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*Jerry Brown Meets Gore Vidal  
—and Ralph Nader Too*

*The Realist*

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Editor: Paul Krassner





## COURT JESTER

### *We Have Ways of Making You Laugh*

Mercury Records released my first comedy CD in August, with liner notes by CEO Danny Goldberg. Here's the opening paragraph of an article in the *New Yorker* by theater critic John Lahr:

"As my plane swooped out from under a cloud bank to reveal Montreal below, I put Paul Krassner's upcoming album, *We Have Ways of Making You Laugh*, into my tape player and let his meditation on religion as a 'rationalization of the sex urge' ease the bumpy descent. Krassner, the venerable iconoclast and editor of *The Realist*, was one of 350 standup comedians taking part in the 14th annual 12-day jamboree of zanies known to the English-speaking 20% of Montreal as Just for Laughs and to the French-speaking 80% as *Juste Pour Rire*. The event, which is lumbered with the additional title of Montreal International Comedy Festival, is one of the city's biggest seasonal attractions—a sort of Cannes of comedy. My flight touched down just as Krassner was declaring that even atheism was 'an extension of the reproductive urge,' and offering as proof the noisy climaxes of his own atheist girlfriends: 'Ooh. Oh. No God! No God! No God!'"

I sent this letter to the editor of the *New Yorker*:

"Of course I was delighted to read in John Lahr's review of the Montreal Comedy Festival that he was enjoying my album, *We Have Ways of Making You Laugh*, just as his flight touched down, but wasn't he also placing everyone on board in danger by disobeying the flight attendant's standard admonition not to play a tape recorder while a plane is landing?"

### *The Winner of the Slow Bicycle Race*

Seven Stories Press published my latest book in July, with a foreword by Kurt Vonnegut. So far, with virtually no reviews, *The Winner of the Slow Bicycle Race: The Satirical Writings of Paul Krassner*, has sold over 6,000 copies. That's not bad, although my autobiography, *Confessions of a Raving Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture*, now out of print, was widely reviewed and sold over 30,000 copies.

My book tour began in New York with an appearance at the National Arts Club. I was told that I would not have been invited to speak if Vonnegut hadn't agreed to introduce me, but I always try not to take insults—or praise—personally. There's a dress code at the Club, and I don't own a necktie, so my publisher, Dan Simon, brought me one, which I refused to wear, especially since this was right after Bob Dole had removed his tie as a public gesture to reveal the real Bob Dole, thereby setting a strong precedent.

The event was for National Arts Club members only, but I could invite anyone I wanted to, so it was fun to see Professor Irwin Corey sitting in the front row right next to Jeff Greenfield of ABC News and, on the other side of the aisle, Barbara Garson, author of *MacBird*, and Dick Schaap of ABC Sports. Plus radical attorney Ron Kuby and Howard Stern's ghostwriter, Ratso Sloman. I also invited the editors of both *Vanity Fair* and *Screw*, but neither showed up.

### *Returning to the Scene of the Crime*

That scraping sound you heard from the Democratic convention was Herbert Marcuse twisting in his grave as the term he coined—"repressive tolerance"—came to life in the form of a Chicago lottery for those seeking government-sanctioned time slots to voice their causes where the delegates couldn't hear them, from Psychologists for Quality to the Lesbian Avengers. It was the ultimate trivialization of protest. No wonder the National Space Society yielded its hour to a marijuana-rights group.

At an officially-approved, fenced-off site opposite the Hilton Hotel facing Grant Park—where in 1968 the whole world was watching as sadistic police turned a peaceful rally into a brutal riot—*nobody*

was listening to an individual speak into a microphone about the injustice of the legal system: "I would like to share with you another experience. . . ." He was supposed to be followed by the American Art Party, which, like several others, didn't even bother to show up.

But then came the most successful demonstration, to honor the work of the late comedian John Belushi with a postage stamp. *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Richard Roeper led 200 spectators in a chant, "Give him a damn stamp!" There were two prototypes. Belushi as one of the Blues Brothers was deemed more popular by the crowd than Belushi in his *Saturday Night Live* bumblebee costume.

And, just as there are Elvis imitators, the Bruise Brothers troupe entertained at this event. Their performance included what was, in a perverted sense, the defining moment of the Clinton convention—a pair of dancing Chicago cops. The Bruise Brothers resented the fact that the classic Sam and Dave blues number, "I'm a Soul Man," which had been further popularized by the Blues Brothers, was now being co-opted by the Bob Dole campaign as "I'm a Dole Man." Probably a more appropriate song for the Dole campaign would be Beck's 1994 hit, "I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me?"

### *The End of The Realist*

When *People* referred to me as "the father of the underground press," I immediately demanded a blood test. *The Realist* began as a magazine in 1958, went on hiatus in 1974, then was re-launched as a newsletter in 1985. The taboos may have changed, but irreverence is still our only sacred cow.

Don Imus was an early subscriber, and recently I was a guest on *Imus in the Morning*. During a commercial break, he said to me, "Now don't mention this on the air. . ." That's like telling a junkie to ignore a packet of heroin on the table. Imus lit a cigarette and continued, "Because my wife doesn't know I smoke." Naturally I honored his request, but this is *my* turf, where there is no voluntary censorship for pussy-whipped radio hosts.

When Imus called me "one of the comic geniuses of the 20th century," at first I thought he intended it as a compliment, but then I realized that he really meant I have only four good years left. So I've decided to publish just 12 more issues of *The Realist* after this one. They will not be available at bookstores or newsstands.

When I "retire" in 2001, there are a few novels I plan to write. Actually, I've already been meditating on one for several years.

"It's hard work doing fiction," I said to Avery Corman, author of *Oh, God and Kramer vs. Kramer*. "You have to make stuff up."

"But, Paul," he replied, "you've been making stuff up your whole life."

"Yeah, but that was journalism."

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Enclosed please find:

- \$23 for the final 12 issues of *The Realist*.
- \$25 for the final 12 issues plus this one as a gift subscription.
- \$7 for *Tongue Fu*, Paul Krassner's New Age media fable about a man with a 15-inch tongue who goes to a summer camp for gurus.
- \$10 for *The (Almost) Unpublished Lenny Bruce*, a collection of the controversial comedian's articles, stories, columns, essays, bits and pieces.
- \$25 for Paul Krassner's autobiography, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture*. "Uproarious . . . soulful humor" — *Village Voice*

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## Death Camp Sitcom

by Lenny Lipton

The Germans have discovered they have a sense of humor when it comes to what must be a disagreeable subject for many of them, the Second World War. The latest hit show on German television is *Hogan's Heroes*, which is playing to a million people a night. In a newly dubbed version it makes the Nazis appear even more ridiculous than in the original American edition.

It may strike the reader as peculiar, or even unbelievable, that Germans find it amusing to watch a farcical sitcom about POWs who get the best of their Nazi captors, and a similar observation might be made about Americans who enjoy the show. What's disturbing to me about anybody enjoying *Hogan's Heroes* is that which is hidden from view—the atrocious behavior of the German population during a war in which they collaborated to murder millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Catholics, and other groups they considered to be undesirable.

It might seem that the German population's behavior during Hitler's war is so inexcusable that it isn't a suitable subject for comedy, but that isn't true. For example, Mel Brooks' *The Producers* is a film that has never ceased to amuse me, even with repeated viewing. As you probably recall, *The Producers* is about bringing to Broadway that ultimate in bad taste musical comedies, *Springtime for Hitler*.

The Germans who are enjoying the recy-

clered American show are mostly young people, who do not identify with the Nazi era, and consider *Hogan's Heroes* to be spoofing the Nazis in particular, and not the German nation in general. There have been complaints from some of the older generation, those aging gladiators who fought on behalf of Hitler and his cause.

It may be hard to summon any compassion for one such veteran who condemns the show for "defaming his comrades who gave their lives for the Fatherland," as reported on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, June 4, but his point of view is comprehensible. It makes sense for a warrior who fought in a cause that he clearly thinks of as legitimate to gripe about a show that makes his comrades-in-arms look like they have Jerry Lewis Syndrome (which, by the way, is the title of Oliver Sacks' next book).

The trouble with *Hogan's Heroes*, for me, is that it misses the point. By making the Nazis look like goofballs it defuses their wickedness and conceals their murderous malevolence with laughter. *Hogan's Heroes* trivializes the catastrophe of this horrible genocidal war. Gaucheries are not in the same class as evil, but I suppose that it should come as no surprise that the success of the revival of *Hogan's Heroes* in such an unlikely venue has spawned an attempt to cash in on what appears to be a growing acceptance by younger Germans of their nation's culpability in World War II.

According to a press release reprinted on a Web site created by German fans of *Hogan's*

*Heroes*, a new German sitcom is in the planning stages, *Kamp Kamp*, set not in a POW camp, but in a concentration camp. A group of the hapless victims of Hitler awaiting extermination is shown getting the best of klutzy and clownish officers and guards patterned after Col. Klink and company, at a mythical picturesque death camp set in the Bavarian Alps.

The cast will consist of several repeating characters and others who pass through on their way to the gas chamber, or the shower, as it is euphemistically known. A running gag goes like this: "Better be good or they'll take you to the shower!"—spoken in a sing-song with an upward inflection of the word *shower*. The plan is to have guest appearances by well-known German actors whose characters don't survive to reappear on the next episode. It's a clever way to achieve rotation in the cast and get some new blood on the screen each week.

One interesting character will be the *capo*, Kristina, a woman who has sold out her people (or has she?) and sided with the Germans to save her own hide. It's hard to imagine how any comic mileage can be gotten from such a deplorable character, but the press release from the show's producer, Wolfgang Gerhard, says that Kristina will be a Murphy Brown-like character, a professional woman who is both gutsy and iconoclastic.

She views her mission this way: If she and those in her charge can amuse the Germans, they won't be sent to the gas chamber. So each week she and her wacky but bedraggled inmates have to dream up some new endearing stunt to amuse their Nazi captors. Presumably the regular cast is quite funny whereas the guest stars are insufficiently amusing to survive.

The camp's doctor, reminiscent of Josef Mengele, "The Angel of Death," will be played by an actor who combines the qualities of Jack Kevorkian and Marcus Welby, M.D. Although the doctor will be portrayed sympathetically, no inmate returns from office visits. An allegedly hilarious scene is described in which the inmates pray that the doctor will not be making any "house calls."

As expected, Simon Weisenthal and other Nazi hunters, such as the Klarsfelds, have been quick to protest the show. Producer Gerhard has xenophobically characterized the complaints as foreign and, taking a free-speech posture, terms their criticism prior censorship. He excoriated his critics by saying that they hadn't seen the show, since it's not yet on the air. "Give us a chance. It's a good show. Let them criticize it only after they see it," he is quoted as having exclaimed.

Gerhard, who claims his father was in the Luftwaffe during the war and not in the SS, as some have alleged, has plans to dub the show into English and distribute it in the United States. He says he's already gotten some nibbles from the History Channel.



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## Jerry Brown Meets Gore Vidal—and Ralph Nader Too

Former governor of California and 1992 presidential candidate Jerry Brown now calls himself "a recovering politician" and has a daily radio show on the Pacifica network.

Gore Vidal was his guest on July 8, 1996.

**Brown:** Welcome to another edition of *We The People*. This is Jerry Brown. My guest this hour is Gore Vidal: author of over 22 books; movie star; movie writer; former opponent of mine in the 1982 senatorial campaign—he lost to me, I lost to Pete Wilson—so we are linked in that political era of the past which is, I think, long gone. Mr. Vidal also ran for Congress in 1960; he is related—in some fashion that maybe he can explain—to Jackie Kennedy, to the Auchincloss clan; he has had knowledge, friendships with people like Anaïs Nin—all sorts of writers—he's seen power up close; he's written about it; his grandfather was a senator from Oklahoma; his father was at West Point when he was born. A very interesting, very rich, very diverse life. It's a pleasure to have you here with *We The People*.

**Vidal:** I am happy to be with *We The People* as one of the people, and I think that our long-deferred debate of 1982 is now going to take place a mere 14 years late, but at least we deliver.

**Brown:** We deliver. Good. Well, it wasn't much of a debate because my goal in that debate was just to get through it without suffering any slings and arrows.

**Vidal:** You did. I say this a little sorrowfully 14 years later, but here we are.

**Brown:** I remember your principle charge in the 1982 senate campaign—this was a primary, of course—was that I was the prisoner of my own ambition.

**Vidal:** Yes. (Laughter) I think that was probably well observed. I was also interested in the B-2 bomber, with which you had a most unnatural affection all the way through.

**Brown:** I did support the B-2 bomber, and I'll tell you why. Because first of all I thought I needed some defense stuff in my bio—

**Vidal:** "Stuff" is a euphemism for money in the—

**Brown:** I did get money from Rockwell. In fact, I talked to the president of Rockwell and I noticed that Alan Cranston was a big supporter of the B-1 bomber, and I went out and visited. They also made the space shuttle, and of course I liked the space program. And I remember, I can't remember the fellow's name, but I recall either he or Alan Cranston saying, "Well, the beautiful thing about the B-1 bomber is it can be recalled. It's not like a missile. And so if you send it on its way to Russia, you can radio the pilot and say 'Come on back.' And number two, you can use it for conventional bombing runs."

**Vidal:** Unfortunately, you can never get back the money that went to pay for it. That was the horrible thing.

**Brown:** Well, I think the B-1 bomber is a classic case of how easily you can buy a politician. I don't think Rockwell gave me more than 5,000 bucks, maybe a couple of thousand more from their executives. I mean it is pathetic how cheaply we sell out, that's number one. And then, of course, I rationalized because Alan Cranston was supposed to be the liberal, and he was actually a member of the World Federalists at one time in his life. And then the third point, which is no big surprise to people who listen to Pacifica Radio, but the B-1 bomber never flew. There were 100 of them. Three crashed and 97 were grounded. And as I understand it, the last time I saw a report on the B-1 bomber, which was about 10 years ago, the refrigeration—just to keep them at the right temperature was something like a billion dollars a year.

**Vidal:** Well, it was a beautiful work of art. We look back on it along with the Spruce Goose of Howard Hughes, which was in the Second World War, one of those dodos. He at least spent his own money. But I thought then, and I think now, that a politician could still get some mileage out of it, to talk about conversion from a militarized economy to a real economy. We became militarized in 1950 when Harry Truman decided that we were to be militarized forever. Not only that

most of the budget would be military, but the Defense Department, he invented that. He invented the CIA, loyalty oaths, and so on. No politicians ever grasped it. The nearest I saw anybody come to it was you four years ago in Connecticut when I was occasionally sending you a fax, and you hit. I said all along, "Find a place where the government is about to terminate a contract (in this case it was the Sea Wolf submarine), find a place where the workers, highly skilled workers, are gonna be let go and they're naturally angry, and say, 'Now we're gonna keep you, you won't be let go, make bullet trains instead of submarines.'" And you took the Connecticut primary with that one line. With a bit of luck you might have taken the whole country once it had been explained to the people that something like 5 trillion dollars had gone down the drain, and they didn't have decent schools. No health care, because that's communist, to have health care for everybody. But that's the beginning. Until you've transferred the money from the Pentagon overruns and so on—not to mention the CIA, which I think should be dissolved—it's of no use, great source of mischief. I don't see any point to the FBI, by and large. What are they there for? Collecting dossiers on Justices of the Supreme Court? They used to be, at least in J. Edgar Hoover's time, they were very good about chasing automobiles across state lines, you know, stolen automobiles. And they were pretty good on kidnapping, but that was about it. Now they're talking about dossiers on everybody. Why should there be one?

**Brown:** Well, they have to check everyone out for jobs. For example, if you're given a job on some kind of a monument commission, they wanna give you a drug test, they wanna check your background, they wanna interview your neighbors, and then they put that in the files.

**Vidal:** But the answer to that is, "Whose business? By what right?" What an invasion of the privacy of the individual. I suppose if you were dealing with a very highly secret matter, you would want to check somebody out. In the absence of an official enemy like the Soviet Union, it's too much. And it's too expensive.

**Brown:** Is there any evidence that there were these checks of people in the early presidency, in the early government of the United States? Do you have any knowledge of that?

**Vidal:** No. You know, the founding fathers were all foreign agents. Alexander Hamilton was British Agent number 12, I think. Aaron Burr was an agent for the French directory, and General Wilkinson, the commanding general of the American army at the time of President Jefferson, was a paid agent of the Spanish government—and our big enemy was, of course, the Spanish in Mexico. So here were three of the major figures and many minor ones, all on the take from foreign governments, and fairly open about it. You know, they'd say, "Well, we're for the French because we like the French Revolution." The Brits would say, "Well, we're anti-revolution, we're conservatives, so we're pro-British." That's gone on since the beginning, but it wasn't until Truman decided that we were to be totally militarized and that was National Security Council Act number 68, which was done I think in 1948, they got an act through Congress which didn't make much sense. In '50 it was enacted. It wasn't until '73 under the Freedom of Information Act anybody ever got to see this thing. There were seven points. One was that we never deal with the Soviet Union, we never have another meeting with them, because they were liars. Two, we go ahead with the hydrogen bomb so that when they got the atom bomb we would be that much ahead of them, and then the militarizing of everything. It would be under the government, most American industry. And the peacetime draft was also one of their great presents to us. And finally the CIA, which has been making mischief to this day on every corner of the earth.

**Brown:** I want to raise a point now—you talk about the hydrogen bomb and what-have-you—looking through the Internet for information about the oversight board of the CIA activity in Guatemala, I came across something called the National Security Archive which is



a project that uncovers documents. And one of the documents they have listed, which I downloaded, was a memo from a fellow named Gerard Smith—I think he was in the State Department, I believe he might have even headed up the American section in Cuba for a while—but he was part of the establishment. He wrote a memo to Christian Herter—he was the Secretary of State, this was in 1957—and the memo was about two islands called Quemoy and Matsu. And in this memo he quoted what was called the JCS planning document—the Joint Chiefs of Staff—and the planning was that for the defense of Quemoy and Matsu, if the Chinese were to try to move on them, the plan was to use low-yield nuclear weapons, 20,000 kilotons, which is the equivalent of what was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And in this memo Gerard Smith says to Christian Herter, “If we do that, the Chinese can be expected to bomb the 7th fleet and Taiwan, in which case we will retaliate.” Oh, one more thing I didn’t mention, that the low-kiloton nuclear bombs would be dropped on Canton and Shanghai. Several million lives could be expected to be lost before it escalated, before there was any retaliation. And so in this memo—this is 1957 now, before the ‘60 campaign—Gerard Smith says, “I recommend that we don’t clarify our position, much less make it known or make it clear that we’re committed to defend these two islands.” Now here’s the point. I remember the debate in 1960, when Jack Kennedy said something about Quemoy and Matsu, we weren’t defending enough. Now Kennedy must have known, because he gets briefed on this stuff, that the only way to defend those islands was with nuclear weapons. And the only way to do that is to kill millions of people. So then the question is: Is this another piece of evidence of Jack Kennedy’s recklessness?

Vidal: Well, not only reckless, he was a war lover. And he was taunting Nixon all the way through about *(In Kennedy’s voice)* “Quemoy and Matsu. Whoever stands strong there will hold the world in his hands.” Or, *(In Nixon’s voice)* “I don’t want to say that Senator Kennedy is a Communist. No, I wouldn’t say that he was a Communist.” And this dumb-dumb debate went on and on, but what was under it was not dumb at all. Kennedy knew perfectly well that there was no missile gap, that we were far ahead of the Soviet Union. Kennedy was basically—what he wanted, in one sentence, and I knew him pretty well—he wanted to win the cold war. Preferably with a hot war. And he made a couple of attempts—the invasion of Cuba, which all went wrong. Yes, it was planned by the Eisenhower administration, but he didn’t have to say yes. And he didn’t have to bungle it. He tries a war in Laos, and he can’t get anybody interested in Laos. And then suddenly, there’s Vietnam, where we could stand tall. So largely due in part to his father and Cardinal Spellman, who were in with the Diem family, who were Roman Catholic, who ran Vietnam, we began to send—advisors were already there under Eisenhower—Jack just increased them and increased them. And *pacé* Oliver Stone, but Jack did not intend to take a little trip to Dallas and come back and stop the war that he had just started. That’s not the way the world works. He saw himself as a kind of culmination of history. He believed all of this idiotic rhetoric, which Harry Truman had started, and Truman was totally cynical. Eisenhower was totally cynical. They knew the Russians weren’t going anywhere, they were too weak. They knew it would be a generation before they were competition for us domestically or even militarily. In the long run, China might be dangerous but there was no sign of any danger at that time, there was this great mass of people. So they were acting out this very dangerous political international theater for the world. For domestic political reasons on the one hand, which is okay, it’s fair enough to lie to the American people, as most presidents do at one time or another, in good or bad faith, but to *believe* your lies, this is where men become dangerous. Adolph Hitler, I’m told, was a great administrator, but unfortunately he believed all of his ugly rhetoric and turned out to be a monster. Jack believed that war could be won, and he kept saying it. I remember I said to him once, “I’ve counted in your speeches, *(In Kennedy’s voice)* ‘Now in this twilight time . . .’”—I said, “You’re 44 years old, what are you talking about, *twilight time*, the United States is on top of the world, we’re the number one economy, the

number one militarily, and you’re doing twilight time?” Well, one reason is, he was dying. He was not going to make it to 50, I don’t think. He might have, with great medicine, lived longer. He was physically fragile, he had a great fatalism, and why not have his moment of glory? After all, he said to me once, *(In Kennedy’s voice)* “What would Lincoln have been without the Civil War?” I said, “You think it’s worth having your face on Mount Rushmore to kill 600,000 men in a war as opposed to 6 billion perhaps or 600 million in a war in Asia?” He was just cockeyed, really, and—sad ending—very charming guy, intelligent, but if somebody that bright can get taken up by this rhetoric in politics, it’s very scary, as you yourself know, having been in this particular trade at that presidential level.

Brown: The impression I had of Kennedy, though, was one of pragmatism. Cynical. The word they loved was *tough*. They liked Jesse Unruh in California because he was tough. And Pat Brown, he was *soft*. Those were the words that came out of the Kennedy era.

Vidal: I must say, it was Gene McCarthy who always has something sardonic to say about people—he couldn’t stand the Kennedys. And he said, “Have you ever noticed about the Kennedys, they only play *touch* football. I played *football*.” So, their toughness was all play-acting. You know, they had fixes, and they had thugs, even, to get things their way. Adlai Stevenson, as you know, was always “that old woman”—to them, if there’s anything worse than a woman, it was an *old* woman, and that was Adlai Stevenson. No, they were with contempt for the rest of the world. And it was hubris—reminds you that the Great Sky God, if there is one, is probably Greek.

Brown: *(Laughs slightly)* So, you brought up Kennedy, and I don’t know whether you want to talk about it, but during this connection between Kennedy and the mob—

Vidal: Well, it’s a great subject, and there’s going to be a book about it, and a TV special within a year, by a very distinguished journalist who’s been working on it for a number of years. And it goes back to Jack’s grandfather, the famous “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald, who was mayor of Boston at the time of prohibition. All of bootlegged liquor went through the mayor’s office, and the mayor got paid off. Came down from Canada. Prostitution. Numbers. All this the mayor was in charge of. Then his daughter marries young Joe Kennedy out of Harvard, and meanwhile his honor the mayor was being helped all the time by a young Italian from New York called Frank Costello. So then the torch sort of passes when Joe Kennedy comes in with the family as a son-in-law and—

Brown: Wait a minute, there is a connection between Frank Costello and Honey Fitz?

Vidal: Oh, yes.

Brown: This is not conjecture?

Vidal: This is not conjecture, and I’ll tell you where it is. So, Joe Kennedy comes into the family and they get him a small bank, which is used largely for laundering money. He also gets into the bootleg business and later into the legitimate whiskey business. Makes his fortune. And now a much older but still quite young Frank Costello is working with him. Once a week, Joe Kennedy—they had this apartment on Central Park South in New York—and he and Frank Costello, while his son was president and Frank Costello the retired head of the mob, they’d have dinner. Just the two old guys.

Brown: Joe and Frank.

Vidal: Joe and Frank. There was a guy who was a member of the Teamsters Union who gave great massages. He would come over to massage the two old guys, and sometimes they’d ask him to stay with them for dinner. And they would talk and chuckle over their crimes, and there’s Jack down in Washington being a virtuous president. Now, to get more into politics, at the time of the 1960 primaries, Jack was having his problems with Hubert Humphrey, who really was this sort of liberal leader of the Democratic party and was very strong in Wisconsin. And so Jack had to make a great showing the next day, which was West Virginia. West Virginia is a state where you buy the election, or at least in those days. Cash is handed out. Cash came in by the floods. Everybody thought it was old Joe Kennedy, but he didn’t have cash like that. It came from Sam Giancana, the head of the



mob in Chicago. And that connection went right on up until who knows when. But this Miss [Judith] Exner, who was involved in it, was both the girlfriend of Giancana and of Kennedy. And she alleges to have brought money from Chicago to Palm Beach.

**Brown:** I knew the affair is out there. She's written a book that she had an affair with Sam Giancana and Kennedy. I never heard about the money.

**Vidal:** And meanwhile, Giancana, under the Eisenhower administration, had been working to kill Castro. For the American government. For the Republican party to get back the casinos, which had belonged to the mob, who were also part of his chain of command.

*(Station Break)*

**Brown:** We're back with *We the People*. The number for those of you who would like to get more information, support or join *We the People*, it's 800-426-1112. My guest is Gore Vidal. The subject is power, government, the Kennedys. It's the theater of illusion that the degenerate state of democracy has evolved to. Now, let me just follow a point here. You made a quick comment here about the Republicans actually hiring the Mafia, you said, to get the casinos back. That's very hard for a red-blooded normal middle-class American, to believe that actually—maybe you could elaborate on that—I have heard stories that the U.S. government, I guess it would be under Roosevelt or Truman, asked the mob to help with the [World War II] campaign in Salerno or to do some stuff there in Sicily, the Sicilian campaign. [Editor's note: The CIA persuaded New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey to release Lucky Luciano from prison for that purpose.] But is there a connection? Does it go through? And does it tie in to the Kennedy assassination?

**Vidal:** Well, I think, as for the Eisenhower connection, that was simply frenzied anti-communism, but *back* of it was money. Back of it was the mob. So, the old Latin question: *Qui bono?* "Who benefits?" Nixon was the vice-president, he was the White House man for Cuba. And they decided that it was a good idea to kill Castro. Well, how do you kill him? Well, the best thing to do is get the mob, because the mob owned all the casinos in Havana. The mob was very upset at losing to Castro a great source of revenue. So, this has all been published, Giancana was working secretly to try and do in Castro. Unsuccessfully. And that didn't work. Now, unknown to the CIA—this was one of the ironies—Kennedy is not only having an affair with Giancana's girlfriend, but is getting money—thanks to his father's connection with Frank Costello—money is coming in to the Kennedy campaign, particularly for the West Virginia primary. This was the greatest kept secret of all time at that time. Now, you ask about the assassination. I don't know any more about it than anybody else, but it's agreed that it was a conspiracy, certainly. Again, who benefits? Who would want to kill Jack? Well, one of the conditions of the mob, when they gave money to Kennedy, thanks to their relationship with his father, was: "Leave us alone. J. Edgar Hoover never bothered us. Justice Department never goes near organized crime. We don't bother you, you don't bother us." It was a truce. Bobby just got over-ambitious in the Kennedy manner and decided that he was gonna be a white knight and he was gonna go after organized crime. Do you remember, in 1961 or '62, the Appalachian meeting in New York when the various mob leaders got together? And Bobby got in on the act, and some of them got indicted. The mob did not take well to this. "What are you doing to us? You know, we gave you this money, and so forth and so on, and now you're going after us." Joe Kennedy is alleged to have said, "Well, you know, my boys are dragon killers. They've got to have dragons to kill." This was their death warrant. So there's a conversation, which has been recorded, and much published, between one of the mobsters, a guy called Trafficante, and Marcello, who was the head of the Louisiana mob, which in turn was involved with the casinos in Havana, which is nearby. And they're swearing at Bobby Kennedy—the Attorney General is going after them—and they're talking about killing him. And Marcello says—I think it was Marcello, maybe it was Trafficante—"If a dog is bothering you, you don't cut off the tail." So you kill the President, was the meaning of that. And I assume that the mob knows—

Oswald, whatever—how it was done, but it was done. And one of the reasons this hasn't come out yet, has only been alluded to, in the '64 election they wanted to get rid of Johnson as vice-president. For a lot of reasons. Bobby particularly hated him. And Johnson was unsavory in many ways, but he was terrified of the Kennedys. He knew of their mob connections. He thought they might kill *him*. And he knew they wanted him off the ticket. So he's sitting there very jittery. Why on earth would they want to get rid of him? (*Slight laughter*) The plan was never—I don't think the family ever agreed on it—before Dallas; after Dallas, of course it didn't exist. They wanted a Kennedy-Kennedy ticket. With Bobby Kennedy, the slayer of the Mafia—the United States' crime killer—and Jack, the hero of the western world. And that would have been hubris beyond belief, two brothers running, president, vice-president. That was in the air. I have a hunch they would not have gone through with it, because not even the Kennedys could have pulled that one off. But all this is the atmosphere, pre-Dallas. And then, of course, hubris, and nemesis arrives.

**Brown:** So let's look at the more general question about power. You've written a lot about it. All these characters in your novels, I mean certainly power is at the bottom. Are we learning anything, or is humankind just perpetually going around in circles?

**Vidal:** Well, I don't think there's any upward route to be detected in the human race. It seems to be more of the same with lucky accidents and unlucky accidents. The desire for power is a perfectly natural one, and it's because every human being, no matter what his background, has been powerless. Because he was a baby. And I suspect if you went into the psyche of Alexander the Great or Jack Kennedy or anybody—Herbert Hoover—you would find out there was something in childhood powerlessness that he said to himself, "Never again am I going to be at the mercy of other people. Therefore, let them be at my mercy"—or however he would translate it into his head. There's nothing wrong with wanting power, it's just to what ends you want it and how wise you are in the use of it. And how much—I was going to say, you know yourself, but nobody seems to do that—how much you know what the world is that you would like to dominate. And what you might do about it, and would you be of any use other than the pleasures of winning. The Kennedys never got beyond the pleasures of winning. They were blank—as Teddy Kennedy revealed when Roger Mudd asked, "Why do you want to be President?" (*In Ted Kennedy's voice*) "Ah, well, um, mmm, yeah, uh . . ." No answer, no answer. He didn't think there needed to be one, I suppose.

**Brown:** So there was a real empty quality here which stands in the minds of the American people as a great icon of elegance and grace and youthful vitality, and what you're really saying is behind all that it's emptiness. It reminds me of a McLeish poem, it's like a circus tent and he looks up at the end of the poem and says, "There, there—nothing at all," or something like that.

**Vidal:** There's even a better McLeish line: "A poem should not mean but be." They didn't mean anything. They just were. But that's true of power in a country like this. It used to be that the great powers in the nation would choose a president for us—see to it that we elected one—who not only served their interests but would also be a dignified chief executive. They were respectful of the Constitution and of the division of powers. I think it really got bad under Nixon, when he kept sending these names to the Senate for the Supreme Court, each more ludicrous than the one before, each more insulting—with Bush finally with Clarence Thomas—I mean, it's just stunning, the contempt for the Supreme Court means you have total contempt for the Constitution of the United States. It means you don't care about the country. They now have just made it very clear they don't care. They care about the people who give them the money to run. Whether it is Bob Dole: (*In Dole's voice*) "Character. That's what it's about. America. Bob Dole." That's all he says. Then cigarettes suddenly come up, and now we know that cigarettes are very serious too.

**Brown:** Okay now, if these people are as pathetic as you are indicating, is it just the nature of mass behavior that this is information or



knowledge that can't be communicated beyond a relatively small class of people? That's a very aristocratic perspective, and I would like to believe and I am hoping you're going to be able to find somewhere in your long experience that, yes, the people can form a judgment and therefore democracy can function and it isn't all just as the fellow from Baltimore [H. L. Mencken] said, Boobus Americanus.

Vidal: Well, it's not aristocratic. I mean this is a case that everybody who cares about the country wants everybody to have all the facts. Jefferson said, you know, if I had to choose between newspapers, good newspapers, and no government, I'd take the papers. The people at least would be informed. We give a hollow laugh at that today. The point is, information, the people who might say things of the sort you and I have been chatting about, are never going to be let on prime time in America. I have here in my hand—a shame we're not on television—I got a letter from Mark Halperin, Producer, ABC News, Special Events, just a few days ago. The background is, in 1968 I did a number of debates with William F. Buckley Jr. at the two conventions. He has been asked back every time. I have never been asked back by ABC or prime time for any election. Now he says, he's writing to my agent: "As you know, Mr. Vidal served as a commentator along with William F. Buckley, etc., etc. We would like to interview Mr. Vidal about his experiences at the 1968 Democratic Convention, about the distance, the direction both he and this country have travelled, and so forth and so on. We'd like to do an on-camera interview with Mr. Vidal at his convenience." This was now June 7th. Now there's a desperate letter of June 25th to my agent. He says, "Lucky for me you are in the right business to understand this [being an agent]. A suddenly installed new Executive Producer has changed our plans. Before I had even contacted Mr. Vidal to arrange the interview with him, that you and I had discussed, the segment was put on hold." Okay, now here it is, how the country is run. Peter Jennings is trying to get me on because Buckley and I made ABC number one for first time on prime time. Jennings and I have a running gag about it. I say, "What did they say this time?" "They said, 'Oh, he'll just be outrageous.'" And Jennings said, "Well, would you give me an example? 'Oh, you know, outrageous.'" It's because real subjects might come up, such as who got what money for what. Which is something you should talk about in politics, because then you understand why the politician supports what he does. But if you can't talk about it, you don't know. So what do you get? You get the fetus. The flag. Are cigarettes good for you? You get subjects which are of no national interest. They may be of personal interest to people, or religious interest. Government's about who collects what money for whom.

Brown: Recently I've noticed this in the papers—in fact, I cut them out because I find them so bizarre. Bill Clinton was talking about three subjects recently. One, he's called for school uniforms for gram-

mar-school children. He's provided last week a 10-million-dollar grant for truancy matters, to try to keep kids in school. And third, he's done something or other about curfew. All three of which, small towns perhaps ought to take some interest in, at best, other than the parents in the local neighborhood, and yet this is material that is picked up in the mainstream media and printed by the Associated Press all over America and not laughed off the page.

Vidal: No. And it's also not a federal matter. Nobody's pointed that out. The president is not in a position to say that at a high school in Glendale the students must have uniforms. Or there must be a curfew. He can't say it. He has no executive power to do this. This is the 10th Amendment. It is left to the states.

Brown: I understand why he's doing it. He needs to prop up his moral aura. School uniforms betoken conservatism. It doesn't irritate anybody so it's a freebie, and the press disseminates it so what you really get is not discussion, you get images and moods that are transmitted electronically into the brains of the people, and then that reacts, showing up in polls and ultimately elections. Now that cannot be described as a free society, governed by democratic discussion.

Vidal: No. Well, it's not a free society, and if I were an ambitious Republican politician I would just quote the president on this. You hear his voice, and his voice will be over the Hitler youth marching in their uniforms. This is totalitarian. This is the intrusion of the government into everybody's lives. The government tells us we can't smoke marijuana. Why not? It's none of their business. Cigarettes they're bearing down on. They banned alcohol in 1919, gave us the worst crime wave we've ever had until now. What is government *doing* in all of these things?

Brown: Well, you know the Unabomber had a very important point to make in his treatise, which of course no one talked about. They just talked about him and how he was caught and how he lived and the vegetables he grew and his rabbit or something. He talked about the fact that people were becoming domestic animals. And he said that's the most important issue in America today, the fact that the American people are being rendered into the status of domestic animals. And there is nobody who's even contesting that issue. That's the Unabomber.

Vidal: And he's quite right. Those guys who went off to Michigan—they didn't go off to commit crimes, as far as I can tell, they went away to get away from the FBI, the laws of the land that they didn't like, and there are more and more laws that the people don't like. The government is on top of everybody. Their sex lives, their intake of this or that. Files on anybody who wants to be a janitor at the Washington Monument. Why do we allow this? It really starts with Harry Truman, to go back to the National Security State. People got used to being—I like that phrase, domestic animals, of the Unabomber. They are domestic animals. Animal Farm, we might call the United States now. I don't know anybody that I come across from one end of the country to the other who likes the way the place is run. Whether they're conservative, liberal, bomb-throwers, quiet old ladies—nobody likes the people in politics. Nobody likes Congress. Nobody likes the press, which sometimes gives the bad news, but generally gives the news that the ownership wants you to know. Now, when you finally get a people so fed up, something's gonna break. And more and more, as I see all these prisons going up, and everybody being sent off to prison—three strikes and so on—they are preparing really for a showdown with the American people. They're already talking about using for minor drug offenders the old Army camps that are being shut down. To pen them in. More animal farming. The animals are going to turn one day and bite. And even now, perhaps as we're chatting, there is some young boy or girl who'll grow up and overthrow this government. Because it is overthrown, our old Republic. It seems to be doing its best to overthrow our Bill of Rights, our Constitution.

Brown: Well, tell me a little bit from the Italian perspective. There you had some powerful parties disintegrate. The man who is now on trial, who was the Prime Minister many times, Andriotti—I remember visiting Mother Theresa at the Vatican, and the Pope coming in,



**The Great Communicator Meets  
the Great Excommunicator**



and Andriotti was right there in his blue suit and he was very centrally located in this little plaza, little outdoor spot next to the Vatican where Mother Theresa had opened some facility for the homeless, or whatever it was. He was there. It was the dedication. And now he's on trial—that whole Christian Democratic Party business. And before that, there was all this about the Masons and P2. Does that shed any light on some of the things we're talking about? Maybe what can happen here, because that party structure after all did fall.

**Vidal:** Well, that is all an aberration, though, because we gave them a constitution after Mussolini in 1945 so that they could never have a dictatorship again. Nor could they have really a democratic government. But we were imitating the founding fathers of the United States. They feared two things. A dictatorship and democracy. And our constitution is so carefully designed that we will never have either one. So now we have this funny mess of a National Security State which does tap our phones, keep track of us, keep files on us, and how will it end?

**Brown:** How will it end? Well, it seems to me if the government of the Conservative Party in Canada collapsed, if the Christian Democratic Party in Italy collapsed, if the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan collapsed, there may be some hope for the United States.

**Vidal:** And it will be that both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party have collapsed already and nobody knows it. Because the press won't tell us.

**Brown:** I bring up the Italian case because in fact what looked pretty solid fell apart. Now maybe that's just the way that system is organized. Our parties seem well in place. I mean the Republican, Democrat—people, you say, are tired of them, but somehow 80% of the people fall into line and go for either one. But that doesn't mean that has to go on forever.

**Vidal:** No. And they don't have an alternative. I was the co-chairman of the Peoples Party with Dr. Spock in 1968 and '72. Just try and start a third party here. There's several of them at this very moment. Third, fourth, fifth parties. Everything is done to keep it possible. Italy, after the war, as our ward, was given proportional representation. Which meant that any small group of people who got together and called themselves a party might end up with a couple of seats in Parliament. So they had so many parties that you had to put together these curious coalitions—Israel's having the same problems today—you put together these weird coalitions of people who don't get along, and you end up with no government, which with Italians is brilliant. I've always said the genius of the American system is the separation of state from church. The genius of the Italian system is the separation of state from people. The Italians pay no attention to their government. The government has the big cars and the big ministries, and the ministers are allowed to steal as much as they can get away with. And the people are left alone. They don't bother to pay taxes, or very seldom. And it's enormously prosperous. Suddenly everything started to fall apart, and the old Democratic Christian party—you speak of Andriotti, seven times Prime Minister—he goes back to the end of the war, and he's now up on a murder rap. He was not only the Pope's man in government, and head of the Democratic Christian party, but he was also the Mafia's man. How his conscience—and he's very intellectual, he's a brilliant man, and terribly, terribly sly—but I don't know how in his heart he handles the two. But then this is the country that produces Machiavelli. Now it's a little more open and more interesting—people are emerging—but every country is owned by a ruling class. And the ruling class there is the Anieli's who own Fiat. There are about ten big families and they own most of the country, and in the long run what they want is what the country will get. They didn't take government too seriously until a number of shocks began to happen, the biggest being that they were no longer a principal American military base. We're still there, we've got about six bases in Italy, but with the fall of the satanic Soviet Union they no longer had any meaning.

**Brown:** When you talk about a ruling class, I wonder in the United States what kind of a ruling class there really is, because you have this stateless money, these corporate structures that give a bureaucratic

mind that looks at how to increase the return on investment. That could be anybody. Does that translate into a ruling class in the traditional sense of the word?

**Vidal:** Oh, sure. Of course it does. We've got one of the cleverest in the world. It's so clever nobody knows it's there. But it's something like 1% have most of the wealth in the country. About 20% are doing very well and 80% are not doing so well. I'd say there are a dozen families like the Rockefellers and the Mellons who've been in the pews. The DuPonts, they've been in business a long, long time. The argument that you'll get from professional liberals like Arthur Schlesinger is, "Well, no DuPont has run DuPont in all these years." Well, I've actually had dinner at Nelson Rockefeller's house and I can tell you, he didn't cook the dinner. Isn't that strange? You hire people to run these companies, and you also hire the congresses, and indeed finally the presidents. So there they are. Now between the 1% there's the 19% of doing very well. At one level it's the Mandarin political class to which you belong and I belong, and we're hereditaries. That's a kind of patriciat which may be against the rulers, or it may be for the rulers but kept on short leash. Very short leash. Then under that are the people who control opinion. These are the colleges, the universities. Did you ever think why all of those, the Harkness clan and the Exeter where I went to school, why all these rich people gave so much money to schools? We always thought, "Oh, so sentimental, they remember their days of, you know, playing soccer on the greensward"—not at all. They want to control the teaching of American History. And of course they own the newspapers. So it's not a conspiracy because they all think alike. They all go to the same prep schools, they go to the same colleges, see each other on the same boards of directors, same clubs. And they stay out of the news. Now the thing tore apart when Nelson Rockefeller got the presidential bug. Rockefellers are not supposed to run for President. You buy the President—and on short term. You don't do it yourself. It's embarrassing. The family was upset. In the case of Winthrop, his brother, who was having trouble—now dead, so there's no libel that he was having trouble with women and was having trouble with alcohol—he just wouldn't shape up, so they bought him Arkansas. Came pretty cheap, the state. And he turned out to be a pretty good governor. Arkansas was happy, and he shaped up, stopped drinking, and it was very good for both of them. But, by and large, the ownership stays out of it. In recent years, and it may be a sign—as you used Henry Adams' phrase, *degradation of democracy*—that the rich, instead of playing polo, and having yachts, are taking seats in the Senate. You have Heinz from Pennsylvania. You're getting all sorts of members of these great ruling-class families who are bored and they think the Senate might be fun. I remember Jim Aberesk of South Dakota, poor-boy senator. He told me he was sitting in a boring committee meeting with John Heinz of the 57 Varieties who had spent 7 million dollars, at that moment the highest amount anybody had ever spent for a senate seat, and he said, "Why on earth did you spend all that money to sit here and we're bored to death, the two of us? I'm poor. I had no place else to go." And Heinz said, "Jim, you don't understand. It was just play money. (Laughter) Monopoly."

**Brown:** It's play money, and I guess it works for a while, but as in the Winter Palace in 1917 in Russia, things collapse. Can you judge where we are on that continuum between complacency and arrogance that works, and then it becomes so out of phase with where people are and what they're feeling, a sense of indignation and justice shows up with some historical regularity?

**Vidal:** Well, I think it will be almost like Russia. You know, the Winter Palace would not have been stormed, the communists would not have come in, the Bolsheviks, had it not been for the external disasters like World War I. Well, I think in our case it's going to be the rise of China as the great power, which is, I think, inexorable in the coming century. And the United States will just be poorer and poorer. And as we begin to descend the economic scale, ending up probably somewhere between Argentina and Brazil, then you will see all sorts of Brazilian or Argentinian style politics here. There's a strong fascist tendency in the United States, always has been, and it doesn't take



much to activate it. Constantly scapegoating: "Oh, it's the fault of the blacks, the boat people, the this, the that." There's always a group that's being satanized. So they always have somebody to blame. And it's very easy when there are no jobs and there's not much hope. This middle-aged couple was asked on TV the other day, "Look, there are plenty of jobs"—they said, "Oh, yes, there are plenty of jobs. My husband and I, we have four of them, but we don't have as much income as we had 20 years ago, when just he worked."

**Brown:** In Guatemala and El Salvador—both client states—El Salvador gets several billion, Guatemala gets a steady, small flow of money, but right to the security services. In those two countries, nuns, labor leaders, cooperative people founding co-ops of one kind or another, kindergarten teachers, were assassinated because the ruling people felt a threat. And I'm trying to understand, okay, that's within the sphere of influence of the United States, highly connected to our intelligence agencies, therefore they know about it, therefore it's not something that's offensive to the powers that be. In this country dissent is allowed. I want to try this hypothesis: Do you think it's because the dissent has no impact? Is it because it's just like a bubble? It's there. There's a Jesse Jackson, there's people out there on the left or the right, but they don't seem to alter anything, and therefore it's kind of harmless, very minor diversion from the general thrust of where things are going. But if it were ever to be that there was an actual threat to the ruling class or to the organization of power as it exists today, why would there be different treatment for Americans than are given to Guatemalans or El Salvadorians under the watchful eye of the leadership of this country?

**Vidal:** Well, within the country, our rulers have figured out that you can write anything you want for *The Nation* (which I write for) when the circulation may be 100,000; you can talk on alternative radio programs; certain TV is accessible. No one who has anything really vital to say about how the country is governed and can name names is ever going to be publicized. He'll be made a fool of. You went through your Governor Moonbeam period when you were trying to say some interesting things about the state of the union. You are either demonized or you're ignored or you're trivialized. That's why I read the thing from ABC television. I can promise you I couldn't change the country, but let's say for six months I had half an hour every evening on television to talk about what I wanted to do, well-researched and proving my points, they wouldn't recover from it because they'd be so busy trying to pick up the pieces or trying to silence these voices. No one has anything to say. That zoo on Sunday out of Washington is the most embarrassing thing I've ever seen: "I am Michael Kinsley on the left." I keep saying, "Left of what?" And "Pat Buchanan on the right." They're idiotic, and they're just buffoons—not they themselves personally; Kinsley is rather bright—but they're there to make you think that there's dissent. And all of it is, is the new Secretary of Agriculture really too closely tied to the Tyson chicken business? Boy, isn't that riveting! You know, there's not one word about the 300 billion dollars we waste on procurement at the Pentagon. That's a non-subject because too many of the sponsors are involved in that. No, we have to sit here because there's so much of it that doesn't matter. It's drowned out and it never will get on prime time. Down there among our wards in Latin America, we've always ruled through thugs. We just kill people. I was there when Arbenz was overthrown.

**Brown:** You were actually there in '54?

**Vidal:** Yes. I had a house there in 1949, and I knew Arevalo, who was a freely elected president before Arbenz. Arevalo served his term. Arbenz was elected in a free election. They expropriated some land of the United Fruit Company, which United Fruit wasn't using, to give to people. They paid United Fruit for it—they did have a sense of humor—they paid United Fruit the price that United Fruit said the land was worth. Which was ludicrous, but they walked into that one. Suddenly we start hearing noises from Washington, that Arbenz is a communist. He wasn't a communist. Actually, the person he was trying to emulate was Franklin Roosevelt. He wanted a new deal for Guatemala. Then suddenly, Henry Cabot Lodge, senator from Mass-

achusetts, gets up in the Senate and says, "This is a communist regime. It must be stopped." And he gets to his friend Eisenhower and Allen Dulles of the CIA, and Arbenz is overthrown by the CIA. They actually brought in airplanes and drove him out. Henry Cabot Lodge forgot to mention that he was a *director* of the United Fruit Company, and no newspaper mentioned why he was so urgent on the subject.

**Brown:** And didn't the Dulles brothers have legal connections to some of the law firms that represented United Fruit?

**Vidal:** Oh, they were totally involved with them. In fact, I think United Fruit at one point—their headquarters was officially New Orleans, but I think Massachusetts was back of it.

**Brown:** They had some Wall Street big fancy law firms, and Secretary of State Dulles was a lawyer, he was in one of those big law firms, and I'm pretty sure I read somewhere that his law firm had legal business with it.

**Vidal:** And the Secretary of State's brother was the head of the CIA, Allen Dulles. And there's Henry Cabot Lodge. Three men forced President Eisenhower to overthrow a duly-elected democratic president of Guatemala. And a blood bath ever since, for which we are responsible.

**Brown:** And very little discussion. No apology by Clinton. No acknowledgment by Bush. Even Jimmy Carter in his human rights discussions at the Carter Center isn't really highlighting the massacre that goes on.

**Vidal:** Well, yes and no. He doesn't know it, or if he does, he doesn't know how to present it.

**Brown:** Having heard all this now, what's your feeling about the common life together? Are you cynical? Does it give you joy? I want something out of your soul here that is human and maybe not positive, but what do you say in the face of all this?

**Vidal:** Well, I say that eternity is a very long time, if it can be called time. And that the human race is just a passing fancy. We're preceded by viruses, and it looks like the viruses will probably kill us off. Bacteria of some kind—they have long, long lives—along with cockroaches. I was never one to take the *idea* of the human race at all seriously. To me, we're just another form of rather chattering monkeys. I don't believe in afterlife, and it's why I believe all the more deeply in *this* life as being the one thing that we can affect. And where I am in a state of continuous high blood pressure, outrage over how badly we screw everything up in the United States, which was basically the most blessed of countries—native Americans to one side—but it was a fairly empty place for a lot of Europeans and then Asians and so on, to come to. How we have come to this, all because of the theater of something called the cold war and the profits it has made for the defense industry, is a tragedy that I have lived through in my life. I saw the high noon. I got out of the Army in 1946. I was in the Pacific. I remember '45 as the moment when we were the first global empire, and we were absolutely unbeatable, the greatest economy, and here we sit 50 years later, and look at it. All I hope is that something will happen that will change it for the better. And that is somebody who may be listening to us now.

**Brown:** Well, of course, there has to be a possibility of change, and it's gone on a long time. There are ups and downs. We've heard a little bit of the down, maybe more than you wanted to hear, but there's also an up out there, and those of you listening, take it to your heart. Think about it. Reflect on it. Gore Vidal, thank you very much. Very fascinating hour.

(Enter Ralph Nader)

On August 1, Ralph Nader was one of Jerry Brown's guests.

**Brown:** Welcome to another edition of *We The People*. I want to talk to the Green candidate for President, or at least the expected Green candidate for president, consumer activist Ralph Nader, who yesterday wrote a letter to President Clinton asking him to reconsider his support of the so-called welfare reform legislation. In that letter he talks about Clinton, who avowed that he would be an advocate for children, is now about to become the author of the most anti-children piece of legislation. Also we see he's got a number of other



thoughts in here about children sleeping on heating grates becoming common in our communities within the next decade. That's something that [Daniel] Moynahan said. Ralph puts that in the letter. And also here a couple of other points we should bring out, that the amount for food stamp assistance to the unemployed, the elderly, some of the people in their late 80s, children—in fact, most of the people suffering cuts, 70%, are little children. The present generous assistance is 80 cents per person for a meal. That will be brought down to 66 cents. We're talking about people, many of whom are living 50% below the poverty line. That's about 6500 bucks for a family of three. They're the objects of this exercise. The Children's Defense Fund estimates that 14 million children will lose food because of these cuts. And, very significantly, the sharpest curtailment of childcare assistance will come to those who are working. Working poor families, where the parent is actually in the work world, is actually getting a wage, doing a job, and they're gonna be cut back. And there'll be some extra money temporarily given supposedly for childcare for those on welfare now who don't have a job. But that's mostly illusory. The amount of money needed to fund the jobs and the training for the work requirement is the exact amount, it's 13 billion short, it's not there. That's the exact amount by which the Pentagon budget is being increased by the same Congress. Ralph Nader, welcome to *We The People*.

**Nader:** Thank you, Jerry. One might add another figure. Listen to this one. This bill that Clinton has said he's gonna sign, that Gingrich and Dole have sent over to him, is expected to save about 60 billion dollars in the next six years. That is about one-third of what this government is shoveling out this year in corporate welfare. Subsidies, bailouts, all kinds of freebies, compliments of the U.S. taxpayer, to giant corporations like General Electric, the petro-chemical companies, the agribusiness companies, the mining companies, the timber companies. That's how grotesque it is. The other point is that the Basilon Center for Mental Health Law estimates that 350,000 low-income children with severe disability will be denied Social Security disability assistance over the next 6 years by eliminating what's called the individualized functional assessment. And that allows disability examiners to decide if the impairment significantly interferes with the child's ability to do everyday things most children the same age can do. What's going on here, Jerry, is that while the middle-class taxpayers shoveling close to 200 billion dollars a year to Washington, that goes out to corporations in terms of corporate welfare, less than 6% of the entire federal budget goes to the poverty welfare programs, like food stamps, aid to families with dependent children, disability support for children, etc. That does not include Medicaid, because in all other western countries, health insurance is not considered welfare, and we shouldn't consider that welfare. These are the regular conventional child welfare programs, about 6% of the entire federal budget. And as you said, the Pentagon is getting more money than even it's asking for from the Gingrich-Dole congress, and Clinton's signing these bills into law. You know, if you really sum it up, here's what I said today to President Clinton, that your decision goes against your own previous statements and those of his cabinet. Imagine. His own cabinet and his own previous statement and the criteria he established for signing a proper welfare reform bill are being violated by his statement yesterday that he's gonna sign the Gingrich-Dole bill into law. And to sign this legislation *may* advance the short-term political welfare of Mr. Clinton, but it is an act that cruelly and knowingly throws out, as the phrase says, the baby with the bathwater.

**Brown:** What's so incredible is it's just going on and there's hardly a whimper in the country.

**Nader:** Well, there are now growing demonstrations in cities around the country. NOW demonstrated in Lafayette Park yesterday outside the White House. They're gonna have another demonstration tomorrow morning. I think that Mr. Clinton's pollsters have misled him. I think that he's gonna be quite surprised that his major constituency—social service, religious groups, lower income people—who will always pull the Democratic lever, are going to basically say, "It's time to stay home. What's the point?" Clinton is taking credit

for a bill that Dole calls the Dole Bill. There ya are. The Clinton-Dole game.

**Brown:** Has that ever happened in modern presidential history?

**Nader:** No Democratic president would ever consider signing a bill like this. Because first and foremost, the welfare system reform is premised on providing enough jobs so the people on welfare can go to work. That is, go to work formally. Some of them work every day raising their kids. And as you say, a lot of these people are working people, you know, they're getting minimum wage, and that's not a livable wage, \$4.25 an hour. That's lower in real terms than minimum wage was in 1950 in this country, adjusted for inflation. Lower than people got in 1950. And the profits of the corporations today are *massively* higher than the profits of corporations in 1950. So you see, the rich are getting richer, and the poor and lower-middle class are being squeezed, and the rest of the middle class is either stagnant or suffering declining wages adjusted for inflation over the last 20 years. So, the key for any welfare reform has to be the provision of jobs. And this doesn't provide for the kinds of jobs that are needed. The second point is that it allows the 50 states to mess around with the block grants that the federal government is sending to them and not really help the people who need help. You know, whatever we say about the federal government, Jerry, the state governments are often far more corrupt. I mean if you look at some of these state governments, and there are 50 of them obviously, whereas in Washington, which was running the welfare system, if there's corruption you can go after it. In the 50 states you've gotta go after 50 states. And there isn't a civic infrastructure to do that. And so you're gonna have some politicians, as they have through time immemorial, mis-use these kinds of block grants and make it even tougher for people.

**Brown:** Now there's nothing in the law that requires a state like Mississippi or Alabama or some other state to give one day of assistance to anybody. If they're elderly or someone loses their job or a man beats his wife and she's left there with the kids, has no way of surviving, maybe she's injured—if Mississippi wants to deprive certain groups in their society and give them one month of relief and then cut them off, this bill for the first time in 61 years says that's okay.

**Nader:** It cuts off Franklin Delano Roosevelt's guarantee that no child in this country would ever go destitute for lack of public support. And that's a big step right there, backwards. But that's what Gingrich and Dole wanted to shove down the White House's throat, and apparently they're going to succeed in doing so. You see, a lot of this comes from—obviously there are abuses in the welfare, there are abuses in corporate welfare that are far, far greater—and all they do is get invitations to the White House dinner parties.

**Brown:** You know, Ralph, just as you say that, note that surveys, very careful research by people like Sandy Jenks and others, point out that most of these people on welfare *are* working because they can't live on the welfare grant alone. So they're working, doing stuff, and then if they're caught getting money they need just to eat, that's called fraud. It is nothing if they really are working—it's just that the grant is so crummy and so abysmally inadequate they have to break the law just to feed themselves, and from the time of Thomas Aquinas that has never been viewed as immoral.

**Nader:** And do you know, a lot of politicians are real rascals here. What they do is they publicize a few anecdotes and then they stereotype all working poor and non-working poor people and children with those anecdotes. You remember Reagan started this in 1980 with his famous welfare queen in Chicago. Allegedly she drove to pick up her welfare check in a Cadillac. Well, it turned out it was one of Reagan's composite characters. There was no person like that. He just put pieces together to create a Hollywood-type composite character. But if you look very carefully at the people who are on welfare and you say, okay, first distinction—we cannot make the children suffer, even if the children are children of the worst parental rascals imaginable, you can't make these 3, 4, 5, 6-year-olds suffer. Not only for humanitarian purposes, but they're gonna grow up and make other people suffer. The second stereotype that needs to be broken is that, as you



say, a lot of these people are working poor and the congress has never elevated the federal minimum wage adjusted for inflation the way they have massively elevated their own senatorial and congressperson pay, perks, and pensions and benefits. And then the third point, and this is very important for people to realize, because there are some people who work hard and make a pretty good living, and they say, why should they spend their money supporting the poor? Well, first of all, I'd like to have them say, why should they spend their money supporting giant global corporations with hundreds of billions of dollars of subsidies in loan guarantees, giveaways, freebies, bail-outs and you-name-it? They never ask themselves that question because they're not thinking corporate welfare. And they've gotta start thinking corporate welfare. And the second thing I point out to these people is, don't over-stereotype. There are people in this country who are injured in accidents and they cannot support themselves. There are people in this country who are born brain-damaged and they cannot support themselves. There are people in this country who are subject to diseases and are disabled and they cannot support themselves or their families. There are people in this country who are victims of crime and disabled and they cannot support themselves. And there are people in this country who are just victims of bad luck and aren't you all out there who aren't victims of bad luck lucky? But there are some people who are victims of bad luck that is not due to themselves. And so when you add them all up, there are a lot of innocent people out there. Sure, there are some people who are ripping off the system. That's what law enforcement is all about. But you don't take the few people who are ripping off the system, or even if it's 15% of the people or 20%, and smear all the rest of them who are working and trying to make ends meet or who are just desperate because of the accidents of life. All of that goes by the wayside in this terrible and cruel stereotyping and over-generalization.

**Brown:** Yeah, they use the words *welfare reform*. Moynahan—I saw him today on C-Span—he calls it “welfare repeal, dismantling of the social contract,” and he predicts Social Security will be next.

**Nader:** Yes, of course this breaks the logjam of the corporate right-wing in Congress, and they're gonna go after Medicare and they already tried to go after legal services for the poor. The Urban Institute, which is a pretty establishment organization, gets home-town-type business grants and so on—they estimate 1.1 million children will be thrown into poverty in the next 5 years. And a lot of other children will not get adequate nutrition. Isn't it interesting that you've got the federal government paying billions of dollars to curtail agricultural production and to raise the price of crops, and then they turn around and they start saying, “Well, we're gonna have to curtail food stamps to hungry children.” Reinhold Neibuhr years and years ago wrote a book which I'm sure you've read more than once, Jerry, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. And one of the theses is simply that people can think themselves moral and prudent but they are tolerating or condoning an immoral society in general. And I think Clinton's gonna learn a lesson here. I think that he's gonna start going around the country and people are gonna start asking him *why* he did this. And they're gonna be engaged in, I'm sure, peaceful protests, which have already started. And he's gonna have to re-think this. It's not too late for him to veto this. Of course, he probably will never do it.

**Brown:** Has the Senate voted yet?

**Nader:** They're supposed to finish tonight. And, you know, a lot of other Democratic senators went along with Clinton. They're just cowards. People like Senator Joe Lieberman from my home state of Connecticut, probably the number one hybrid Rep-Dem enthusiast in the Senate. And he knows very well from his own work in Connecticut how this is going to affect children, and he's urging Clinton to sign it. I mean it's not enough to say, “Look, this brings us half way, there are a lot of bad things in the bill, as Clinton said yesterday, and we'll take care of it later.” There's no later when you're dealing

with this kind of bill. They'd never get through provisions to get rid of the bad parts of this bill through a Republican-dominated congress. And even if it isn't, the filibuster by Republicans if they are in the minority can take care of any Clinton revisions.

**Brown:** Now, by lowering the support for the working poor by lowering the welfare benefit, by kicking millions of people off welfare, what you do is you put more downward pressure on wages. And that, added to the globalization of business, the management continues to get an upper hand. And this is a boost in that balance of power between the boss and those who work. And those who are at the bottom of the scale have to trade their labor, their bodies, their minds, for 5 or 6 or 7 bucks an hour, they're gonna find out there are more bodies on the line competing with them. Not just those in Mexico and Indonesia making stuff that used to be made here. Now it's gonna be people pushed out of this support system called welfare. So I think there's a very intentional program here by corporate America.

**Nader:** Yes, and you know, I think a lot of these politicians in Washington, the only time they get concerned about the poor, really, the only time they really get concerned about the poor is when a city explodes, and then suddenly, gee, you know there's real problems here. Sure, these are criminals, you know, prosecute 'em, but this wouldn't have happened if people had jobs and people had hope and opportunity. You don't see many urban explosions in wealthy cities. Or wealthy parts of cities. But you know, they're just engaged in increasing the pressure and increasing the pressure without providing employment opportunity. Or if they do, they're not, they're not a livable wage. I think we all, all of us as Americans, have got to look at this concentration of power and wealth in too few hands. And every society that allowed it to go too far has gotten into serious trouble. We don't have many political statespeople around, and that means we really have to recognize the old Greek saying, which is, a society rots from the head down like a fish, and then realize that that's it's built from the bottom up.

**Brown:** So it's a matter of the consumers, citizens, grass-roots activists, people who finally get the message that Mr. Clinton and others who are supposed to be their friends are actually in the employ of the other side.

**Nader:** When has Clinton ever gone after corporate welfare? I mean, for heaven's sake, one-third of America are public lands, the federal lands, and big mining companies come on these federal lands, discover melibdium or gold or hard-rock minerals and they get it free, for 5 bucks an acre, over the mine. They buy 5,000 acres for \$25,000, as a Canadian company did in Nevada, and there's \$9-billion of federally owned gold—that's *your* gold—in the ground, and they can sell it and they don't give the taxpayer any royalties or interest. They leave environmental wreckage behind that the taxpayer has to clean up. I just saw an article the other day, that Microsoft and General Electric, which owns NBC, are starting this new network to compete with CNN. And they said it's gonna produce 400 jobs, so they dangled it before New York City's mayor and the governor of New Jersey to figure out who will offer more corporate welfare, or as they call it, incentives. And the Governor of New Jersey won. And here's one of the corporate welfare provisions that these immensely rich corporations, General Electric and Microsoft, will receive when they start their 400 jobs, as they have in New Jersey. In the next ten years, 80% of the New Jersey State income taxes that these 400 employees will pay are rebated back to Microsoft and General Electric.

**Brown:** Incredible. A very good example of food stamps for the rich. Ralph, I want to just thank you for being with us, and good luck in your travels. When will the Green Party nominate you?

**Nader:** It's later this month in Los Angeles, and anybody who wants more details, just look at the Green Party website on the Internet, and they can get more details, and also more details about what the Greens are doing throughout the United States.





## MEDIA FREAK

### Scatological Paranoia

Paula Poundstone in *Mother Jones*: "I learned that each time a toilet flushes without the lid down, a fine mist of fecal matter lands on everything in the bathroom. I try not to use the bathroom anymore, and I certainly don't brush my teeth. I don't know how well-informed people sleep at night."

### Valerie Solanas Lives

When Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol in 1968, Ben Morea of the Lower East Side Motherfuckers wrote a leaflet in her defense, and they became friends. Morea told *The Realist* that, in the recent film, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, "The scene showing her meeting with me and staying the night was a composite. But there never was any sexual activity or frivolous gunplay. And she absolutely did not steal a gun."

### Madalyn, We Hardly Knew Ye

September marks one year that Madalyn Murray O'Hair, her son and granddaughter have been missing. According to *American Atheist Newsletter*, a few days after their disappearance, her son, Jon, promised on their car phone, "It's too complicated to explain now, but we'll have a conference call with the board members when we get back and explain everything." The call has never come. Only God knows what really happened.

### Shuffling with Sneakers

In Paul Beatty's novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, Gunnar Kaufman experiences adolescent rites of passage, such as buying his first pair of basketball sneakers: "Before the staff allowed me to try on any shoes, I had to sign a release stating that if my new sneakers were forcibly removed from my feet and the crime received any media attention, I would blame the theft on the current administration and not on niche marketing." His friend vetoes one model "because they were sewn by 8-year-old Sri Lankans who worked in open-air factories, received no lunch breaks, and were paid in candy bars"—even while, back in real life, basketball star and Nike sneakers promoter Michael Jordan is busy marketing his own new fragrance, *Sweatshop*.

### Unexplained Celestial Events

*Saucer Smear*, official publication of UFO research, reveals "a newly-discovered 'flaw' in Ray Santilli's notorious alien abduction film, *The Roswell Incident*. The original film reel-can labels bear a stamp which appears to have been applied before the cameraman wrote his instructions. The design of the stamp has now been clearly identified as that of the National Military Establishment, and research shows that this stamp was not introduced until October 1947 at the earliest. Unfortunately the Roswell Incident occurred in late June or early July, 1947—depending on which expert one listens to."

### Filler Items

- Atlanta security guard Richard Jewell has been offered a job as a radio talk-show host.

- William Saroyan's archives include frayed shoelaces and mustache clippings. When he ate canned food, he steamed off the label and stamped the date on the back.

- *Euphemisms*: Dr. Jack Kevorkian uses the term "patholysis" for assisted suicide. The abortion of one or more fetuses to improve the odds of a healthy outcome for a multiple pregnancy is known as "selective reduction." Since Russian troops marched into the Chechen capital, Grozny, almost ten years ago, countless still-missing citizens have been carted off to camps known in military jargon as "filtration points."

- "There were questions asked by unnamed people about whether we should call it *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*," says co-director Gary Trousdale, "because 'hunchback' is a hurtful word. You're going to call it *The Differently Abled Bell Ringer*?"

- From a review of *Independence Day* in Louis Farrakhan's *The Final Call*: "Anything—even fictional—that threatens to wipe out the white man's civilization is good news to the Nation of Islam."

- Warning in the *Organized Crime Digest*: "Because of the sensitive nature of material in this publication, the publisher reserves the right of approval of subscribers."

- *Men's Health* reports that the most orgasms ever recorded by a woman in one hour was 134... but who's counting?

- From the society page of the *New York Times*: "Wendi Beth Rose, daughter of Marshall Rose of New York and the late Jill Rose, son of Joanna and Daniel Rose of New York. The couple was not previously related. The bride was The bride has chosen to keep her maiden name."

- A Minnesota state law orders all counties to rename any lakes, rivers or other geographic features containing the word *squaw*. Lake County tried to change Squaw Creek and Squaw Bay to Politically Correct Creek and Politically Correct Bay. The law was passed after Cass Lake High School students traced the word *squaw* to a French corruption of an Iroquois epithet for vagina.

- Tom Cruise has filed a \$60-million defamation lawsuit against a German magazine, *Bunte*, which published a story alleging that the actor—who has adopted two children with his actress wife Nicole Kidman—is sterile. Cruise claims that he has a normal sperm count and that the article could damage his movie career.

- An announcement in the *Los Angeles Times*: "A Restless Leg Syndrome support group will meet at 1:30 in the Whittier Room of Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital."

- From *Smoke and Mirrors, the War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure* by Dan Baum: "The year chain-smoking William Bennett became drug czar, tobacco killed some 395,000 Americans—more than killed in both world wars. Alcohol killed 23,000 and

another 24,400 on the highways. Cocaine killed 3,618 that year, heroin 2,743. And no death from marijuana has ever been recorded."

- South Carolina's Supreme Court has ruled that a woman can be prosecuted for child abuse if she takes drugs during pregnancy. In a dissenting opinion, Justice James Moore asked, "Is a pregnant woman's failure to obtain prenatal care unlawful? Failure to take vitamins and eat properly? Failure to quit smoking or drinking?" He said a woman would be better off to illegally abort her third-trimester fetus and face a 2-year sentence rather than give birth to a baby after taking drugs and face a 10-year sentence for child abuse.

- A woman who represented herself as a Whitewater juror and said her pretrial suspicions influenced her vote admitted that she never sat on the jury—she just had the same name as a panel member. She said she was tired of calls from the media and decided to play along.

- A novelty shop in Budapest, Hungary now sells musical condoms. A programmed chip plays a melody as the condom is unfurled. The condoms come in either of two melodies—*You Sweet Little Dumbbell* or an old communist song, *Arise, Ye Worker*.

- In Ecuador, a foot powder called Pulpavies was elected mayor of Picoaza, a town of 4,000 population. During recent campaigns for municipal office, a company that manufactures the deodorant used this slogan: "Vote for any candidate, but if you want well-being and hygiene, vote for Pulpavies."

- A defining moment of this season's presidential campaign coverage occurred on ABC News, when anchor Peter Jennings asked correspondent Cokie Roberts, "What do you think the spin will be tomorrow?" It used to be the job of newscasters to tell you what happened. Now they predict how the propagandists will use the media to manipulate you.

- On the Internet: What did Boris Yeltsin's chief bodyguard tell him when the election results came in? "I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is Zhirinovskiy got 65%. The good news is you got 85%."

- At a press conference called to kick off the first organized lobbying campaign by adult video performers, erotic actress Nina Hartley insisted that the market for X-rated movie rentals is rapidly expanding and may even promote romance for middle-aged couples in the privacy of their homes. "It's no different than Hamburger Helper."

- When several dozen American business leaders met in Washington to protest an \$11-billion increase by Congress in military spending, Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry's ice cream offered scoops of his latest flavor, "Totally Nuts."

- Bill Clinton assumed that Dick Morris was advising him on the phone to move to the right, but Morris was actually talking to his hooker girlfriend.