

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

# Taking Issue



THE ISSUES—oh, glowing term, preeminent in the minds of all political commentators and of political junkies everywhere. Both groups yearn for a field of political candidates who addresses THE ISSUES. Yes, of course, and they all liked summer school and ate all their vegetables and avoided rich desserts.

It is one of the vanities of the American political culture that its adepts are ardent for a good healthy discussion of THE ISSUES. The worst hypocrites on this topic are the political commentators and reporters. The time they devote to covering THE ISSUES or a candidate's position on THE ISSUES is, truth be known, minimal and perfunctory. The conventional way of discussing a political campaign is to discuss it as a competitive event, "a horse race," and there are very few political reporters who are not conventional. Most simply report: "Who is up?" "Who is down?" "How much money has the senator raised?" "How does the governor do with upstate's Armenian community?" Every now and again a reporter gets involved with THE ISSUES. Once he is fired or put on medication, the political reporters go right back to the horse race.

If some devil-may-care candidate does wage a campaign solely on THE ISSUES the press corps's judgment is not likely to be flattering. The candidate with the statistics and charts risks being dubbed "cold," "aloof," lacking the human touch. Back in 1996 Steve Forbes was depicted as all of the above plus a Johnny one-note for his flat tax. Today, as an energetic can-

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didate for the Republican presidential nomination, he elucidates ideas on a wide range of ISSUES. The political hacks mark him down as DULL.

Consider the plight of Bill Bradley. Famed for his intellect and his absorption with policy matters, he too is consigned to the dull heap of history. But, of course, to mediocre or lazy minds all discussion of policy very quickly turns dull. My guess is that even if Bradley were possessed of the idiotic effervescence of a pop music disc jockey it would do him no good. The minute he erupted on, say, the subject of low-income housing, the press would esteem him dull, dull, dull. In fact this actually happened. The other day, *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen reported covering Bradley in East Hampton. There, Cohen reports, they were walking across "a vast and silken lawn." (That is correct, Cohen found himself on "silken lawn." Perhaps it was artificial turf.) At any rate, Bradley piped up about "the lack of low-incoming housing." Cohen, his feet nuzzling the "silken lawn," reports that Bradley induced sleep. And when the lazy reporter does not characterize a candidate's stand on THE ISSUES as dull, he characterizes it as "vague," possibly nonexistent. This is the accusation being laid upon George W. Bush. Yes Bush—son of a life-long policy wonk and member of a third-generation political family—has meditated on running for the presidency for several years now, yet somehow we are to believe he has only "vague" positions. I found that hard to believe, and so I sent off to Bush's office for a few of his position papers. The result was a fat sheaf of stuff that looks and reads like very heavy social science. He has, indeed, taken positions on THE ISSUES. They are available in brief digests and in full position papers. Why did the press corps not look into this matter?

On taxes he addresses marginal tax rates (reduce them!), the death tax (reduce it!), the marriage penalty (reduce it!). He

has a position on corporate and personal tax rates (no increases!), on Social Security (its "lock box," personal retirement accounts, and government investment of Social Security funds—which he opposes), and on health care (favoring medical savings accounts and private-sector alternatives). He even has a farm policy whose details I would relate but might bore Mr. Cohen standing over there on the "silken lawn."

Bush even has trade policies that sound very much like free trade policies. He has a position on China's admission to the WTO. He opposes quotas and racial preferences. Has a campaign finance reform an environmental reform, and even some

## 25 YEARS AGO IN The American Spectator

It takes wishful thinking and a lack of historical perspective to conclude, as many people have, that Watergate happened because a handful of terribly ordinary people mistook themselves for philosopher-kings. A bit more honesty or reflection would point to a long-term subversion of professional political tradition, which merely culminated in Watergate. This subversion has been the piecemeal alteration of our constitutional system over a period of many years, from one separate institutions—president, Congress, the courts—sharing powers, to a system of all-power-to-the-people participatory, communitarian democracy in which power would run directly to the president in the name of the People. In other words, President Nixon and his White House *camarilla* were exploiting for their purposes what had become the favorite design of New Left politics. This is not to blame the New Left for Watergate. It is to indicate that, as so often has happened since the Bolshevik Revolution, the differences between the so-called Left and Right may not be differences at all.

—Arnold Beichmar  
"Parties in the Age of Watergate"  
SEPTEMBER 1974

ideas about sex education. His position papers are loaded with ideas about education, guns, and judges. He is a conventional Republican if somewhat prolix on the topics of defense and foreign policy.

And, well I could go on, but this column is getting dull. I do not want to be accused of dullness. So let me leave all further discussions of THE ISSUES to the journalists who really care about them. ❄

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# One Day at a Time

**A**re you convinced that Hillary Rodham Clinton is going to run for the Senate from New York? Her coyness fades daily as something approaching frankness takes its place. Most of the political pundits believe that Hillary's Senate campaign is already underway. Allow me to file a caveat. Regarding a race for the Senate seat now being vacated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, I doubt that even Hillary knows what she will do.

My guess is that Hillary is playing it day by day. Some days she sees herself as a shoo-in. Some days she is in doubt. The problem for her is that she is not a politician but a celebrity. Her prospects to replace Moynihan derive not from her political skills but from her celebrity. Only a few of our political observers recognize this. Why they fail to see the celebrated Hillary for what she is defeats me. But then, until very recently the political classes failed to see her husband for what he is. This, even though, as early as 1992, witnesses as credible as Gennifer Flowers and Colonel Eugene Holmes (the former Army ROTC recruiter) delivered the goods on him. Flowers provided tapes of intimate conversations in which Clinton could be heard coaching his former lover on lying to the press. Holmes provided an impudent letter in which Clinton as a student admitted to dodging the draft. Yet the political observers persisted through all Clinton's years of scandal and misconduct in seeing him as just another good-government progressive. In the aftermath of the Lewinsky scandal that may have changed, but apparently to this day the political observers see Hillary as a political genius.

Her record reaching back to her days in Arkansas is a record of political blunders. It was her political advice and polit-

ical appointments that doomed Governor Bill Clinton's first term to defeat and a couple of years in the wilderness. While in Arkansas Hillary confected a blowy education program not unlike the blowy health care program she confected during Clinton's first presidential term. Both were disasters. Once in the White House the evidence suggests that she was behind Clinton's Travelgate scandal, and she played a significant role in the Filegate scandal, despite this week's denials. During Clinton's Whitewater controversies and his pursuit by Paula Corbin Jones, Hillary's truculent advice to stonewall and to deceive made Clinton's problems worse. Her refusal to cooperate with Congress or the courts made a peaceful negotiation of her husband's problems impossible. Her dreadful advice regarding the Jones case probably made Clinton's impeachment inevitable, and it most certainly led to the constitutional crisis that most lawyers warned he would lose.

From Travelgate on she has displayed not only a tin ear for politics but a willingness to lie brazenly. Now an expanding number of former aides are coming forward and admitting that Hillary encouraged them to lie. The columnist Michael Kelly reminds us that George Stephanopoulos has admitted Hillary's role in her husband's lies to the press. I could go on with instances of Hillary's political ineptitude and malversations, but the point is made. This is not the record of a suave political operative. To be sure no politician in America could have survived as many scandals as Bill Clinton, but his survival was not the consequence of Hillary's talent for lies and smears. Starting at least with Travelgate she only made Clinton's problems worse.

What has saved Clinton is a gullible press and a fiercely partisan Democratic Party. Now, if the polls are accurate, the party is suffering nationally, and the press seems to be split. Some journalists sense that Clinton has disgraced his office and in terms of policy mattered for very little. Others, for instance those covering Hillary in New York these past few days, seem still to be in the raptures over her.

But their enthusiasm is not for any set of policies she has espoused. Even now on such matters as the Middle East, agricultural policy, and health care, Hillary is abandoning earlier policies so fast that it is difficult to say what she stands for other than more government. No, Hillary's fans in the press and in the Democratic Party are attracted to her because she is a celebrity. The celebrity is vacuous at this point. Hence her senatorial prospects look plausible. Yet if at some point the press or a political opponent raises her unsavory past for public review, her senatorial prospects will go aglimmer. "Clinton Fatigue" has become a cliché only for one reason. It is valid.

All this is why I believe Hillary is playing it day by day. She has terrible political instincts but she is not without the instinct for self-preservation. It is difficult to believe that the hellish Republican party will not at some point remind the public of her many errancies. Then even the press might take an interest in what has to be among the most scandal-ridden records in modern politics. At that point Hillary may bow out. She would be leaving New York's Democrats in a dreadful mess, but she could offer them the old explanation that works so well for her. She could blame it on "the Clinton haters." That powerful little group that gets the Clintons into so many fixes. ❄

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# Rip Van Winkle in England

Even the cricket isn't what it used to be.

In an interview with an English journalist, Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* recently commented on the difference between the British and the American press. The separation of fact and opinion, so much touted and admired by American journalists, is not well observed on Fleet Street. (This former venue of London journalism has since been displaced by more up-to-date facilities elsewhere.) It's true that British journalists freely insert their opinions into newspaper stories. And yes, the adjectival interjections of the Brits would be hurriedly removed by American editors. But Woodward did not mention, and may not fully appreciate, a more basic distinction. In America, journalism is integrated into the development of policy, which is not the case in Britain. (Nor is it anywhere else in Europe.) Government in America is a machine that interdigitates with the public prints. Although they are employed by private corporations, journalists are policy makers *de facto*. In Britain, policy is more completely formed offstage and then handed down, as a *fait accompli*.

I became aware of this on a recent visit to England. Even in the high-toned broadsheets (which are becoming much less high-toned), there is far less reporting on government proceedings than there is here. Sometimes it seems that there is one news item per day, which is then endlessly mulled over in features, comments, and editorials. While I was there it came out that the Labour government of Tony Blair was planning to ban fox hunting. The subsequent

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ruminations were without end. The main difference, however, is that on this side of the Atlantic the press plays an integral role in policy making. Even though it lacks constitutional authority or coercive power, it has enormous influence because it controls the terms of the debate. In shaping our perception of what is going on in Washington, it steers politicians toward one choice rather than another. The press is effective in this respect, precisely because so much *is* going on. Big government ensures that people don't know what their representatives are up to, most of the time. A determined political party could just push ahead anyway, ignoring the media's interpretation, but with narrow electoral margins, most politicians are cautious. They look nervously upon those with the power to make them look bad.

There are a number of cultural explanations. In Britain, the educated minority has by tradition opted for the civil service, and has enjoyed (at least until recently) the *esprit de corps* needed to reserve policy making unto themselves. (No leaks!) Fleet Street, on the other hand, was for those who didn't take life so seriously. The late British journalist Henry Fairlie said that English journalists saw themselves as an adjunct to the literary world, American journalists as a part (an important part!) of the political world. On Capitol Hill, the media-attuned congressional staff is there to publicize the boss's activities. In Westminster, a relatively poorer Parliament can hardly afford staff, or even office space. But everything is changing. Britain is getting richer, and imitating America in many ways. More of the top talent in Britain will no doubt head for the media rather than the

civil service. The U.S. press didn't begin to gain its leverage over policy making until Watergate (or the Pentagon Papers episode that paved the way). Its supervisory control over politics has greatly increased since then, and no doubt it is still increasing. There's a sense in which George W. Bush was "nominated" by the media before a single vote was cast. They won't much mind if he wins, either.

One political issue that has attracted a good deal of news coverage in England is the monstrosity of European federation. Most Germans, I am told, still don't know that the Deutschmark is due to be abolished in 2002, the submissive German press having covered the issue with great deference and discretion. "Euroland" perhaps better than anything illustrates the absurdities that elites are capable of when they operate independently of press scrutiny (as was the case for many years when European union was in preparation).

In Britain, the European project has been more skeptically received. As public understanding of it sinks in, furious letters have begun appearing in the papers. Margaret Thatcher, now in the House of Lords, herself wrote to the *Sunday Telegraph*, calling attention to the Foreign Office's institutional view of the world, "which believes that Britain's only way forward is to dissolve our national independence in the European Union. This attitude has been held by a handful of senior officials since the Fifties, without regard to the opinion of the electorate or of various Governments since then." A number of the great and the good had earlier written a joint letter claiming that Britain cannot maintain its influence outside the Euro zone. Sir Charles Powell (Thatcher's assistant in the 1980's) dismissed these gentlemen as "the Foreign Office's European mafia who built their