



## 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,

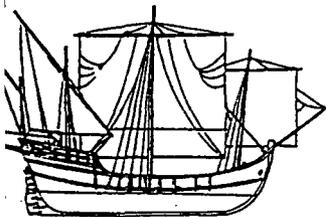


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# 1492 AND ALL THAT . . .

## *Should We Celebrate or Repent?*

The 500th anniversary of the first voyage of Christopher Columbus has spurred a host of attempts to recast the history of the Americas. Many of the revisionists are trying to use the past as a tool to advance "politically correct" goals. In doing so they profoundly distort the historical record of Columbus the man and of the societies that have sprung from his explorations.



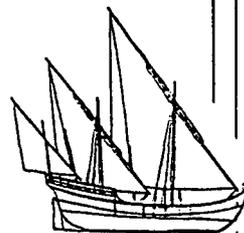
For many critics, the presence of evil in American history totally discredits the "myth" that the United States is a just society. Indeed, they have made the Columbus anniversary an occasion to reject all of Western culture. At the other extreme, many defenders seem to think that any criticism of the United States will lead to total denunciation.

Robert Royal examines the available facts about Columbus and the Spaniards, their first New World contacts, Christian missionaries, North American Indian tribes, and the early British and French settlements. His wide-ranging accounts of the

complicated interaction between Europeans and Native Americans suggest that little of the early cultural mixing in the Americas can be characterized in strict black-and-white terms.

Universal ideas of human rights and international law that slowly emerged from Western reflection on indigenous peoples, Royal concludes, are major contributions for which we should all be grateful.

Robert Royal is vice president and Olin Fellow in Religion and Society at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.



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and as an incumbent had to answer for more than his challengers did. He was bound to rack up a lot of negative stories. But obviously there was no oversupply of negative pieces about Clinton. Moreover, as Byrd pointed out, the *Post* published positively beatific articles about Clinton. One declared that Clinton has "The Aura," which is to be found in "his eyes . . . in his body language, casual yet commanding."

My guess is that Bush would come out on the short end of a positive-negative count at every major newspaper other than the strongly anti-Clinton *Washington Times*. But the question of bias is not exhausted by this kind of inquiry. There's also the media's conduct during the presidential debates. A special place in the 1992 Hall of Shame goes to ABC's Carole Simpson, the moderator of the "Oprah"-style second debate in Richmond, for mocking Bush ("Who would like to begin, the 'Education President'?") while treating Clinton as if he had, well, The Aura.

Then there was the PBS election night special, "The Finish Line," which included Hodding Carter, Kenneth Walker, Daniel Schorr, Terry Gross, and Nancy Dickerson. No balance there. Worse, cheers broke out when it was announced that Ohio had put Clinton over the electoral top. We taxpayers pay for this.

Then there were the stories barely if at all pursued. I'll mention two big ones, the first involving Gennifer Flowers's tapes of her conversations with Governor Clinton. They have him saying, about the alleged affair: "If everybody's on the record denying it, you've got no problem." And, about whether she had ever talked to him about the state job he gave her: "If they ever ask if you talked to me about it, you can just say no." Ordinarily, the press is profoundly interested in exposing people who traffic in lies—the Clinton presidency likely will test the White House press corps—but few news organizations pursued this story, some newspapers (including the *Post*) even failing to print a full transcript of Flowers's tapes, on the grounds that the recordings were unverified—an absurd technicality, since Clinton didn't deny that it was his voice on the tapes, and he actually apologized to Mario Cuomo for the bad things he'd said about him during the taped conversation. Imagine if

the press had aggressively asked Clinton about whether he had told Flowers to lie; imagine, too, if the press had pursued the story of how Clinton put Flowers on the state payroll, bumping a black employee named Charlotte Perry.

The other story concerns the indictment of Caspar Weinberger issued by Iran-contra independent counsel Lawrence Walsh on the Friday before Election Day. The press and the Clinton campaign seized on a note in the indictment as the latest and best evidence that Bush had not been telling the truth about when he first knew the Reagan Administration was swapping arms for hostages. Bush's late surge in the polls would not have been enough to put him over the top, but his momentum quickly stopped as he faced endless press inquiries about the Weinberger note, which was no "smoking gun." (Is the whole show going to be about Iran-contra? the President asked his inquisitor, Frank Sesno, on CNN's "Newsmaker Sunday.")

What's important here is not so much the press's total lack of curiosity about any link between Walsh's office and the Clinton campaign, whose press release attacking Bush was dated the day before the indictment was returned (a misprint, said the folks in Little Rock, and the press asked nothing more). No, what's most important is the complete lack of inquiry into political motivation on Walsh's part. A more scrupulous prosecutor would have avoided even the appearance of plunging his office into politics on the eve of a presidential vote. Just as he would have refused to hire James Brosnahan, a partisan Democrat who opposed the Rehnquist, Bork, and Thomas nominations, and the Gulf War, to prosecute Weinberger. Any fair reading of the Weinberger indictments (as well as other principal papers in this case) suggests that Walsh believes Reagan and Bush conspired to cover up as much as they could about Iran-contra, a case he cannot prove. There were therefore many good reasons for the press to go after Walsh. But Bush was the target—the only target.

I have heard the various explanations for the pro-Clinton, anti-Bush bias. I don't buy the self-serving one, that a new President would be a better story to

cover. Closer to the mark is what some reporters were saying when the snow was falling last February in New Hampshire—that they think Bill Clinton will be a good President, and good for the country. There was something generational taking place as well—that like most of those covering him, Clinton and his wife are boomers whose sensibility was shaped by the political and cultural left of the 1960s. And there was a touch of hubris—that, like us, he's smart, a product of all the right schools, a man just for *our* time, and, you know, our time has come.

Will the honeymoon last? Ten days after the election, Michael Kelly of the *New York Times* reported the contents of a confidential memorandum (fourteen pages, single-spaced) co-authored last April by Clinton campaign manager James Carville. The memo proposed "one of the most ambitious campaigns of political rehabilitation ever attempted." It included "the construction of a new image for Mr. and Mrs. Clinton: an honest, plain-folks idealist and his loving wife." It recommended that Bill Clinton appear on a television talk

show to play the saxophone and make fun of himself for saying he'd tried marijuana but not inhaled. And it put forth ideas designed to counter the perception of Hillary Clinton as unaffected and preoccupied with power and career. Of course, the Clintons followed the memo almost to a tee.

Kelly bent over backwards in the Clintons' favor: "What the memorandum told the Clintons to do, and what they did, does not show chicanery," he wrote. "The goal [as stated by the Clinton camp] was not to present a false image of the couple." Less credulous reporters may come to think that they—and the American people—were had. And more industrious reporters will discover that on September 24 the *Times* carried a front-page story in which Hillary Clinton "dismiss[ed] the notion that there was ever a strategy to warm her up." Had Kelly pulled up this bit of reporting from his paper's files (I'll give him the benefit of the doubt), he could have pursued a question that seems to recur with our new White House inhabitants: Were they telling the truth? □

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## Hit List

by James Bowman

It may not seem a significant coincidence to you, but the new *Dracula*'s coming along at the same time as *The American Spectator*'s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary got me to thinking. To amuse myself, I made a very personal choice of the ten best and the ten worst general-release American films of the past twenty-five years, and I found a curious asymmetry. For while egregiously bad movies were fairly evenly distributed throughout the period, the really great ones seemed to be concentrated in the earlier part of it. As I scratched my head over this, along came Francis Ford Coppola's version of the movies' most famous vampire to remind me of the reason for it.

My top ten, in roughly chronological order, were: *The Graduate*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Patton*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Godfather* (Parts I and II counted as one but not Part III), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Star Wars* (but not the sequels), *The Deer Hunter*, *Batman* (but not the sequel), and *Miller's Crossing*. It will be noticed that not only is there a gap of more than a decade in this listing between *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Batman* (1989), but there is also a huge gap in style. For at some point during those years, Hollywood discovered post-modernism—that self-conscious, self-referential, ironic style which now seems to have entrenched itself in the American film industry forever.

*Dracula*, like *Batman Returns*, Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, and so many of the industry's top hits these days, is a good example of the post-modern style. It is one of those films that is more about other films than it is about the real world.

James Bowman, *TAS*'s movie critic, is the American editor of the Times Literary Supplement.

All of them are filled with striking images and witty dialogue and clever ideas, but all of them are dramatically incomprehensible apart from the cinematic tradition to which they make continual reference. In other words, it is now impossible to make a movie about vampires without acknowledging that vampires exist only in the movies. Once that fact is established, anything is possible—anything except the kind of artistic greatness that in retrospect seems to have been comparatively common in the 1970s. This *Dracula* has given up trying to scare us, but still insists, "It's only a movie."

We can date the post-modernist revolution in Hollywood to the success of Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* series. You can see what I mean if you compare Indy with Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars*. Luke, for all his futuristic accoutrements, was an old-fashioned hero in an old-fashioned situation. The world he lived in may have been unfamiliar, even fantastical, but as a character he was as familiar as Gary Cooper's Sergeant York or Jimmy Stewart's Mr. Smith. Above all, he didn't know he was a hero. He may have been a simple kind of guy, as heroes often are, but he was recognizably human. Indiana Jones, on the other hand, knows nothing but his own heroism. He is in no way an ordinary guy but a kind of madman, obsessed with being a hero. Spielberg runs him through his hair-raising adventures and impossibly close shaves at such speed that he has no time to establish an existence independent of the self-consciously Hollywood-heroic framework set up to contain him.

It is this framework that is the real hero of all three films. Spielberg cares nothing for Indy himself but, with a nod

and a wink to the audience, dearly loves the heroic cinema that utterly defines him. The result is an almost balletic product that succeeds in amusing both as an homage to and as a send-up of the old-fashioned Hollywood action film. Proclaiming that "the hero is back," the Indiana Jones chronicles in fact replaced him for millions who didn't know he had been gone with a post-modernist simulacrum. From that time onward, heroes—at least heroes like Luke Skywalker rather than Batman—disappeared for good.

You've got to admire the skill with which *Batman* and *Miller's Crossing* both make use of their pop culture conventions—the comic book and the gangster film respectively—in order to help bring into focus what is really a very serious and humane view of the world. The trouble is that such a technique is inevitably tainted with the mockery out of which it rises. Both films were added to the top ten because they were great of their kind—the kind that Hollywood has been producing for the past ten years or more. But I am not altogether sure that they deserve their place at the expense of such great pre-post-modernist films of the seventies as *A Clockwork Orange*, *Deliverance*, or *Taxi Driver*.

What those films have in common with the first eight on the list is that they entered into the folk consciousness. Just as poetry gives us the language by which we define and bring into intellectual order the chaos of experience, so films at their best give us the images. The "generation gap," both its myth and its reality, was never better symbolized than in *The Graduate*, and the eternal tension between American innocence and experience never found a better embodiment than in *Midnight Cowboy*. A similar ten-