



## Tears and Cheers

by Benjamin J. Stein

Wednesday

Here I am again in Heber Springs, Arkansas, visiting my hero father-in-law. It's a warm, dry day, and time for little me to visit the local school. I'm interested in education, plus I'm interested in faces. For years now, I've been working on a general theory of faces, which basically holds that the farther inland from New York or Los Angeles one travels, the sweeter and more intelligent the faces. Arkansas has about the best-looking faces I've ever seen, and I say this even though it also has been known to produce some very cagey, slick faces.

At the sprawling campus of the Heber Springs combined elementary school, junior high school, and high school, my father-in-law Col. Denman and I strolled into the elementary school. We registered our humble selves with the powers-that-be in the principal's office, and then were shown around the pleasant school.

Computers, computers everywhere. A forest of computers. Kids sitting at computers learning reading, spelling, math, vocabulary, geography, history. Computers in neat rows, computers donated by the local grocery store, computers via the taxpayers of Arkansas and Cleburne County. In the background, teachers hover and help, often talking to little knots of children who do not happen to be at computers.

Elementary school as I knew it years ago—long before there were any computers besides the refrigerator-like things at the Strategic Air Command—has apparently vanished from Heber Springs.

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There are no Miss Carters standing in front of the room saying "Two times two is four. Four times four is sixteen. . . ." I guess that's all done by software designed somewhere far away.

The kids had extremely sweet faces, and the teachers looked like my dream of what teachers should be: focused, kindly, patient, and eager to teach. But I wonder what the effect on kids is of interacting, if that's the right word, with a TV screen instead of with a flesh-and-blood adult. A computer is unforgiving and mechanical. You can "talk" to it while you pick your nose. You need learn no skills of social accommodation when you learn from a computer. You do not learn how to get along with your fellow humans. You do not learn how to think and memorize and reason while you learn to follow some general rules of human conduct.

I loved the school at Heber, and I loved the faces, but I kept thinking that having an adult teach you what is correct and incorrect is better than having a machine do it. I would rather have children grow up thinking that their elders were the source of wisdom than thinking that a machine they can turn on and off is their only master.

Then again, what do I know? I can't even turn on a computer.

Monday

Electon eve in Houston. I'm here at the behest of Comedy Central to broadcast to the nation from the Bush-Quayle Victory Party at the Galleria Westin in Houston. I used to wonder where all of the Iranians who aren't in either Iran or Los Angeles have been hanging out, and now I know. They're driving taxis in Houston, working as desk clerks at Houston hotels, waiting tables at Bennigan's at the Galleria. I like Iranians. They're smart. Not sweet, but smart.

Off to the Bush Victory Rally at the Astrodome. It's the last night of the campaign, and even though Bush is far behind in the polls, there's a mob scene here. There are lines of cars stretching for miles to get in and cheer for Bush. We barely got in, and when we did, we had to edge forward slowly to get a glimpse of the entertainment before Bush's speech.

There was Bob Hope, God love him, still in there pitching; Charlton Heston, God really love him, tireless for the cause; Ted Williams, great baseball player and fisherman; Arnold Palmer; some wonderful country singers; and a fabulously good choir from the First Baptist Church.

These people are enthusiastic. Not just enthusiastic, enthralled, wildly devoted to Bush. They look as if awaiting the One True Messiah. I've never seen such enthusiastic human beings at a political gathering. They would crawl on ground glass for Bush. Women are leaning forward with misty, damp looks in their eyes. Men are flushed and breathing heavily. As I made a mental note of this religious revival, a young Bush storm trooper approached me and my producer for Comedy Central and shouted at us, "Press, back to your area!"

I tried to tell him that I couldn't really get a feel for the crowd's enthusiasm from the press pen, but he wouldn't listen. He said he would call the police if the press did not return to its area. He looked as if he was just itching to call the police. His face was mottled and wet with perspiration.

I meekly went back to my press area, but the thought occurred to me that this hostility to the press and by the press had to be a two-way street. How smart Reagan was to have been endlessly friendly and one-of-the-boys to the press. How idiotic to treat the press with mean-

ingless hostility. As if showing hostility would somehow shame reporters and pundits into being nice.

Bush finally appeared and gave his usual rambling, shambling talk. What a mess. Even he could not really come up with any good reasons why we should re-elect him. Still, the notion bore down on me that there's a lot of enthusiasm for that old-time religion out there in America. Reagan knew he could tap into it by appealing to the dream of what America is spoze to be. Bush hasn't much of a clue. Reagan's speeches used to bring tears to my eyes. Bush's speeches embarrass me.

As I looked at Bush fumbling as the multitudes hoped for more, I kept thinking of an heir tossing away his principal, a spendthrift who had no idea of the legacy he'd been left. Oh, well. Easy come, easy go.

Tuesday

**E**lection day here in Houston and everywhere else. The first thing I noticed about the Bush-Quayle Victory Party is that the name has subtly been changed, more or less overnight, to the Bush-Quayle Election Party.

The second odd thing is that the party is in a smaller room than the room where dentists' daughters have their wedding receptions. Not only is it small, but it's extremely unfestive. Plus just about the only substantial presence is us media folk. My stand-up slot is right next to Susan Spencer from CBS and near that of Brit Hume from ABC. Of course, their stand-up slots are a lot bigger, but at any rate I'm in damned good company.

The third thing of note is that the Bush guests at this thing are really stoked at the media. The young Texas bucks in their ill-fitting suits and their girlfriends are eying us as if they'd like to kill us. Luckily for me, as soon as they notice I'm from *Ferris Bueller*, they all love me. But the hostility toward the press is fantastic. Several times during the evening, as I went off to buy drink tickets from a beautiful young blond woman named Kelly, the Bush goons shouted at me, "Media back to your slots!"

What's the point?

On one of my forays to get a drink I met Bob Mosbacher and on another I

met his son. They were being brave and level-headed. On another trip I met two beautiful girls from the University of Texas named Michaelynn and Christie. They were lovely young rich women who seemed genuinely heartsick that Bush was going to lose.

It was clear from the get-go that if Bush lost Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Colorado by big margins—as he did—it was good-bye White House. I felt sad, but then I flirted with the girl selling the drink tickets, brought her on TV to flirt with her on TV, and then I felt still better. Being on TV is a drug. It's not "like" a drug. It is a drug.

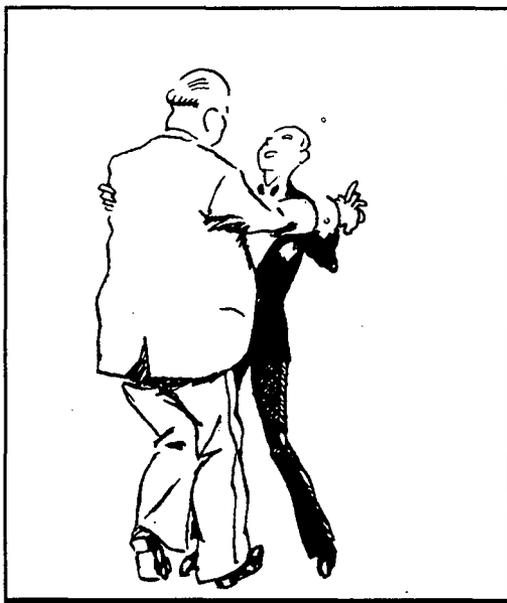
"Kelly," I asked on camera, after Bush was clearly gone, "do you ever like to go out with older men?"

"Yes," she said.

"How about older, intellectual type men?"

"Ooooh, I really like smart men," she said.

"How about men who have houses in



Malibu, paid for or not, with great connections in Hollywood?"

"They're the best of all," she said.

I had to do something to amuse myself. The party was not happening. A very wealthy Houstonian whom I knew slightly talked to me under the watchful eye of a Bush Kommando.

"The truth is," she said, "that Barbara Bush hated being First Lady and didn't want George to even run again. She's glad he didn't win from what I hear."

"Really."

"Plus, George wasn't really that keen

on winning himself," the woman added. "He really was ready to retire and get out of public service."

At about 9:30 local time, Bush appeared on stage. He gave a short, rambling but polite concession speech, and the crowd of his pals shouted, "WE HATE THE PRESS," over and over again.

It was a scary sight. I can't think of a time when a presidential candidate's party shouted a slogan of hating anyone.

I felt really sad for the party. This is what the whole hope of a Republican party that stood for the ordinary man's dreams of what America should be has come to: blame it on the media. As if the media tossed away Nixon's innovation and brilliance in foreign affairs, his compassion for the poor, as if the media trashed Ronald Reagan's flawed but still historic vision of an America of opportunity for everyone, not just for Wall Street. As if the media didn't even bother to make presidential speeches to the nation for four years.

Blame it on the media. The last refuge of losers.

Oh, well. Time to rethink our lives. My self-help group, Journey into Self-Obsession, has a few applicable slogans:

- When someone criticizes you, maybe he's right.
- When you have a disagreement with someone, maybe he's right.
- When someone tells you that you made a mistake, maybe you did.
- Accept what's inevitable, and work with it.

Good lessons.

Thursday

**A** meeting in New York with a magazine editor. He's a fabulous guy, the true salt of the earth, a literary, sensitive, wonderful man. We ate at an Italian restaurant on the West Side. "Do you know what kind of college graduates we get?" he asked me. "Let me tell you. We had one from Brown, who didn't know what a dateline was. What future does this country have when journalism interns don't know what a dateline is?"

I took a bus across town to talk to another magazine guy, a wealthy man who owns a small, hip newspaper. We talked about stories, and then he said, "Can we get you to write a column for us really cheap?" →

"No," I said. "You can't."  
 "Why not?"  
 "Because I have to support my family," I said.  
 "Well, T. writes for us really cheap," he said.  
 "T. is already rich. I'm not."  
 "T. has no money at all," the publisher said. "He's broke. At most he's got a few million."  
 "I see."

"Now will you do it really cheap?"  
 "No."  
 I took a bus downtown to buy shoes. It was a cheery Fifth Avenue bus, and the New Yorkers on it looked surprisingly cozy and relaxed. Then, at about 60th Street, a young African-American got on with dark glasses. He sang in a loud voice. He started playing drums on a seat next to an elderly woman. He started talking dirty to himself. Suddenly the

whole bus looked sad and frightened. The spell had been broken. The masks came down and the weary, resigned looks appeared. American urban life in a nutshell.

After-dinner drinks with my pal D., a wealthy writer. We ate at a place called the Saloon. "I'm up to a million two-fifty per book," he said. "That's for now. Pretty soon, I'll be at two million, and then who knows? And the books take a few months to grind out."

"I see," I said. The sums he was mentioning so dwarfed my own royalties that it was like comparing a beetle to an elephant.

"I'm thinking of buying a yacht. My kids would love it."

"Makes sense to me."

"I want a real yacht, though. Not a little cabin cruiser. I want something with at least ninety feet of length. Something that I can take friends on and not be ashamed. Maybe have a crew of five or six young women."

"It sounds like a shrewd move in these times."

"I want a yacht my kids won't be ashamed of, Benito," he said. "Something substantial, yet fun."

"Ninety feet sounds exactly right."

*Sunday*

**H**ere I am in Washington, D.C. At this moment, so to speak, I'm lying on an ancient couch in my parent's amazing Watergate apartment. It's so filled with books, newspapers, and assorted papers that it should really be an exhibit at the Smithsonian. Something like "Apartment of Old Washington Hands, 1937-1999." It's a small apartment, but seems to have every book ever written.

Anyway, I'm lying here and nodding off, my father is sitting a few feet away looking at the silent TV, and my mother is looking through one of her many piles of newspapers. A thought keeps going through my mind. It's a complex thought, but sort of important, so let me explain:

Someday, none of this is going to be here. None of us. This cozy scene. This warm intellectuals' apartment of University of Chicago grads who have seen Presidents come and go. This mother who at her age lugs huge cartons of fresh orange juice for blocks for me, her 47-year-old boychik. This father who

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ignores his angina to work out complex calculations and look up obscure quotes for me. The son who cries far more than a middle-aged man should cry and laughs inappropriately. This moment.

Almost twenty years ago, Bob Tyrrell called me out of the blue to ask me to be a movie critic for his magazine. He said he wanted me to share my "wisdom" with readers. I still remember the phrase, because when he and I talked I lived in a miserably small hovel in Washington, was unhappy and frustrated much of the time, was so filled with self-hate that I used to hit my dog when she misbehaved, and maybe didn't even know how to spell "wisdom."

Time has passed. I worked for Nixon and loved him and still do. I cried every day for six months after he resigned. I fell in love many times and wound up taking girls to emergency rooms for drug overdoses and feeling I was the scum of the earth. I felt fear about money every day for more than a decade. My whole life was based on fear and trying to fight it by eating too much, showing off, and acting as if I knew what wisdom was.

In the past few years, I have come to a better understanding of things. Here's what it is. Life does not change. It's always going to have fear and envy and ambition and low self-esteem lurking out there behind every bush. All of those things are going to conspire to make me feel bad.

But there is also an arsenal of thoughts that make me feel good and keep me able to act decently toward men, women, children, and above all dogs. The arsenal consists of feeling gratitude instead of envy, of surrendering to what's inevitable instead of fighting it, of trusting in God instead of money or movie stars or cars, of realizing my own insignificance except in a comic sense. It also consists of treasuring those whom I love and who love me, and of worshipping the moments of serene companionship with those I love, those perfect gifts from God.

In the years since I've been scribbling for *The American Spectator*, I have come to believe that the magazine and its readers are my family. (Not "like" family, but *family*.) The people who run the *Spectator*—Bob Tyrrell, Wlady Pleszczynski, Chris Caldwell, Ron Burr, and before them, long ago, Adam

Meyerson—have never flagged in their solidarity with me. The readers of the *Spectator* have become like a large *meshpuchah*, like kinfolk, all over America, sharing their lives with me as I share mine with them. The hours I spend telling about my life are hours spent among friends, an amber preserve of shared feelings and affection.

I would have to be as good a writer as Bob and Wlady and my hero-writers Aram Bakshian and John Coyne to really say how moved I am to have had this family. I can't really show my thanks except maybe by taking all of you to

Morton's and by saying what I've just said: when you're in a room with your elderly parents and it's all quiet, and the sun is setting over the Potomac, and you know you're safe for an hour or two, you're in a good place. Life with those you love, even life in a community formed by reading, is a gift, no matter what else happens. People are saved by knowing what good is, and happiness is falling in love with what you already have.

Happy birthday, Bob and Wlady and Ron and Chris and everyone else, and thanks for my family. □

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## Crossing the Line

by Terry Eastland

Confronted with information showing that the three major networks gave George Bush a tougher time than Bill Clinton, NBC's political director, Bill Wheatley, told the *Washington Post* that there hadn't been any "active bias at work." At least he agrees there *was* bias, and in that respect, he was more right than he knew. Certain ideas did influence the press, but in some cases reporters probably were not aware of them. For this reason, part of the bias really might have been unpremeditated.

Fundamentally, the press (with all the usual qualifications about how the press is not a monolith) accepted the notion that the fate of the nation rides on the fate of a presidency. This idea of "presidential nation," as it has been called, dates to Woodrow Wilson and is basic Democratic doctrine, the writers on the "imperial presidency" of Richard Nixon notwithstanding. Down through the years, Republican nominees often have accepted the idea, but never to the extent that Democratic candidates—or journalists—have. This year was no exception, as witness the abundance of stories about the United States from 1980 to 1992, effectively tying the state of the nation to the state of the presidency.

The idea of "presidential nation" makes a hash of any (typically Republican) effort to limit, either for reasons of con-

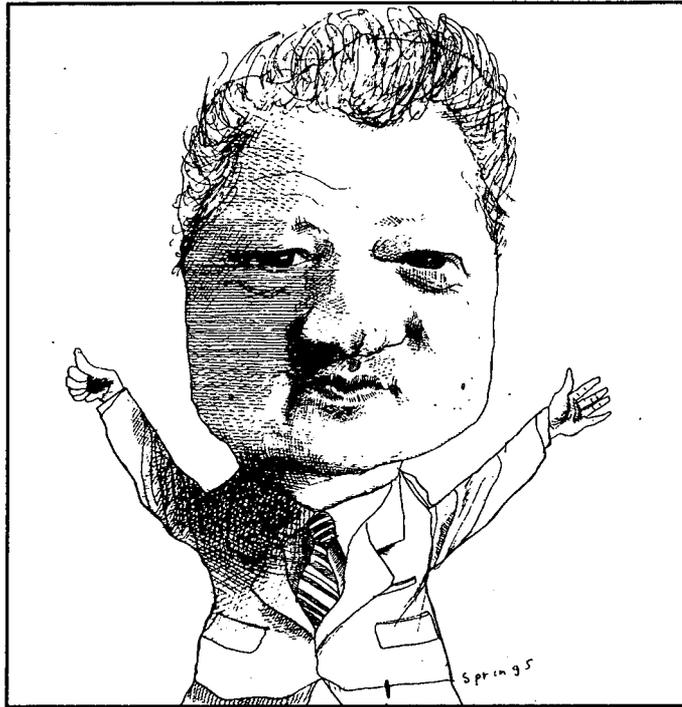
stitutionality or policy, what the government ought to do. Its most simplistic expression—visible in the questions reporters asked of the candidates this year—is the belief that the President is responsible for the nation's social and economic conditions. This rationale holds not only that the President must *do something* about what putatively ails us, but also that what is done—by the federal government—will do the trick. Where was the much vaunted press skepticism when we needed it? Reporters could have perused a vast literature on the limits of social and economic policy. The charitable explanation is that most reporters have yet to sample it.

Included within the idea of presidential nation is the notion of the President (again, traceable to Wilson) constantly explaining to the people what they really

want and how to achieve it. Having absorbed this perspective, the press reported accordingly. This particular bias had to help Bill Clinton, a policy wonk whose ability to speak in complete and complex sentences drew constant (and predictable) notice, even as it worked against George Bush, whose Bushisms were the subject of constant (and predictable) lampooning.

This said, however, the press coverage was so uneven that it is obtuse to deny any active or conscious bias. Indeed, I agree with my predecessor of some years ago in this space, Fred Barnes, who says that in 1992 the press crossed an important line, casting off even the pretense of fairness that in campaign years past had restrained them, making their work much more "actively" biased.

Print- and picture-heads alike were agog about Clinton and spiteful about Bush, treating the candidates in ways that will merit the attention of dispassionate scholars. Consider the *Washington Post*, a major sinner. Ombudsman Joann Byrd went so far as to call the paper's coverage "very lopsided." Reviewing seventy-three days' worth of pictures, headlines, and news stories, Byrd found about the same number of "positives" for both (175 for Bush, 195 for Clinton). But Bush racked up 184 negatives, compared to only 52 for Clinton. On the *Post's* front page, Bush was portrayed negatively more than twice as often. Granted, Bush ran a lousy campaign,



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