

Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

Allegania the Beautiful

Charles Fenno Hoffman was a one-legged Hudson Valley lawyer turned poet who wrote—seriously—one of the best odes upon a dead dog ever penned. Hoffman had earned his gimp when, in a fit of boyish daredevilry, he tried to leap from a pier onto a steamer. He came up about half a leg short.

As he later came up short in his most ambitious project: an attempt to give a new name to our country. If poets ran this land, Hoffman would be revered today as the father of our beloved Allegania.

Nineteenth-century American poets keenly felt the infelicity of the name “United States.” What could we call ourselves? “United Stateser” is hopelessly clumsy, and rhymes only with “late, sir” and “fate, sir.” Besides, there were five other United Stateses in the hemisphere. “American,” which—not to spoil the ending—finally won out, was imprecise, encompassing two continents and many countries.

Washington Irving, the nation’s leading man of letters, had worried this bone for years. “We want a national name,” wrote Irving. “We want it poetically, and we want it politically.... I leave it to our poets to tell how they manage to steer that collocation of words, ‘The United States of North America,’ down the swelling tide of song, and to float the whole raft out upon the sea of heroic poesy.” A stirring new name “would bind every part of the confederacy together.”

So in March 1845, the New York Historical Society appointed poet Hoffman, Indian expert Henry R. Schoolcraft, and attorney David Dudley Field to come up with a better name for our country. By month’s end, their report was in. (Commissions worked faster in those days.) It

urged discarding the “irrelevant appellation at present used for this country” and its replacement by one “more likely to promote national associations, and prove efficient in History, Poetry, and Art.”

The trio looked for a name in “our mountains, or our lakes, or our rivers.” The Rockies they judged too distant; the northern lakes peripheral; the great Mississippi River and its tributaries had already given names to six states.

Taking a cue from Washington Irving, they settled upon “Allegania,” to be pronounced “Alganian” for poetical reasons. (Though suitable rhymes do not quite cascade: mania? Mauritania? That’s vain o’ ya?)

The Alleghany Mountains were “the grandest natural feature of the country,” declared Hoffman and Company; “one that is common to the north and south...the back-bone of the original thirteen states: and the dividing ridge between the Atlantic rivers and the great central valley of the continent.” Moreover, the national monogram—USA—would be unchanged in a United States of Allegania.

The name speaks of “colonial adventure, and revolutionary heroism”; its Indian derivation gives it a native quality that a corruption of Italian explorer Vespucci’s first name just doesn’t have.

The Society asked other state historical societies and “eminent citizens” to jump aboard the Allegania bandwagon; mapmakers and textbook writers were asked to designate our land as the “Republic of Allegania.”

But it would have been easier to move the mountains themselves than to move men on the subject of a national name. Washington Irving, of course, was for Allegania, but his fellow Hudson Valley

eminence Martin Van Buren was against. Another ex-president, John Quincy Adams, was appointed chairman of a Massachusetts Historical Society committee to consider Allegania; uncharacteristically, the Bay State stayed out of the fray.

Newspapers were found on both sides of the issue. (This was an age when poets—Allegania’s chief constituency—published in the daily press, where they actually had readers.) The *Boston Journal* was all for a new national name, but it preferred the undignified “Yankee Doodle.” The *Evening Gazette* of New York pointed out that westward expansion would render the Alleghany Mountains eccentric. The *New York Evening Post* published “Allegania” by Henry B. Tuckerman, who (in addition to introducing a new spelling for the name) did his cause no favors with this example of the poetaster’s art:

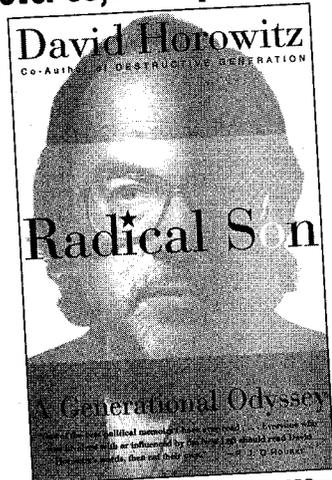
*And Alps and Apennines resign their
fame,
When thrills the world’s deep heart with
Allegania’s name!*

By May 1845, Hoffman was being shouted down at a raucous meeting of the New York Historical Society. His committee “hardly escape[d] without impeachment from these indignant United Statesers.”

But that was to be the least of poor Hoffman’s troubles. In 1848, a chambermaid accidentally used the manuscript of the nearly finished novel that he regarded as his masterpiece as kindling. Within a year, Hoffman suffered a nervous breakdown. He would spend the remaining 35 years of his life in and out of insane asylums, writing no poetry, the first forgotten mad poet of the Republic of Allegania.

—Bill Kauffman

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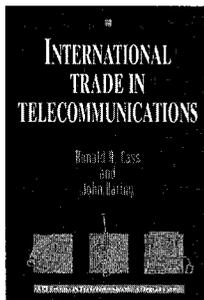
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Bill Clinton, Movie Mogul?

Hollywood lore has it that Darryl F. Zanuck, the famous president of 20th Century Fox, had an insatiable appetite for beautiful young starlets. Before they were cast in his pictures, Zanuck supposedly conducted “auditions” in the secret chamber behind his desk, decorated with hunting trophies and a bed with a tiger-skin spread. It was the era of the “casting couch,” and to many it’s ancient history. Guess who might bring it back?

Bill Clinton has been more successful than any other politician at cultivating a special relationship with Hollywood. As Arkansas governor, he dreamed of life as a screen idol, telling confidants he had a special star quality, but sadly admitting, “I’m going to have to stay in politics now, because I’m too old to be a movie star.” So as Clinton begins making plans for life after the presidency, is it any wonder that he has reportedly informed friends that he may want to run a movie studio?

Clinton will be only 54 when his term is over, and as a studio head he could make more money in one year than he’s made his entire life. Then there’s the added allure of finding himself surrounded by the Beautiful People. Given these powerful incentives, coupled with Clinton’s demonstrated affection for the celebrity culture, it seems unlikely that he will be satisfied to return to a Place Called Hope. Nor does he demonstrate any of the scruples that led Ronald Reagan to refuse movie cameos and studio positions after leaving office—on the grounds that they would “cheapen” the presidency.

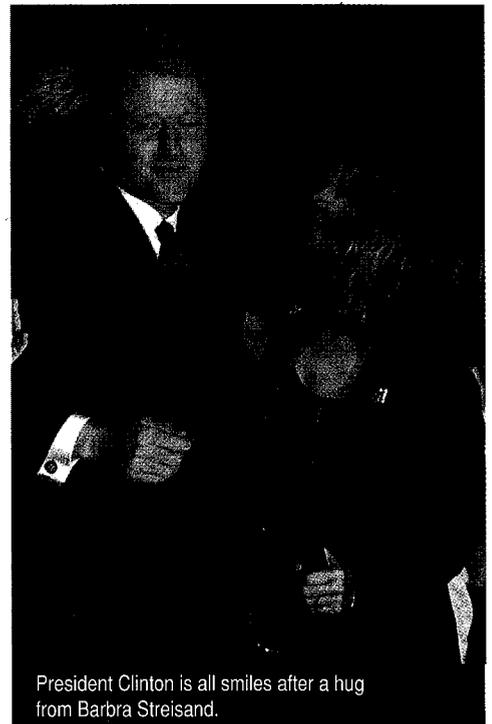
Clinton surely won’t follow the course charted by other former presidents of his age. Franklin Pierce left office at 53, retired to his native New Hampshire, and was never heard from again. U.S. Grant,

55 when his term was over, spent most of his remaining years in a drunken stupor, but nevertheless managed to write one of the great American memoirs from his deathbed. And Jimmy Carter, at 57, moved back to Georgia to build houses and teach Sunday school.

In many ways, Hollywood and Clinton seem the perfect match. But earlier this year, when it began to appear that the President may have been using the Oval Office like Zanuck’s studio hideaway, many of Clinton’s film industry allies began to get nervous. Hollywood FOBs who had hoped Clinton would be their version of the mythical John F. Kennedy of Camelot fame were shocked by the Monica Lewinsky and Kathleen Willey news that cast him as a crude lecher. And comments similar to Hugh Hefner’s subsequent proclamation—“We have a playboy in the White House who’s lit a thousand points of lust”—made some people skittish in an industry increasingly sensitive to “family values” criticism. The message to the White House was made clear: If you come to us as a martyr railroaded by a political witch hunt, we’ll take you. But come to us as damaged goods, and you won’t be useful.

Of course, some in Hollywood actually champion the lifestyle Clinton has come to symbolize. Jack Nicholson eloquently argued this position in a front-page *Wall Street Journal* story: “I supported Gary Hart because he f...s. I support President Clinton and will always be on his side because he is someone who f...s. I don’t trust any guy who doesn’t.”

But others are more wary. One former studio head, a Democrat who has attended Clinton fundraisers, acknowledges that while many are still reserving judgment and giving the President the



President Clinton is all smiles after a hug from Barbra Streisand.

AP/Wide World Photos

benefit of the doubt, the mood toward him has shifted, and is “much more mixed” than when he was first elected. And a high-placed source at one of the top talent agencies says that in this age when many industry leaders are raising their own families, even some of Clinton’s staunchest political supporters are having serious qualms about accepting his alleged behavior.

Still others have different concerns about Clinton running a studio: They’re skeptical about whether he could make perceptive creative decisions. “As a politician and orator, he’s extraordinary,” the famed Paramount head Robert Evans, now a producer, told me. “But if his taste in films is the same as his taste in women, I wouldn’t want to finance the pictures.”

Two-and-a-half years is a long time, and Clinton has many miles to go before his civilian life begins. But if the lukewarm reception he’s now receiving continues, he may want to consider other options that would bring him to the Sunset Strip. Word is, Pepperdine University, just off Malibu Beach, is accepting applications for dean.

—John Meroney