

## Not With a Bang

So President Clinton's not a lame duck? In an early February press briefing he had more people there to help with the briefing than reporters to listen to their droning. At the podium to discuss new plans to curb unlicensed gun dealers and gun shows were Clinton, a deputy press secretary, Treasury Secretary **Larry Summers**, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Director **Brad Buckles**, Undersecretary for Enforcement **James Johnson**, and White House domestic policy adviser **Bruce Reed**. Each of them brought along at least one staffer to assist in answering what they expected would be an onslaught of queries. One reporter in attendance counted at least 20 people standing on the dais. But only eight White House reporters flocked to these proceedings (and that's counting the official White House photographer). But even with all that intellectual firepower to draw on, neither Clinton nor anyone in his crew could give a straight answer to the one question at least three different reporters asked: How many gun dealers are responsible for the guns that are traced to crimes? Clinton did claim that one percent of all gun dealers were responsible for more than 50 percent of all gun-related crimes. But no one, not even Harvard economics ace Summers or the ATF folks, could say how many is one percent. When

pressed, the ATF staffer admitted: "We don't keep those kinds of statistics."

## What, Me Worry?

In the wake of Sen. John McCain's rise in February's primaries, Republican Party Chairman **Jim Nicholson**



met with the GOP leadership of both the House and Senate. When pressed by both Speaker **Dennis Hastert** and Majority Leader **Trent Lott**, he refused to allow for the possibility that McCain could complicate Republican plans for the fall elections. "Hastert said there was a growing sense the party may have misplayed its hand with McCain, and asked if there were plans to adjust should McCain remain strong throughout the primary season," says a congressional aide who attended the House meeting. Nicholson replied that the RNC would continue to downplay the McCain insurrection. "The question had less to do with McCain and more to do with the ongoing perception that Nicholson is just over his head when it comes to party politics," the aide says. "McCain just completely

caught them off guard at the RNC, but instead of reacting, they've done nothing. It's like he didn't exist." Both Hastert and Lott asked Nicholson to shore up grassroots support for Bush, but Nicholson steadfastly refused, saying the expense precluded it. "Lott asked how it would feel in December, when the party had \$5 million in the bank and Gore in the White House," says a Senate aide who attended the meeting with Lott. "Nicholson simply smiled and said it wasn't going to happen."

## The Best of Enemies

Sen. **Mitch McConnell** has long butted heads with John McCain over campaign finance reform, as has Sen. **Don Nickles** over McCain's anti-tobacco position. So it's no surprise that each displays absolute contempt for the gentleman from Arizona. At a recent National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee fundraiser in California, both openly ridiculed the insurgent one. To peals of laughter from the crowd, McConnell and Nickles introduced themselves as members of McCain's cabinet and promised the audience no voice (read: no donations to politicians), no smoking, and no personal freedom. When one attendee asked McConnell how he and Nickles would get along with McCain back in the Senate, McConnell replied, "We won't!"

## Let Me Repeat

Political consultant **Ralph Reed**, former director of the



Christian Coalition, earns his keep, apparently by working the phones. But who has he been talking to? During the South Carolina primary campaign, Reed did extensive national TV commentary. His big issue: the differences between the Bush and McCain tax cuts, especially a McCain proposal that would disallow a tax write-off for some forms of charitable giving. To illustrate the danger posed by this loophole closure, Reed told **Larry King** that he'd spoken to a minister in South Carolina who said his church would be put in financial danger if McCain's plan passed. Days later on CNBC's "Hardball," Reed in identical language said he'd spoken with the head of a school for handicapped children, who felt just as threatened. "[Reed] used the same story and just changed the profession and location," says a Bush advance man. "I don't know that anyone in South Carolina cared about that particular McCain initiative, but Reed sure beat it to death."

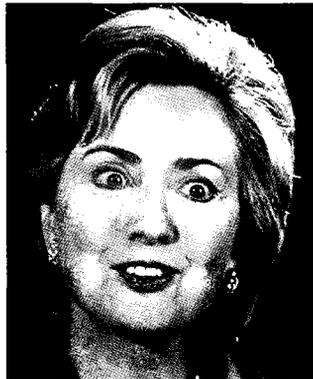
## Reality Check

"I've tried to not get too aloof from the people," President

Clinton told reporters on February 18 after he'd returned from a trip to Texas. "I went down to the Rio Grande Valley the other day. I was the first president since President Eisenhower to go down there. ... A lot of people came out and I stopped along the street and talked to them and visited with them." Clinton was replying to a question about whether he'd become too disconnected from the public. Perhaps the reporter should have asked if he felt disconnected from reality. Never mind that both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon visited the Rio Grande Valley on several occasions during their presidencies. More telling was the part about stopping to visit with the locals. Clinton's real reason for being there was to attend a DNC fundraiser hosted by obscure Rep. **Ruben Hinojosa** on February 9. His

## Can't Stand the Heat

At a stop in Buffalo this winter, **Hillary Clinton** told



reporters and supporters that she could hardly wait to move into her house in Chappaqua, go shopping at the local Grand Union, and cook a meal in her kitchen. One of those meals tossed omelets, or whatever. But first she'll have to find her recipe book. "The refrigerator is empty and there isn't a frying pan in the house," says one Hillary aide. "When she and the president were up there 'unpacking' they had to send out Secret Service agents to get takeout from local restaurants." There are actually three grocery stores in the area at which Clinton could shop, but managers at each report no contact with anyone associated with the Clinton household.

## Paging All Interns

White House staff are quietly concerned that the pager system they use to communicate both inside and outside the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and the White House may have been compromised. In February a hacker apparently broke into the White House Skytel paging system and, citing a breaking news story, informed reporters to call a Virginia Hospital. Considered to be a secure system, Skytel is carried by most White House staff and

reporters. It allows users to send not only numeric messages, but text messages as well. So why the concern? "We send each other all kinds of messages on this thing," says one staffer working in the Congressional Liaison office. "During the Lewinsky scandal, everyone knew our e-mails might be subpoenaed, so we used Skytel to send messages instead. Whenever there was a scandal or risk of a scandal brewing and we didn't want a paper trail, we'd just say, 'Go Skytel.'" But after the recent hacking incident, White House staff worries that a secure system has been compromised—and that embarrassing or incriminating messages will become public. "It's got a lot of people nervous," says the staffer.

## Walking the Line

For a time last year it appeared that New York's Republican Party had found a way to broker a deal that would allow Mayor **Rudy Giuliani** to be the Conservative Party's candidate in the U.S. Senate race. Conservative Party Chairman **Mike Long**, a longtime Giuliani combatant, had steadfastly denied Giuliani support, partly because of the mayor's refusal to take pro-life positions in his campaigns, but also because the Conservative Party has a rule barring a candidate from appearing on both the Liberal Party's and Conservative Party's tickets. Because Conservative endorsement is essential to the Senate race, Giuliani very much wants it and has told Long he won't accept official Liberal backing. GOP leaders want Conservative backing for Rudy as well. "[Gov. George] Pataki had persuaded the Liberal Party to put any one of

several Manhattan liberal Republicans on their line, and not Rudy," says a GOP state party spokesman. "Rudy was going to support a ban on partial birth abortions, and those two events would have allowed Long to save face in putting Rudy on the Conservative Party line." But Long won't bite on the deal, and is enjoying watching Rudy sweat. A Republican has not won a statewide New York race in more than 50 years without Conservative backing.

## Lucky Lindsey

An overlooked winner in the South Carolina primary is turning out to be McCain supporter Rep. **Lindsey**



**Graham**. The conservative Republican is mulling a Senate run in 2002, but has been hesitant to commit for fear former Gov. **Carroll Campbell** might want to run himself. But Graham helped draw huge crowds to McCain events, and trumped Campbell during media appearances on behalf of his candidate. "The party would have no trouble with Graham running," says a Republican National Committee aide. "Between the impeachment hearings and this primary, he's set himself as a statewide candidate with a national reputation. Campbell is looking a bit long in the tooth by comparison." ❀



glad-handing with average folks was limited to a few handshakes with dignitaries at the airport, and stopping off at a taco stand in the town of McAllen for six beef tacos with extra cheese and extra hot sauce. Total population met: twelve people, ten of them politicians, two of them wives of politicians. Then it was off to two homes in a gated community where Clinton talked and visited with DNC big-wigs who had paid \$5,000 a head to talk and visit with the president.

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

# Unsolicited Solitude



Perhaps the liberal Democrats are justified in the exalted view they have of their own moral heft. No other political point of view spends so much of its time self-

lessly lecturing the opposition on how to improve itself. Liberals are forever telling us how we conservatives can better our electoral chances and be more true to our highest conservative ideals in general. The columnist E.J. Dionne is particularly selfless in advising us on how to be true conservatives.

Of course, conservatives have reason to grow suspicious when those liberals, advising us on how to improve our electability, counsel us to nominate candidates who are liberals. And that almost always is their advice. Remember how they warned us against our suicidal impulse to nominate Ronald Reagan?

Our liberal friends are also very helpful in advising conservatives on tactics. When conservative politicians make the mistake of soliciting votes from staunchly conservative supporters, liberals speak right up, admonishing against such reckless imprudence. When George W. Bush set foot on the campus of South Carolina's Bob Jones University, you can be sure that E.J. foresaw Bush's imminent doom. (By the way, what happened to Ronald Reagan's presidential possibilities when he visited the Bob Jones campus in 1980?)

Interestingly, our liberal prelectors never think it politically dangerous for liberal politicians to solicit votes from

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the staunchly liberal. The other day, when Bill Bradley and Al Gore went on stage before an audience of black political leaders and did contortions before them, I heard no liberal commentator admonishing against the reckless pandering that ensued.

Viewing the spectacle, one would have thought that Bradley and Gore were running for election in South Africa. The excellent Bill Sammon, reporting in the *Washington Times*, recorded that "The vice president and the former New Jersey senator talked of reparations for descendants of the slaves, promised 'info stamps' that the poor could use to buy computers and harshly scolded white Americans for not holding similar views on how to unify the races."

Now the Democrats are showing themselves to be even more energetic in helping the conservatives to victory. In the Republican primary in Michigan, the liberals went beyond advising us of the best presidential nominee we could choose. They actually pulled on their boots, buttoned up their winter coats, and went out and voted for him. They tried to save us from George W. Bush, the candidate from Bob Jones U. Their choice was Senator John McCain. Fifty-one percent of those voting in the Republican primary admitted to being independents or Democrats. Thanks, fellows.

But Senator McCain is really not much of a liberal. His rating from the right-wing American Conservative Union was 77 in 1999. He is against regulation, big spending, excess pork. He is a friend of the military, the tax cutters, and limited government. Are his stands on campaign finance and tobacco the desiderata that make him a true blue liberal? Has liberalism come down to this?

Thus far Campaign 2000 qualifies as one of the Republic's most bizarre presidential elections. Democrats are decid-

ing the presidential nominees of both parties. The party bosses have been banished. Sectional interests are history. The new king makers are the primary voters of New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Michigan. By the end of March the nominees of both parties will have been chosen by nine or ten percent of the electorate. There are only two candidates in the Democratic primary. In the Republican primary there are three, the last one being Alan Keyes.

Something is indeed wrong. The major issue in the Republican primary is that rich people and rich corporations are actually paying for the cost of elections. The major issue in the Democratic Party is which candidate is more



## 25 YEARS AGO IN The American Spectator

Richard Nixon's announcement of his impending resignation was not the only event that made August 8, 1974 a crucial date in the history of the American Presidency. On that same day, the House of Representatives, after long uncertainty and delay, approved legislation providing for the public financing of all future Presidential elections. (The Senate had already passed similar legislation in April.) The combination of the House vote and the Nixon resignation made it all but certain that public financing would become law. Nixon had made perfectly clear his own strong opposition to such a measure, and until his departure, the threat of a Presidential veto could not be discounted. His successor was also reportedly opposed to public financing, but the prospect of a Ford veto never seemed very credible; especially after the Nixon pardon, the political costs of such a move would have been too great. On October 15 President Ford signed the bill.

—Marc F. Plattner  
"A Campaign Reform for Yesteryear"  
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