitory. I went down to Washington for his funeral and stood in the front row on Pennsylvania Avenue, right outside the White House, as the cortège formed up and moved past me. The cold came up painfully through the soles of my shoes.

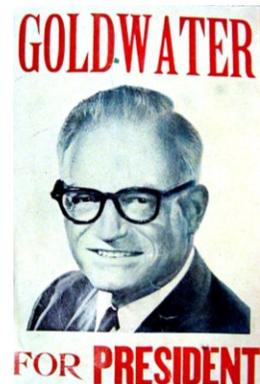


In mid-1963 the war in Vietnam was not that big a deal. I supported it because I believed the anti-Communist rhetoric which was used to justify our involvement, which was still quite small in those days – we only had 16,000 troops there by the end of the year, and only in advisory roles. I describe in Chapter 12.A how I changed my mind about the war, and was radicalized on other issues too. The present chapter is about mainstream, mostly electoral, politics – it is sufficient here to say that I wanted a peace candidate in the election of 1964.



Fortunately (or so I thought) there was one – President Lyndon Johnson. Graybeards and *aficionados* will recall that Johnson ran as a peace candidate that year, against Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona (1909-1998). He promised that he would not “send American boys to do what Asian boys should do,” that is, fight in Vietnam. Although Americans were already fighting there, they were posted to South Vietnamese units and the United States did not have major combat responsibility. Goldwater was seen as a nut who would drag us into a major war. I remember going with Christopher to a vast rally for Johnson at Madison Square Garden. It was a kind of peace rally – Norman Thomas (1884-1968), six times Socialist candidate for President, spoke for Johnson, and notable lefty singers Joan Baez and (I think) Pete Seeger performed. Johnson won in a landslide, of course, and look what happened. Don’t get me started. The phony Gulf of Tonkin incident was staged in August 1964, two months before the election.

I remember how appalled I was to learn that my great-uncle Abe Rubinstein had given money to Goldwater. Goldwater! How could someone in my family do a thing like that? I was astounded. But now that I think of it, his daughter Judy Rosenberg was a



longtime supporter of Senator Jacob Javits (1904-1986), a liberal Republican but still a Republican. How? Why? I have only voted for two Republicans in my life, and both of them later became Democrats. One was John Lindsay (1921-2000) when he ran for Mayor in 1965 and 1969, and I voted for him on the Liberal line.⁵ I voted for him in 1965, and if I hadn't left town I would have voted for him again in 1969 on the Liberal line – he lost the Republican primary in 1969 and won re-election as a Liberal. The other Republican was California State Senator Milton Marks (1920-1998), a peach of a fellow with an impeccably liberal voting record.

1965 was a big political year for me. My Congressman, William Fitts Ryan (1922-1972) (right) (*not* FitzRyan), was a Reform Democrat and a terrific person. He was the first Reform Democrat elected to public office in New York City (1960). In 1965, during his third term in Congress, he ran for the Democratic nomination for Mayor. The other candidates were Abe Beame, Paul Screvane, and Paul O'Dwyer. O'Dwyer



would have been fine too, but Ryan was my Congressman when I lived near Columbia and I knew him from the Riverside Democratic Club, then as now in an upstairs suite at 106th Street and Broadway. That summer I threw myself into the Ryan campaign. It was an underdog campaign and I got in early – I was almost 21 but not yet quite old enough to vote.⁶

It turned out that the day I showed up to volunteer, the Ryan campaign was about to open its campaign headquarters in the Sheraton Atlantic Hotel on 34th Street and Broadway (left).⁷ I went down to help open the place up and virtually never left – I became the *de facto* manager of Ryan Headquarters. I had the keys, I was the interface with the hotel staff, I arranged for everything that needed

⁵ In New York candidates could be nominated by more than one party, giving voters a choice how to vote for them. The New York Liberal Party was a satellite party of the Democrats, often used for this purpose, as was the New York Conservative Party on the other side.

⁶ The voting age in New York did not drop to 18 until the 26th Amendment in 1971.

⁷ It was the former McAlpin Hotel, now condos.

arranging. I kept the Gestetner mimeograph machines working.⁸ Because I was on speed all the time (see Chapter 17.D), I almost never slept, and so I was there 20 hours a day. It was a great experience for me – it was my first taste of responsibility, and my first chance to learn how to do things in the world.

Sometime in the middle of the summer Ryan’s campaign manager detailed me away from headquarters to work on the allied campaign of Eugenia Flatow for the Democratic nomination (which meant election) for Manhattan Councilman-at-Large. This was a borough-wide seat in addition to Manhattan’s district seats on the New York City Council. It was a low-visibility campaign, and apart from campaign manager Ed Robin and Gene’s husband Paul I was the only volunteer. This meant even more responsibility, which I liked very much.

One thing I handled pretty much by myself was a challenge to the nominating petitions of one of her primary opponents. To get on the primary election ballot a candidate had to submit petitions signed by registered Democratic voters, and one of them had submitted a lot of phony petitions. The hope was that we could get him off the ballot and so help our chances. I went down to the Board of Elections on Varick Street and examined the opposition petitions. They were pretty bad in spots – whole petitions filled out in the same handwriting, signatures in alphabetical order, etc. I figured out what the rules were and designed a form for documenting our objections to each petition. And I masterminded our presentations at the hearings before the commissioners (or whatever they were) at the Board of Elections, although Ed Robin, who was a lawyer, actually asked the questions, which I prepared him for. The hearings were (to put it mildly) not impartial, and although we did win some points, inevitably we didn’t get our opponent off the ballot. But it was a terrific learning experience for me, and as I look back on it, it was a trial run for being a lawyer.

- It was a little strange in 2008 to hear criticism of Barack Obama for doing this same thing in his early State Senate election in Chicago. Scrutinizing your opponent’s petitions is a routine part of local politics and often reveals blatant fraud. What are you supposed to do, overlook that on grounds of chivalry?

Need I say that Flatow was defeated in the primary? She came in last of three. And so was Ryan (third of four, but ahead of O’Dwyer). But it was a great summer for me anyway.

I was not old enough to vote for either of my candidates in the primary, but I turned 21 before the general election and cast my first vote for Lindsay rather than the Democrat

⁸ Mimeograph ink was the blood, or maybe the lymph, of politics everywhere in 1960s America, left and right. For more on the Gestetner mimeograph machine, and a picture, see Chapter 12.C, text at note 12.

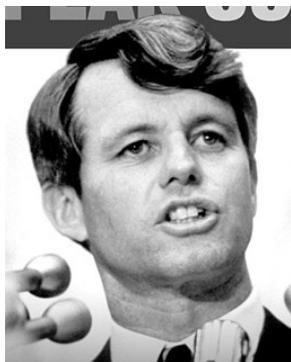
Beame. I knew Lindsay (left) as my Congressman from the East Side, before I moved up to Columbia (he represented what was called the “Silk Stocking” [then the 17th] Congressional District. Also I had heard him speak during the campaign and was very impressed; he was terrifically handsome, too.⁹ In a line Lindsay made into a campaign slogan, the journalist Murray Kempton summed it up: “He is fresh and everyone else is tired.” I was pleased with his performance as mayor and am sorry he didn’t go further, but the mayoralty of New York is a traditional political dead end – no one occupying that office has ever won a higher one since DeWitt Clinton



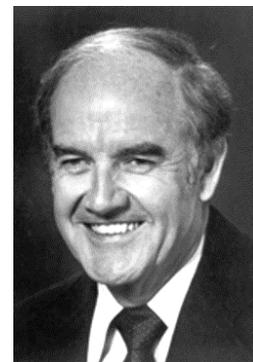
became Governor of New York in 1817. Rudy Giuliani is just the latest victim of the curse. Perhaps if Lindsay had been a Democrat it might have been different for him – he finally did become a Democrat in 1971 and ran for President the next year, but it was too late.

I tell in Chapter 12 of my general political evolution and leftward drift over the years 1965-1968. As noted, it was powered by the Vietnam War, the draft, and the Columbia Strike. My work for the National Conference for New Politics in 1966-67 is discussed in that chapter also.

In the election of 1968 I supported Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota (1916-2005) in his insurgent primary campaign against the war. Mavens will recall that he came in second to Johnson in the New Hampshire primary in March 1968, with 42% of the vote to Johnson’s 49%. This was a shocking upset, and showed how unpopular Johnson and the war were in the Democratic Party. Johnson announced later that month that he would not be a candidate again. I remember watching this electrifying statement on television in my 120th Street apartment.



After McCarthy showed the way, Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York (1925-1968) (left) entered the race as an anti-war candidate. I had heard Kennedy in 1966 when he came to speak at Columbia as a candidate for the Senate. I was impressed, and voted for him that year. But many who supported McCarthy in 1968, including me, thought his Presidential run that year was



⁹ In the picture the figure in the background looks exactly like the 20-year-old me, but it probably isn’t.

opportunistic, and that McCarthy deserved continued support for having been the first to challenge Johnson. In retrospect Kennedy would have been a better candidate, and a better President too.

But in June, after winning the California primary, Kennedy was assassinated. That left McCarthy, who was by now a spent force, and Senator George McGovern of South Dakota (above right), to whom many of the Kennedy supporters now turned as an alternative to Vice President Hubert Humphrey (1911-1978), justly regarded as Johnson's lapdog and unacceptably complicit in the war. I have no memory of voting in the primary that year. New York had no presidential primary in 1968; Pennsylvania had, but it might have been over (or too late to register) by the time I moved there at the end of May. But if I did vote, it would probably have been for McGovern.

The other big political event of 1968 was the disastrous Democratic convention in Chicago, where the thuggish Mayor Richard Daley (1902-1976) (right), the local Democratic boss, allowed his cops to go wild beating up protesters. It was an outrage few of my generation will ever forget. Who *could* forget the Chicago Seven, or Mayor Daley shouting anti-Semitic insults at Senator Abe Ribicoff as Ribicoff was speaking to the convention?¹⁰ Passions ran high. I watched part of the convention at the home of Columbia history professor James Shenton. By the time Humphrey was nominated it was just about too late for him, although he was closing the gap against Nixon when time ran out.



When the fall election was held I was in Philadelphia. I was much too angry about the war to vote for Humphrey. As there was no “major” third party candidate that year, I was reduced to voting for individual electors. I voted for all of Eldridge Cleaver's electors – if I had known as much about Cleaver then as I do now I wouldn't have, even Humphrey was better than *that* – but there weren't enough of them to fill up the ballot. So then I wrote in all the Socialist Labor electors (Socialist Labor was De Leonist, not Troskyite like the Socialist Workers Party) – that's another group I wouldn't support today. But

¹⁰ Ribicoff told the convention “With George McGovern as President of the United States, we wouldn't have to have Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago!” Daley, sitting with the Illinois delegation right in the front of the hall, shouted back over the applause “Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch!” Television made this almost undeniable.

The Chicago Seven, charged with conspiracy, riot, and so on, were Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, John Froines and Lee Weiner. Bobby Seale was in the group until his trial was severed. The judge was the notorious Julius Hoffman; Bill Kunstler led the defense.

that *still* wasn't enough (Pennsylvania had 29 electoral votes that year). So then I started writing people in for the remaining slots. I voted for my law school classmate Andy Schwartzman and my college friend Joel Solkoff and my father and some other people – never mind that some of them might not have qualified as Pennsylvania electors, they weren't going to win anyway. My landlord, a landscape architecture student at Penn, was an election judge (meaning a precinct election officer), and he had to record the write-in votes; mine was the only write-in for my precinct, so he ended up knowing how I voted. But he was a liberal too, so it didn't matter. Maybe I should have written *him* in as an elector.

A word about the presidential nominating conventions. I was always a great fan of televised conventions – I watched those of both parties every four years at least from 1956 (and I think even in 1952, at my grandmother's house). The last presidential nomination that went more than one ballot was Eisenhower's in 1952, but they continued to be exciting television. I remember especially the uproar over Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964, and John Chancellor being removed from the floor of the Republican convention that same year (he was arrested on camera and signed off "this is John Chancellor, somewhere in custody").



Chancellor ordered out of 1964 Republican convention

For many years the parties were pretty good at maintaining enough drama to keep people interested – there was usually something like a platform fight or a credentials issue to keep the pundits talking and the political junkies entertained. And the roll-calls were thrilling with their dark horses and favorite sons, even though the outcome was not in doubt. I always watched the whole four days. In recent years, though, the conventions have become highly scripted infomercials, and the candidate is always effectively chosen months earlier in front-loaded primaries. Now I don't bother watching even the Democratic conventions (although I did watch some of the major speeches at Obama's convention in 2008). I gave up on the Republicans even earlier – they disgust me too much to watch.

I made it a practice to volunteer in elections on a regular basis. Usually what I did (except in the 1965 city primary) was unskilled work such as I had done for Stevenson – envelope stuffing, precinct walking, distributing literature, phone banking, getting out the vote.¹¹ I continued doing this kind of work for many years, and sometimes still do where there is someone or something on the ballot I particularly care about. (In California, as in many other western states, initiative and referendum put propositions on the ballot as well

¹¹ I have been chased down apartment house corridors by dogs while distributing literature – it's all for the cause.

as candidates). In recent years I have stopped walking precincts but still do phone banking sometimes, and now I also give money, which I couldn't do before.

Joel Solkoff reminds me that in 1969, although I voted in Pennsylvania, I happened to be in New York for the primary in which incumbent Mayor John Lindsay was defeated for the Republican renomination. We went to his party at the Roosevelt Hotel, but it was a downer because he lost. So we went to John Marchi's victory party instead. As noted, Lindsay won as a Liberal in the general election without the Republican nomination, which went to the right-winger Marchi.

In 1972 the war was still on, and as noted by convention time I supported McGovern for the nomination, and he won. It was exceptionally rare for anyone I supported to win the nomination – in fact until Obama in 2008, I think that's the last time that happened unless you count President Carter's doomed renomination in 1980.

I worked for McGovern that year in San Francisco, and remember the frustration and despair of knocking on doors on election night, pleading with people to go out and vote, and hearing them say there was no point because TV had already declared Nixon the winner. Not that a few more votes in California would have saved McGovern, but still it was discouraging.¹²

1972 was the year that thoroughly crummy cracker demagogue and former Governor of Alabama George Wallace (1919-1998) was shot while campaigning in the Democratic presidential primary in Maryland. With him out of the race Nixon brilliantly scooped up all his racist Democratic supporters. That was the beginning of the "Southern strategy" which led to the catastrophic Republican ascendancy under which we still suffer.

In 1974 I was living in Washington DC, and there was no point in local electoral work, but it was still exciting to be there during the crisis which ended in Nixon's resignation. It was a local story.



In 1976 I was abroad while the Democratic field was sorting itself out. I started a long run of choosing the smartest, funniest, and most imaginative, original and eloquent candidate, and watching him go down to ruin. My candidate in 1976 was Rep. Morris Udall of Arizona (1922-1998) (left). David Broder called him "too funny to be President," and he was right about that (Udall later used the line as the title of his autobiography). He was nosed out by Jimmy Carter early in the race and never recovered. I was satisfied to support Carter in the general election, which he won largely because

¹² Projected results are not shown on TV now for any state until 8:00 PM Pacific time, when the polls close in the last of the 48 contiguous states.

of the backlash against Nixon after Watergate.

1976 was the year I returned to California from Taiwan (see Chapter 22) to find Tom Hayden, of SDS and the Chicago Seven, running for the Democratic nomination for the Senate against the boring incumbent John Tunney. I went down to volunteer for Hayden and did a lot of grunt work in his campaign. I even met him and his wife Jane Fonda when they made an appearance at their San Francisco headquarters (the main HQ was of course in Los Angeles). As usual my participation was the kiss of death and Hayden lost; Tunney was renominated and went on to lose to Republican S. I. Hayakawa (1906-1992), a professor of linguistics best known for falling asleep.

In 1977 I worked to get my law school classmate Ron Green elected San Francisco Supervisor from District Five (Noe Valley). He lost to the charismatic gay candidate Harvey Milk (1930-1978). If he had won he would probably have been assassinated instead of Milk. For more on this see Chapter 23.



I rarely had much to do with Congressional races, because almost always I thoroughly approved of my Congressman, and whoever he was he never had any trouble winning without my help: John Lindsay (on the East Side of Manhattan), Bill Ryan (on the West Side), Bill Green (in Philadelphia), the very powerful Phillip Burton (1926-1983) (left),



Tom Lantos (1928-2008) and Jackie Speier (in San Francisco), and Gerry Studds (1937-2006) (in Cape Cod; see right). I stood by Gerry Studds when he had his gay scandal with a Congressional page. I wrote to him that I didn't care if he fucked elephants as long as he kept on voting right.

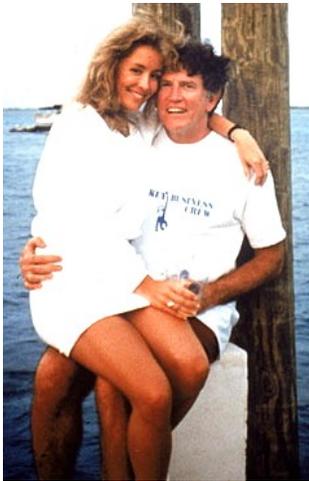
In 1980 I supported President Carter for re-election over Ted Kennedy, which is probably why he lost. I remember watching Reagan's inauguration on a TV set in a small hotel in Tiberias, Israel.

Here's an e-mail to a friend who tried to tell me in 1999 that ol' Dutch wasn't so bad after all.

You are just so incredibly wrong about this it blows my mind.

1. Reagan may or may not have been the embodiment of Evil, but he was certainly the embodiment of really bad government.
2. Reagan's saying "bring down the wall" didn't bring down the wall. If that could do it, Kennedy would have brought down the wall.

3. Yes, he had an appealing personal style, and “he didn’t have to ask pollsters or count votes to figure out what he thought about something.” The trouble was, what thought was a mixture of regurgitated right-wing pap, patriotic songs from the 40s, and imagined scenes from Warner Brothers B movies. After so long with phonies and frauds, it is tempting to remember Reagan as a genuine person. But you persist in forgetting that sincerity is not all – you need substance too, to be judged on its merit as policy and not on the charm or sincerity of the leader. No doubt Mussolini had deeply held personal views, too – that wouldn’t be a good reason to follow a modern-day politician who thought Mussolini was a terrific role model.
4. “Vision, simplicity, guts, independent thinking, these are the essential elements of real leadership.” Absolutely right. The problem is: leadership is no good if it leads us off a cliff. We need leadership in the right direction! Leadership in the wrong direction is worse than none at all. I’d rather the right-wingers and *Roe v. Wade* repealers and so on didn’t have such great leadership. We have still not recovered from the last great leader the right wing had – meaning of course St. Ronald Reagan.



In the hopeless effort to defeat Reagan in 1984, I was for the cadaverous-looking Senator Alan Cranston of California (1914-2000) originally, but he flamed out early and I switched to Senator Gary Hart of Colorado. Hart, who had been McGovern’s campaign manager in 1972 (and what a success *that* was!) won the New Hampshire primary and did very well in the other New England primaries. I voted for him by absentee ballot from London, where I had to go to the Magistrate’s Court and swear an oath in the witness box to get my ballot authenticated. But former Vice President Walter Mondale was too strong for him; Mondale (such a cipher he doesn’t even get a picture here) was nominated, and in due course crushed by Reagan’s landslide re-election. Hart is seen

here, at left, with Donna Rice, in the photo that finished off his 1988 campaign. What a bunch of losers are getting pictures in this chapter! Here’s an e-mail from 1999:

I don’t follow sports, I follow presidential politics instead, down to the hot stove league murmurings in the off season.¹³ Who gets elected can have more serious consequences than who wins the pennant, but there is no point in getting more excited about it as there’s nothing we can do about either one. So I am an active partisan, as for a team, a passionate rooter, but when I wail how wrong you are, it is

¹³ *Hot stove league* refers to deeply informed followers of a sport like baseball. In the winter, when no games are being played, they sit around the hot stove in the country store and discuss minute technical developments like pre-season trades, coaching appointments and scouting reports.

as if I am wailing the same wail about your choosing Robinson over Schm Robinson as an all-star 3d-baseman. All in the spirit of the game. I have to think of it as a spectator sport, because (1) I can have no meaningful participation, and (2) if I didn't think if it as a sport I would be REALLY REALLY PISSED at how these bozos are fucking up my country.

Joel Solkoff had wangled a convention press pass to the 1984 Democratic Convention, held in San Francisco, as an accredited representative of a Japanese magazine which wanted him to interview Mondale. He asked me to come to San Francisco to help him, and put me up in a semi-sleazy motel on Ellis Street. He lent me his press pass, and for a brief heady half hour or so I was on the floor of the convention. As an old convention maven this was deeply thrilling, even though there was no doubt about anything at the convention and Mondale was as uninspiring a candidate as could have been imagined. Hart would have been a better candidate, but even Jesus (perhaps particularly Jesus) could not have beaten Reagan that year. I voted for Mondale as a way of sealing his defeat.

In 1984 Steven Kinzer of the *New York Times*, who lived in Wellfleet on Cape Cod, gave a talk there about Nicaragua. I decided to go to Nicaragua and have a look, which I did in early 1985 (see Chapter 30.F). I remember giving a very emotional speech at a rally soon afterward about American intervention there, saying that this was the first time since the end of the Vietnam War ten years earlier that I had gone out into the streets in protest. I didn't go again until 2006, against the war in Iraq.



In 1988, following my usual practice of picking the candidate least likely to be nominated, I backed Rep. Patricia Schroeder of Colorado. She crashed early after breaking into tears over something, and I switched to Governor Bruce Babbitt of Arizona. With my backing he went nowhere, too, and Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts was nominated. I had no problem with this and voted for him that fall – he was an OK Governor and would have been an OK President. However, he was not a very good candidate. His masterful operative John Sasso maneuvered him into the nomination, but Sasso had to be thrown to the wolves over leaking a “killer video,” which appeared to show that competing candidate Joe Biden had cribbed part of a speech from British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock.¹⁴ After Sasso left, Dukakis had no idea what to do next. The plan was that Sasso would maneuver the

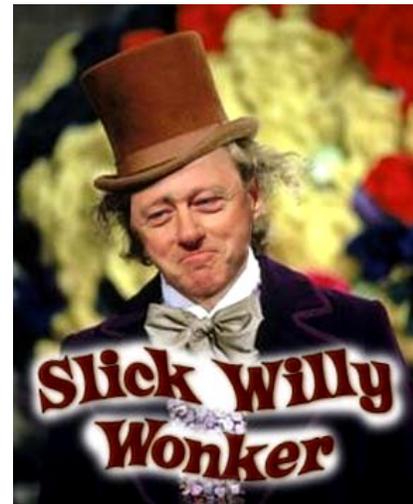
¹⁴ I'm not sure why this had to be leaked anonymously, or why doing it was a firing offense. Actually it was a bum rap on Biden, who had given the same speech nine other times with proper credit to Kinnock.

election as he had the nomination, but with him gone Dukakis floundered and ended up losing to George H. W. Bush, not yet known as 41.¹⁵

In 1992 my candidate was Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, a terrific fellow and a genuine liberal. After he went nowhere I switched to Senator Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts (1941-1997), who was in turn eclipsed by Bill Clinton, the Comeback Kid. I voted for Clinton for President, campaigned for him, and was delighted when he won despite his obvious flaws because he was (I thought) at least a Democrat.

- This from a letter to a friend, September 14, 1992: I am forced to urge people to vote for Clinton even though I know his positions on specific issues to be hopelessly cynical posturing and usually wrong-headed even as that. But no doubt *slightly* less wrongheaded than the other guy (Mr. Universal Slimebucket), and promising *almost imperceptibly* better results, and at least no *more* Clarence Thomases *for a while*, right? So vote for him! Yay, Bill!

My very restrained delight did not last long – Clinton began his long sellout before he was even inaugurated, with his shameful *volte-face* on the gays-in-the-military issue. He was a trimmer and completely unprincipled, the ringleader (with Gore and Lieberman) of the notorious “centrist” Democratic Leadership Council, which advocated moving the Democratic Party to a point one millimeter to the left of the Republicans. Co-opted by the Republicans under the charismatic leadership of the sinister Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, Clinton pretty much destroyed the Democratic Party as heir to the New Deal and as an instrument of change. By 1995 (and maybe earlier) I had a bumper sticker on my car which said “Hell yes, Clinton’s a mess!”)



The last straw for me was his move to destroy AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). This was a core Democratic welfare program to help the most vulnerable members of our society, and Clinton was not only willing but positively *eager* to throw those people away in order to curry favor with the Republicans. I left the Democratic Party in disgust in 1994, which was a wrench for me as a lifelong Democrat. But in the words of the time, I didn’t leave the party, it left me. I know how

¹⁵ The convention of calling these two statesmen Bush 41 (41st President) and Bush 43 (43rd President) started after they were observed on 41’s cigarette boat in Kennebunkport, Maine, wearing baseball hats with just their numbers. It is the only way of distinguishing them which has really caught on. Bush 41 was once asked if he would have done anything differently if he had known his son was going to become President. “Well,” he said, “I wouldn’t have named him George.”

the American Communists must have felt when Stalin allied with Hitler and so many of them had to leave the party which had meant so much to them, and in which they had placed their hopes.

- To show how disgusted I felt with President Clinton, especially as a Democrat, I attach two letters I wrote to him in 1994 and 1995. See Document 13-1. These were written *before* we knew about Monica Lewinsky and the office blow jobs, and the perjury before a federal judge. Although somewhat intemperate, they give a good insight into how I felt at the time.
- The issue about Clinton, at least from my perspective [I wrote in a 2002 e-mail], was not his wandering eye, or hands, or any other portion of his anatomy, which is of course a matter strictly between Hill and Billary, but his dishonesty. First off, he lied under oath to a federal judge, which is against the law and also morally turpid. And I don't agree that his affair is unconnected to his job – he broke his promises to his wife, and deceived her, and lied to her and all his staff and supporters as well. A man who'll betray his wife will betray his constituents (as in fact he did in matters far more serious than office gropings and suckings). His actions revealed his rotten character as starkly as Nixon's tapes revealed his. He may be a hound dog, but he never caught a rabbit, and he ain't no friend of mine. Save this e-mail, which may become a collector's item as it contains a rare rock and roll reference.¹⁶
- To a friend who recommended castrating Clinton:

Bad *juju* to castrate the chief. We rely on him to be the Most Potent Elephant. Many bastards in the women's huts in the chief's compound means the chief is potent and we are a superpower. In a traditional society he would be impeached for *not* fucking her, but contenting himself with half measures. But as usual Bill chooses a middle ground which satisfies no one, including Lewinsky herself. Trimmer! What's the point of smoking dope and not inhaling?¹⁷

I have never rejoined the Democratic Party, and I don't intend to unless something radical happens to change it.¹⁸ The Democrats are cowards and lapdogs and largely

¹⁶ To "Hound Dog" (1952), lyric by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, one of Elvis Presley's most famous hits (in 1956). I don't need to explain him in a footnote, or give his dates – I predict that even in 2319 people will still know who Elvis Presley was.

¹⁷ As Clinton famously answered a question about his marijuana use at Oxford, characteristically trying to be two people at once and therefore leaving both sides unconvinced, dissatisfied and distrustful.

¹⁸ Even the election of President Obama is not radical enough to get me back there, because except for him the party is the same as it was, except noticeably weaker and more cowardly than before.

unworthy of office. I still mostly vote for them, with a few exceptions, because the Republicans are so very much worse; and I vote in Democratic primaries as allowed by California law. But I don't wish to be associated with them as a party anymore. Even as I wrote this in 2007, when General Michael Hayden (head of the National Security Agency during its illegal covert surveillance program) was nominated to head the Central Intelligence Agency, the spineless Democratic Party was unwilling to use his confirmation hearings *even to ask* him about the surveillance. They rolled over on judgeships and every other issue, and wouldn't even raise a noise when Robert Kennedy Jr. *proved* the 2004 presidential election was outright stolen. Speaker Nancy Pelosi caved in repeatedly every time President Bush demanded more money for the war in Iraq, and then claimed she was afraid of a veto (which made no sense as President Bush was the one asking for the supplemental appropriation – there was nothing to veto – all the Democratic majority in the House had to do was not agree to it). They are contemptible. As Al Sharpton said, “How can we be an opposition party when we won't oppose anything?” See the cartoon by Pat Oliphant in Document 13-2.

- Rereading the above paragraph in March 2009, after the sensational campaign and election of Barack Obama, I changed most of the verbs to the past tense as the Congressional Democrats were no longer in opposition. I was hoping my judgment was dated and the Democratic Party might again amount to something under Obama's leadership. A year later in July 2010 it doesn't look good. I'll have to be thoroughly convinced before I change my registration again, and the abject and craven failure of the Democrats to govern even when in the majority is not encouraging.

After I left the Democratic Party I joined the Greens, but left them too because it interfered with my ability to vote in Democratic primaries. I have since learned how bad the Greens are on Israel, so I won't vote for them now even as a protest. Anyway after 2000 I lost faith for the last time in the idea of growing a progressive third party – it will always result in electing the right wing instead. Because of our winner-take-all elections, we are doomed to have just two parties converging on a center point.¹⁹ As the Republicans change from a center-right party to a far-right party, the unprincipled formerly center-left Democrats follow the supposed center rightward, strictly from fear.²⁰

¹⁹ That (and the campaign money) are at the root of the problem. If we had a parliamentary government, the party in charge of the executive could at least be assured of the ability to govern, and if discredited would fall. In our system an ineffective executive cannot govern but also cannot fall. Woodrow Wilson, in his book *Congressional Government* (1885), written long before he entered politics, argued for just such a system, which of course, for many reasons, we will never have.

²⁰ The Republicans themselves move rightward too, out of fear of even more extreme Tea Party types on *their* right. No one seems to move leftward. “Put not your trust in princes, in whom there is no help.” Psalm 146:3.

In 1996 Clinton was unopposed for the Democratic nomination, and I did not vote for him in the primary. In the general election I held my nose and voted for him anyway over Bob Dole. During his second term I was revolted by Monicagate – not the sex, as I didn't care what he did with his private parts, or with whom, any more than I did about Gerry Studds, but by his lying and betrayals and deceit and smarmy phony lip-biting hangdog apologies.²¹ He was disbarred for his perjury and should have been removed from office. If he had been (and I supported his impeachment and removal), Gore as an incumbent would probably have beaten Bush in 2000 by more than he actually beat him by.



In 2000 it was former Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey against Vice President Gore. I voted for Bradley without enthusiasm, but refused to vote for Gore in the fall, and voted for Ralph Nader (left), perennial gadfly and economic Cassandra, instead. It made no difference in California, but I was so fed up with the me-too-ism of the centrist Democrats that I would have voted for Nader even in Florida.

Of course if I had known then what I know now, what a monstrous villain and pathetic incompetent Bush 43 would turn out to be, I would have gone to Florida to campaign for Gore in person.²² The sins for which I bawled Clinton out in Document 13-1 look pretty mild by comparison to Bush's record. But at the time it wasn't so clear. I went to hear Nader speak in San Francisco and agreed with just about everything he said. So it seemed like he had earned my vote. I approached him after the speech and asked him to promise me personally that he would run like he meant it this time, rather than make only a token effort as he did in 1996. He promised me he would, and I promised to vote for him. People at the time said that a vote for Nader was a vote for Bush, which I denied – I agreed with Nader that it was not his job to get out the vote for someone else, and that Gore did not deserve my vote. As it turned out, of course, not only was a vote for Nader a vote for Bush, a vote for Gore was also a vote for Bush.

- Document 13-3 reprints two e-mails I wrote to friends, explaining my decision to vote for Nader despite the argument that it would be a vote for Bush.

Some more e-mails from the Bush years. In December 2000:

Reagan was Wittgenstein compared to Dubya, a man of really towering ignorance, stupidity, shallowness and cluelessness, if you can have towering shallowness,

²¹ However, the White House blow jobs were still pretty sordid. Q: Why does Bill Clinton wear trousers? A: To keep his ankles warm.

²² It is hard to be a monstrous villain and a pathetic incompetent at the same time. Bush may be the first person in American history to accomplish this on such an epic scale.

which if anyone could it would be Dubya.²³ It makes me nostalgic for his father, that's how bad he is. The pictures show him scared and confused as he stares out his limo window, waiting for Dick Cheney to tell him what to do. They're keeping him under wraps as much as they can, but that can't go on forever – soon he will be exposed as the dumbest president we ever had. Even Harding was a newspaper editor – can you imagine Dubya editing a newspaper?



And on January 23, 2001, three days into Bush's term:

We'll see what you say about equating progressive people with the Democratic Party after a few months of watching the Dems roll over and allow Bush to do whatever he wants. First step, so I hear, is confirming Ashcroft as Attorney General by voice vote so no Democratic senator has to go on record either way about him. With that level of cowardice in Bush's first week, it is hard to expect the Democrats to offer Bush any opposition. And if the Democratic Party will not even offer opposition to a rape in progress, what good are they and why should I (or you) identify with them?



In the 2004 election, disgusted by Bush, I was for former Governor Howard Dean of Vermont (left) from the start for the Democratic nomination. I liked his forthright manner and the fact that he appeared to be speaking his mind. I thought his authenticity would make him a good candidate, as would his willingness, uncommon in the Democratic Party of 2004, to attack President Bush.

- From an e-mail: You think Dean couldn't go the distance because he's not dead center. But he's right that Bush Lite won't win against Bush. Dean is a genuine Democrat who speaks fearlessly against the abuses of the Administration. Listen to him sometime on C-SPAN.²⁴ Plus he is a handsome doctor with a great record in his state. Senators rarely win, governors do – look at the record. An unknown general who's never run for office and even today is not a candidate (Clark) and a Senator with a screw loose who can't make up his mind (Kerry) and an unknown backbencher with the charisma of a sofa cushion (Graham) are not winning prospects. In order to win we need someone to excite people, and Dean's the only one who can. I don't say he will, but he could. No one else on the Dem side possibly could.

²³ Future researchers – George W. Bush was called *Dubya* because that is Texas dialect for *W.*, as he was called by some to distinguish him from his father. The liberal Texas columnist Molly Ivins (1944-2007) popularized *Dubya* as a sobriquet for Bush 43, who later found more dramatic ways to distinguish himself from his father.

²⁴ Future researchers: C-SPAN was a non-profit cable television network which among other things carried important political speeches in their entirety.

I also liked his line that he “represented the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party” – that was where I felt myself to be also. Probably because I supported him (and sent him money), he flamed out early. The Party preferred “electability” to authenticity, and ended up with a candidate (Kerry) who was neither authentic nor electable. After the end of Dean I then supported Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, but without enthusiasm, and voted for him reluctantly in the California primary.²⁵ It was all over for him long before then.

By 2004 I had learned my lesson about not voting for the Democrat, whoever he was, and not only voted for the feeble and useless Senator John Kerry (below) but sent him money. He was an awful candidate, and a thorough wimp in the modern Democratic Party manner. I wangled a ticket and went to hear him speak.

Went to San Jose (!) for a Kerry campaign event to take a look at the candidate. On television Kerry may seem like an uninspiring speaker, but when you're in the front row 15 feet from the guy, with an enthusiastic crowd cheering him on, he's *still* an uninspiring speaker. He's our candidate, though – the party turned down the inspiring Dr. Dean – so what we see is what we hope we will be lucky enough to get. He might be a decent President if elected, who knows? I shook his hand and wished him luck. Then someone distracted him asking for an autograph, and then he shook my hand again, having forgotten where he left off. The poor guy has been staring into the lights repeating the same speech 1000 times for over a year now, and has more than 4 months to go. Our public life is pretty damn degraded and no mistake.



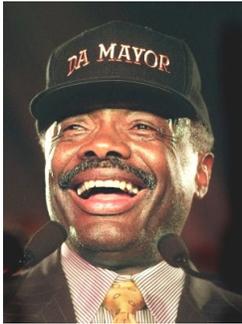
However, Bush was so horrible that I would have voted for *anyone* to get rid of him. But it turned out that it made no difference in 2004 either because Bush stole that one too.²⁶ I expected the Republicans would steal the 2006 Congressional election also and maintain themselves in power forever, but it turned out they couldn't.

Wretched though Kerry was, I tried to stay evenhanded in 2004. As I wrote to a friend who was considering voting for Bush:

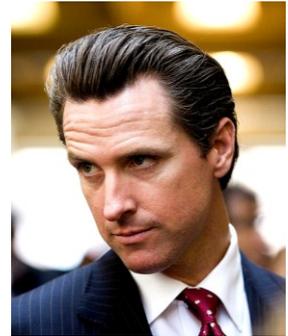
²⁵ It's a good thing he didn't win – he later exploded in a tawdry scandal complete with an unacknowledged love child, secret hush money, a lying lackey taking the fall but later telling all, and a pregnant sex tape. It made Gary Hart look like Jimmy Carter.

²⁶ See Robert Kennedy Jr.'s meticulously documented article in *Rolling Stone* magazine on the theft of the Ohio vote at www.rollingstone.com/news/story/10432334/was_the_2004_election_stolen.

You wouldn't really vote for W, would you, that vile slimy evil ignorant destructive piece of shit? He is by far the worst President in American history – don't you know that? I'm really shocked. There is such a thing as carrying a pose too far, and voting for W would be just that.²⁷



In recent San Francisco politics I supported Willie Brown (left) for mayor in his first race in 1995 – he actually won but turned out to be quite a disappointment. In 1999 I supported Tom



Ammiano for mayor against Brown, and there my jinx effect seemed to work. In the 2003 mayoral election I supported Matt Gonzalez, a former Democratic Supervisor turned Green. San Francisco municipal elections are nominally non-partisan so the Green thing was not a problem. I worked for Gonzalez, and so he lost in the runoff to Gavin Newsom (above right), the slithery empty suit protégé of billionaire Gordon Getty. Newsom took a step toward redeeming himself by allowing gay marriages in San Francisco, even though as the courts pointed out he didn't have the authority to do this. But it was only one step, and was not enough. I was so disgusted with Newsom after his first term that he was re-elected unopposed.

It doesn't sound like I like *anyone* very much, does it?

A word here (in July 2006) about the war in Iraq. I was a pacifist back in 1966, but I am not one anymore. I supported the first Gulf War, to eject Iraq from Kuwait. I supported the intervention in Kosovo and favored American use of force in Bosnia. I supported the 2001 war in Afghanistan to dislodge the Taliban. And I also supported the second Iraq war, which I now see to have been a historic mistake.

The initial plan for Iraq was to use the supposed weapons of mass destruction as a *casus belli* to get rid of Saddam Hussein. That would have had two good consequences: first, just getting rid of him would have been good, as he was a monster, and second, establishing a friendly state in place of a hostile one would have been good for our national interests and the balance of power in the mideast. A good swift demonstration of our overwhelming military power would be a useful thing also. I thought Saddam had the weapons, because if not why go to such dangerous lengths to defeat inspection? I was wrong about this, as were most of the people in the world – really what he was concealing was that he *didn't* have the weapons. But I agreed with the neocons that the

²⁷ My friend replied: “That’s exactly what you said about Clinton.” Not so! I never said Clinton was ignorant, which in a way made it worse because Clinton knew better.

supposed weapons provided a useful opportunity to move against him for other more important geopolitical reasons.

What I did not anticipate, but should have, was the amazing, unprecedented, breathtaking incompetence of the Bush administration. Their diplomacy was so arrogant and heavy-handed that we went in with almost no allies except the British. This same bad diplomacy so alienated the Turks that we lost the crucial northern column we really needed – the Turks would not let us launch it from their territory. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted on doing the war on the cheap to prove a mistaken point – he slashed the numbers in the Department of Defense war plans on his own, with a pencil – and we ended up without enough force to do the job properly. We violated all the principles of the Powell Doctrine by proceeding without decisive force or well-crafted political objectives or an exit strategy or international support.²⁸ We abolished the Iraqi army instead of relying on it to produce a friendlier, more humane strongman to succeed Saddam. The conquest of Iraq went fine, but (in part because of Rumsfeld's incompetent micromanagement) we did not have enough military police and civil affairs personnel to defend what we had won, or enough understanding of the need for them, and so failed to prevent the anarchy which gave the insurgency room to breed. We sent one set of incompetents after another to administer the place. We kept changing our objectives. And so on and on.

- I wrote in the first draft of this chapter (2006) that the war was a disaster without an easy way out, and which was ramifying to strengthen our enemies. Now (2010) it has become (years too late, and perhaps only temporarily) somewhat less of a disaster. But I still agree with the analysis set out above, that the war to depose Saddam Hussein was a decent idea, worth considering and maybe even attempting, but mismanaged to ruinous failure by Rumsfeld and Bush. My friends on the left were appalled that I felt that way, but I did and still do.

In retrospect, I should have anticipated this level of incompetence, but I didn't. I thought the neocon idea was worth a shot, since Saddam gave us an opening, but assumed it would be competently handled. It was a serious error of judgment to trust this crew with anything at all. So my friends were right after all, although perhaps for the wrong reasons. The war was not immoral and not illegal. If we had gone in with sufficient force and sufficient backing, and handed the country over promptly to a successor regime capable of holding it, it probably would have been OK. But we didn't, and I should have predicted these goons would fail.

Now (2010) Afghanistan is the principal problem, and we can't blame Bush any more – he messed it up, but Obama bought into the failure. We are pouring in

²⁸ For a listing of the elements of the Powell Doctrine, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Powell_Doctrine.

money and betting soldiers' lives on the ridiculous premise that a "national army" can be brought by "training" to the point where they will fight for a corrupt and impotent national government which no one in the country trusts, and which just blatantly stole a national election. Afghans when motivated don't need to be trained to fight – they defeated the Russians, and the British before them. But they don't fight for our pathetic nominees, because they don't want to. And the reason for the war – to deny Afghanistan as a safe haven for Al Qaeda, which we accomplished in a few weeks in 2001-02 and then allowed to slip away – has been overtaken by events, in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere. The policy is completely bankrupt and a Democratic president can only sustain it with Republican votes, which they will give him for this although for *nothing* else because they love war so much and cannot understand that we can't just automatically "win" because we're Americans. Don't get me started.

The following discussion of the 2008 election was written before it was decided, and before the economic crisis whose emergence is dated from my birthday that year (September 15, 2008). It is obsolete, but as the purpose of this chapter is to show my views about electoral politics through the years, I am leaving it in.

Before the 2006 elections my candidate for 2008 was Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin. He had the same forthright quality Howard Dean had, although with much less charisma, and was the leftiest of the projected field and against the war in Iraq from the beginning. But almost immediately after the 2006 election, when Barack Obama began to boom, Feingold decided not to run. Maybe he heard I was supporting him.



After wavering between Obama, a very attractive candidate with Kennedy charisma, and Edwards, who was much more specific and much further left, I ended up supporting Obama, based mainly on his exceptional intelligence and character, his brilliant campaign (which augurs well for his skill in governing), and both of his books, which I read and liked very much. I loathed the trimmer ice queen Hillary Clinton and think we had a lucky break when she lost. I am amazed that a candidate I supported was actually nominated. As I write this paragraph on September 1, 2008, it is still touch and go whether he will defeat McCain. Here's hoping.



NOT
SUCH
A HARD
CHOICE
REALLY.

The Bush administration, undoubtedly the worst in American history,²⁹ has done so much damage I doubt it will ever be fully repaired. Apart from the wars and their consequences, there are the catastrophic deficits, the destruction of our reputation in the world, the grotesque tax cuts for millionaires only, the rejection of any meaningful oversight of the financial markets, the erosion of civil liberties, the blank check for the supposed endless phony “war on terrorism,” the torture and secret prisons, the despoliation of our environment, the stubborn indifference to global warming, the rise of religious fundamentalism to power (*viz.* Bush’s veto of the bill to restore stem cell funding), the abandonment of New Orleans, the packing of the judiciary with crypto-



fascists, the corruption of the Justice Department and the Environmental Protection Agency and plenty of other agencies too,³⁰ the routine placement of industry lobbyists in regulatory positions, the assault on free elections, and so very very much more.

But do I despair? Yes, I might. If Obama loses I definitely will; and I may anyway, even if he wins.³¹ He looks like an exceptional candidate, but even as an exceptional president how much can he accomplish? Our politics have become so base, and what passes for political discourse so empty, and the “issues” so far from what the real issues are, and the legislature so polarized, and the challenges before us so severe, and the damage so deep, and the true holders of power so firmly in control of all the players, that I have my doubts whether *even if Obama is everything I hope he will be* that all that much will change. Fortunately I am on my way

²⁹ Well, maybe Buchanan, because his incompetence had an even more catastrophic effect, but the Civil War probably could not have been stopped anyway. And Buchanan’s incompetence didn’t damage and corrupt every aspect of American life and government the way Bush’s has.

³⁰ I could have added the Minerals Management Service if I’d known about it then, before the BP oil disaster of April 2010.

³¹ August 2010: getting there rapidly now.

out anyway, and will probably not live to see the final crash and ruin. But my hope that this situation can be turned around is ebbing fast.³²

In March 2009, soon after Obama took office, I was encouraged that he seemed to understand our problems and to be acting boldly to meet them, even though our problems are now known to be much worse than anyone expected. He was looking like he really *was* what I hoped he would be. But, I said, it may be too much even for him, and the forces of inertia may still defeat him.

Now, in March 2010, I am discouraged again. The dysfunction of our legislative branch seems almost insuperable. Obama campaigned on overcoming that by trying to govern with the Republicans, but they have shown a relentless refusal to work with him. Their whole program for the country is to make Obama fail, no matter what harm this causes, and it looks as if they might succeed in this. They have, as one observer wrote, opted out of government, something our system is not set up to handle. And perhaps Obama was too generous and tried too hard for bipartisanship, and waited too long to recognize that he wouldn't get any.

But I am still for him. I still think he is way above anyone else on the scene, intellectually, morally and personally. I can't think of anyone else who could have done better. He is the first grown-up to get very far in our politics for a long time. Moreover, he has only been in office a year and a half. He is brilliant and thoughtful and calm; he is articulate and eloquent when necessary, secure in himself and graceful and handsome and a good dancer.³³ He is a quick study and takes the long view. And he has accomplished quite a lot in the teeth of implacable opposition – health care reform, financial regulatory reform, avoiding a total economic meltdown, rescuing the automobile industry, and much more.

Obama has a chance to make the case this year (2010) that Republican obstructionism is foolishly and spitefully blocking necessary change – we'll see if The People, Hamilton's "great beast," will recognize that. At the moment fear and ignorant reaction seems to be the ruling passion among The People, stoked by Fox News, with a cowardly Congress that has structured itself so as to make positive action almost impossible. The prospect

³² Graduate students of the 24th century – will you even be there? If you are, this rant may seem quaint enough to you. In 2010 it is seeming prescient rather than quaint.

³³ The picture on the next page shows President Obama in a typically thoughtful mood. He is talking with Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, the new commander he appointed to run the war in Afghanistan. McChrystal got his fourth star on June 15, 2009, and the President fired him a year later.

for decent government is not good. But when has it ever been? I'll close this chapter with two e-mails about perspective, the first from 2005 and the second from 2010.



- Yes, it is all changing again, like when you jiggle the kaleidoscope. It would be easier for me to get upset about it if I didn't take the long view. When I hear people raging against the war in Iraq I can't help but hear people in Trajan's time raging (more discreetly) against the war in Parthia. And quite right they were, too. Either it's Buddhism or I'm just lazy, but I can't find much outrage anymore, even though things are pretty bad for a lot of people. Read enough history and that's what happens to a person. Changing the world is impossible; changing a sliver of it is only a sliver; I can't take any of it seriously. Engaging the world is not possible for me anymore; I just accept it as it is. Easy for me to say, maybe, as I'm not digging tin cans out of the mud in a Brazilian *favela* or working 120 hours a day in a Bengali sweatshop. But fortunately I'm not, and have the leisure and relative safety to disengage from the world. It's an energy trap. It's Maya the Deceiver. Can't be fooled anymore. And yet I still follow world events like a sports fan and read lots of newspapers and handicap the elections years before they happen. It's just more history – there is an endless supply, unless there isn't; either way I'm dead before it's over.
- For the rest, don't be troubled. It was ever thus. It is painful to see a leader like President Obama brought down by tiny men like those in Congress, but only because Obama is so rare a spirit. When was Congress not dominated by tiny men? When was this country, or any country, wisely governed? Plato complained 2500 years ago about fools dominating government – is this news?

Moreover, even though your complaints are all justified, what good does it do to get your knickers in a twist until you have to ask: is this dementia or just a spleen disorder? Nothing you can say or do will make the slightest difference – you as a Marxist materialist know better than most that billions ride on, for example, defeating health care reform, and there is war in heaven as high interests contend, and writing screeds to your lefty friends and sending Internet petitions to members of Congress (especially members from another state) will have no effect on the outcome.

That being so (and I dare you to tell me with a straight face that it is not so), the thing to concentrate on is maintaining equanimity in the presence of folly, because folly is always present. I follow the news too, the way some people follow sports, but I don't forget that it is a sport. The consequences for real people are realer than for what happens on the sporting field, but my input as a spectator is no different from what it would be in the cheap seats in the stadium. So my advice, since you beg me for it so earnestly, is to ease your frustration by putting your attention back where it can do you some good. You can't affect health care reform, but you can affect dementia. The *Dhammapada* says: "Sit in the world, sit in the dark."



DOCUMENT 13-1: Two letters to President Clinton

2331 - 47th Avenue
San Francisco CA 94116 USA
December 17, 1994

Tel: (415) 753-6190
Fax: (415) 753-1950

Dear Mr. President,

I am a lifelong Democrat and have worked for Democratic candidates since 1956. I voted for you and had great hopes at the beginning. During the past two years, while other Democrats said you were a trimmer, a hypocrite, a fool and a disaster, I defended you. When they said you couldn't lead I told them to follow. When they said you'd made a mess of things I told them to suspend judgment through your first Congress. I wrote to Democratic Senators to praise them when they supported you and to criticize them when they didn't. I did my level best to be loyal.

But this week is the limit. First you fired Elders for saying something which (if you even read her words) you know to be unexceptionable. You said it was because she violated your principles (that's a hot one!), but really it was to suck up to the right. And then you went back on your "principles" and called for a tax cut (after asking for a defense increase!) even though you know perfectly well (having made the case for at least two years) that it would ruin the progress you have made on the deficit. Again, not because you meant it, but to suck up to the right even though you know it's harmful to the country! What a contemptible thing to do! And on top of that the numbers are rigged-- it's bait and switch-- you didn't mention that the cuts you announced aren't what people would really get for years to come even if your proposals were adopted!

I wash my hands of you, Bill Clinton! Your critics are right-- you have no principles. You won't fool anyone on the right, and now you won't fool anyone on the left either. You really are a hypocrite and a trimmer. The damage you have done to the Democratic Party and to progressive politics is incalculable. You'll lose (deservedly) if you're nominated in 1996, and I'll do my best to see that someone else wins the Democratic primary in California. Anyone else. You are a catastrophe, Bill Clinton. Hang your head in shame! Announce promptly that you won't run again. And devote your remaining time in office (and what little moral authority you may be able to recapture by stepping aside for 1996) to standing up for what you know to be good for the country instead of saying whatever you think might please your opponents from moment to moment.

Disgustedly,

David F. Phillips

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May 8, 1995

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Dear Mr. President,

I am a lifelong Democrat and was a precinct worker in your campaign. I defended you as long as I could, but finally during the week of the double hypocrisies of Elders and the tax cut I broke with you and asked you not to run again.

Now I write to raise a futile protest against three particularly outrageous actions-- your grotesque response to the Oklahoma City bombing, your equally grotesque "new policy" on Cuban immigration, and your appointment of a totally unqualified politician to be Archivist of the United States. As usual, I am disgusted with you as a politician and as a person not so much because all these policies are foolish, but because you MUST HAVE KNOWN they were foolish but ordered them anyway for myopically perceived political advantage.

1. I object to an anti-terrorism policy which abolishes the "guidelines" used to restrict the FBI's infiltration of political groups. These guidelines were wisely instituted 20 years ago to protect against the abuse of the FBI by Hoover's red-baiting. It is stupid and dangerous to abolish them. The same is true of the rule which limits the crimes for which the FBI can obtain a wiretap order. You know the dangers, but you see Oklahoma City as an opportunity for you to regain some of the political capital you have wasted over more than two years of feckless and incompetent floundering. But you don't care that these policies are DANGEROUS TO THE COUNTRY! All you care about is a desperate hope that people might like you enough to vote for you again despite the mess you have made of your Presidency and the Democratic Party and the harm you have done to the country. It is despicable.

2. Equally despicable, while we're on the subject, is your proposal in the same negligent and opportunistic spirit to involve the military in domestic law enforcement. YOU MUST KNOW that this is one of the most dangerous things you could possibly propose, and that military involvement in domestic law enforcement is one of the fastest, surest ways to destabilize the tradition of civilian control of government. I don't have to outline the dangers because you already know all about it. But the safety of the Republic means nothing to you when compared with the possibility of squeezing a vote out of the people's fear and grief. You really are the limit.

3. As to Cuban immigration, I don't mind so much your letting all the Guantanamo people in when you said you wouldn't. True, it shows your word to be meaningless and makes a mockery of your previously announced Caribbean policy. But we expect vacillation and foundering and useless policies from you, so more of that is hardly worth a stamp to complain about. The real problem is your "promise" to return all arrivals from Cuba without inquiring whether they have a legitimate claim to be genuine refugees from political oppression. This violates guidelines of humane conduct which oblige all civilized states to give asylum to genuine political refugees. Instead you have promised to return them all to Castro to do what he likes with, even if they have the well-founded fear of political persecution which would entitle them to asylum if they came from anywhere else. This is contemptible. The only bright side is that the policy depends on your word, and so is not likely to last out the year (your last policy on this subject certainly didn't, and neither did the one before that. You hypocrite!)

4. I mention your stupid appointment of a political hack to be Archivist of the United States, even though he has no experience with preserving historic documents and no particular interest in history, only because I am writing to you anyway. It is so typical of the kind of bad government you have been giving the people that I wouldn't bother writing a separate letter about it. You are hopeless!

As I said, I worked in your campaign in 1992. Now I have a bumper sticker which says "Hell yes, Clinton's a mess!" If you can so alienate even a loyal, yellow-dog Democrat by your hypocritical

trimming and foolish, ineffective "policies", why do you think they will convince conservatives to vote for you? No one who wants a real Republican will settle for you, no matter how much you truckle and suck up. And no one who wants a real Democrat has much use for you either.

You aren't yet the worst President in American history-- you have quite a ways to go before you beat Reagan in that regard-- but you have by now probably surpassed Buchanan as the most cowardly and craven. And you're gaining on him as the President who let his country down the most by useless and ineffective responses in challenging times.

You should resign at once.

Yours truly,

David F. Phillips

DOCUMENT 13-2: Cartoon by Pat Oliphant

“Good Doggie” (October 7, 2002)



[Researchers of the 34th century – that is President George W. Bush carrying the sack.]

Document 13-3: E-mails explaining my 2000 vote for Nader

The main trouble with your argument is that it circular without a forward element.

- This year the Dem, although unfit to be President and unworthy of your vote on his own merits, is marginally better than the Rep, and the Green can't win. Therefore you must vote for the Dem.
 - You won't vote for the Green because he can't win, but he can't win because people won't vote for him because he can't win because people won't vote for him because ...
- As you have not voted for the Green, four years from now the Green's support will not have risen, and you will be in the same situation: the Dem, although unworthy, is marginally better than the Rep, and the Green can't win. Therefore you *must* vote for the Dem *again*.
- Eight years from now, the same thing. Twelve years from now, the same thing. Sixteen years from now...
- As the Dem will *always* be marginally better than the Rep, and as you will not vote for the Green unless enough others go first to convince you that he can win *this year*, you *must always* vote for the Dem, no matter how disgusting he is. The model you have accepted *guarantees* that there will never be a change, and removes the freedom from your vote. There might as well be only one candidate, as in Cuba, because there is only one candidate you are allowed to vote for, no matter what, whether he deserves your vote or not, whether you think the other guy is better or not. You *can't vote your conscience* because you have made yourself a yellow-dog Democrat, and *must* vote for the whatever YD they nominate, year after year.³⁴
- As long as you focus *only on this year*, you will *always* have to vote Dem, because the dynamics of the choice as you have defined it can never change. Because you *have* to vote Dem, the Dems do not have to care about your concerns, *just because* you have to vote for them no matter what. So by voting Dem, you also guarantee that the Dems will not improve – why should they? With your vote guaranteed, they are free to ignore you and fight with the Reps for the right-center vote, which leads the Dems rightward.
- The only way out of this trap is to raise your focus *beyond this year*. If you vote Green, Green support will rise. If Green support rises, more people who now refuse to vote Green will start doing so, and Green support will rise even further, until eventually Green (or some other 3d force or personality, emboldened by the rise in 3p support) can win. This provides the forward element, without which the lesser-evil strategy guarantees perpetual evil.

³⁴ Future researchers: a Yellow-Dog Democrat will vote Democratic no matter who the candidate is, even if the party nominates a yellow dog, which so often it does, for example Walter Mondale in 1984, or John Kerry in 2004.

- Although a major growth in 3d party support may seem unlikely *now*, the alternative guarantees (1) no change in electoral balance *ever*, (2) no progressive policies *ever* (because progressives have to vote Dem even if the Dems do not govern in progressive fashion), and (3) no freedom *ever* to vote your true preference, for a person and platform you can genuinely support. That isn't free enough for me – it shouldn't be free enough for you either.

This analysis still makes *logical* sense to me, but in 2009 it seemed dated by (1) the catastrophe of Bush, (2) the bankruptcy of the Greens, and (3) the temporarily hope-restoring emergence of Obama. In 2010 I no longer hope for a third-party rescue – I no longer hope for any rescue at all.

Here's another e-mail on the subject.

You bet I voted for Nader, and proud of it. It was my duty to my country. You can't blame me for Bush, because California was going to go for Gore overwhelmingly anyway. And you can't blame Nader, either – blame Gore for being such an awful candidate that Democrats wouldn't vote for him. As Nader said during the campaign, it wasn't his job to elect another candidate. And the whole argument suggests that Gore had some sort of prescriptive right to my vote, which belonged to him despite his lickspittle complicity in Clintonism, his fund-raising crimes, and his appalling hollowness as a person. No one *owns* my vote – I heard Nader speak and agreed with almost every word he said. He *earned* my vote by the positions he took – in fact I gave his campaign several hundred dollars, more than I ever gave anyone else. Gore never came close to doing that.

The counter-argument that Bush is worse has this fatal flaw: the Rep will always be marginally worse than the Dem. If that means we must always vote Dem no matter what, the Dems will slide, as they have already slidden, to a position one millimeter to the left of the Reps, and then whine how they are betrayed when I don't vote for them. Such serfdom of the franchise forecloses the possibility of progressive change. I left the Democratic Party in 1994, when Barbara Boxer followed Clinton in destroying AFDC. If they want me back, *let them act like Democrats again*. I don't absolutely swear I will not be so disgusted with Bush as to vote Dem in 2004 – depends on who they nominate – but it is very likely I will vote once again for someone whose positions and integrity I believe in rather than for a lying sanctimonious hypocritical turd-flavored jellyfish like Gore. Harrumph!