

Pop Culture and Politics

Passing By the Train Wreck

by Christopher Sandford

If Macbeth were alive today, he would probably make an appearance in the public confessional with Oprah Winfrey and, in all likelihood, would emerge as a prime candidate for *Big Brother* or one of the other “reality” shows that crowd our airwaves. Macbeth would be helped to come to terms with his domestic issues and would, in turn, deliver some wrenching monologue to the viewing audience exhorting them to become similarly “empowered,” empowerment being the highest attainment both of mind and spirit known to modern man.

In due course, we could expect to see the thane of Glamis rewarded with his own show, which would spawn the inevitable line of accessories—everything from rhinestone-clad daggers to insomnia medications. There would be a brisk trade in replica witches’ cauldrons among broadly the same audience as that drawn to the occult antics of Mr. Marilyn Manson. Critics would race to fawn over their latest celebrity protégé. The taste-makers at MTV would uniformly speak in Macbeth’s voice and would wrinkle up their noses at anything that had a bad smell for him. As a converted warmonger, Macbeth’s views on the conflict in Iraq would be received with an awe normally reserved for the truisms of Gen. Wesley Clark. The competition for an exclusive interview would be brutal. One can imagine the jockeying between Larry King and Barbara Walters to secure the rights to slip their guest into a media jacuzzi of mutual reassurance and respect.

More to the point, Macbeth’s every pronouncement on the current state of politics and society would be seized upon by a predominantly youthful audience who have increasingly turned away from mainstream sources and instead look to “pop culture” for their news and views. Anyone in doubt about this phenomenon has only to tune in to the shrill, round-the-clock “Rock the Vote” programming fronted by the likes of P. Diddy (a.k.a. Sean Combs) to be found on every available music and entertainment channel in the months preceding a national election. For professional reasons, in the summer of 2004, I was compelled to sit through one such transmission featuring Bruce Springsteen, about whom I had written a book. The musical component of the show, in which Springsteen appeared as a kind of sawdust Steinbeck, was at least modestly engaging, but anyone looking to him for deeper enlightenment on, say, the paradox of securing peace and liberty through a military action was in for a sorry disappointment. According to my notes from the subsequent interview, the rock star’s comments on Iraq consisted of little more than “Yep” and “Nope,” laced with the occasional choice anti-Republican tirade.

With the benefit of hindsight, Bill Clinton’s saxophone-play-

ing 1992 appearance on MTV would seem to be one of those pivotal moments, much like his subsequent ruminations on marijuana and on his taste in underwear, in the evolution of politics as another branch of the entertainment industry. Critics still debate the chicken-and-egg dilemma of which came first, the electorate’s taste for freewheeling, taboo-busting candidates such as Clinton, and the concomitant rise of their celebrity backers, or a sudden awakening on the part of the politicians. The answer would appear to be a bit of both. The sort of bolshie, youth-led cultural radicalism of America in the early 1990’s, largely a reaction to the Gulf War and to mass affluence, provided a new market for supposedly switched-on political leaders as much as for idiosyncratic pop icons of the stripe of the late Kurt Cobain. All it took was for a few socially alert pragmatists such as Clinton to infiltrate the system, which was simultaneously enlivened by a press corps whose mean age had fallen to something on the order of 17, and the emphasis would henceforth be on giving the public what it wanted rather than on any moral niceties. This development arguably reached its apogee in May 2005, when Tony Blair and his wife, Cherie, neither one a martyr to false modesty, took time away from the British general election to discuss their sex life with the *Sun*. In what may have been a characteristic exaggeration, Blair revealed that he and Cherie “do it at least five times [a] night,” adding that, “I am up for more depending on how I feel.” The couple then exchanged views on various body parts, leading Mrs. Blair to invite her husband to strip off publicly. “You keep your hands to yourself, Cherie,” the prime minister retorted. The Labour Party press office appeared bemused at the subsequent controversy, limited as it was to what Mr. Blair has characterized as “the decaying forces of conservatism” in the United Kingdom. “They are married, so why shouldn’t they talk about sex?” a spokesman said.

Meanwhile, it has become almost an article of faith that today’s entertainers should be claimed by partisans of both the left and the right. When television first infiltrated our lives in the 1950’s, one of the new medium’s chief functions was to act as an emotional pick-me-up for a weary public. Somehow, that mission statement got lost over the years. Whatever one makes of their acting skills, many of today’s performers, and an even higher percentage of their pop-music counterparts, offer a monotonous diet of screwed-up nihilism (part of the unrelenting war on family values), crass histrionics, and phony salves, whether delivered from on or off stage. Both they and their various escapades have become culturally polarizing in a way that would have been hard to imagine in the era of Milton Berle. Even without them so much as speaking, these individuals are routinely transformed into politically divisive figures whose every provocation, however trite, is analyzed *ad nauseam* on talk radio and elsewhere. Consider the enduring case of Janet Jackson’s infamous “wardrobe malfunction” at the 2004 Super

Christopher Sandford is a British-born, Seattle-based writer. His biography of the director Roman Polanski will be published this month by Century.

Bowl. That once austere daily bulletin board of the British establishment, the *Times*, now sadly slumming it as a tabloid, had this to say of Miss Jackson's aureole-baring exhibition: "The physical spectacle [was] at best negligible, but will inevitably be the subject of a prolonged action-replay debate, [such] is the now universal need for these incidents to mean something to us." Note that the newspaper does not speak of a "regrettable need" or even a "pervasive need." The word was *universal*.

These days, pretty much everything we see in the lively arts is part of the ongoing culture wars.

Late last year, I found myself in a Canadian hotel room, channel-hopping between the coverage of Gerald Ford's funeral and that of James Brown. It would be hard to imagine a more vivid contrast than that presented by the two ceremonies. In the case of the 38th president, there was a lying-in-state at the U.S. Capitol followed by services at Washington National Cathedral and at Grace Episcopal Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as well as a private service attended by Mrs. Ford and her children in Palm Desert, California, and, finally, interment in the family crypt next to the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum. The whole spectacle—which was actually quite restrained as presidential obsequies go—involved some 700 serving military personnel, a precision team of protocol experts from the Joint Force Headquarters National Capital Region/Military District of Washington, assorted representatives from the State Department and the Department of the Interior, and a significant presence of Secret Service officials, sheriff's deputies, and others, including a dedicated group of press spokesmen deployed across three states. For all its grandeur, the entire occasion was distinguished by the most flagrantly unfashionable sense of self-restraint among the principal mourners. Mrs. Ford and her family evidently preferred a process of internal grieving to the now apparently mandatory appearance on *Larry King Live*. The Fords' quiet dignity struck me, several thousand miles away, as being almost unwatchably moving.

Contrast this to the seething, disco-bopping crowd that thronged around James Brown's open coffin in Augusta, Georgia, while the late singer's band performed a spirited version of "Sex Machine," among other uptempo numbers. After peak-decibel orations by friends including the Rev. Dr. Jesse Jackson and one Bootsy Collins, Michael Jackson bounded up to the podium to announce that James Brown had been "cool" and "an inspiration" before briefly breaking into an animated dance sequence, an occasion captured for posterity by the flashing of several hundred camera phones. It says something both for the eulogies and the overall tenor of the affair that, seated in the audience, the Rev. Al Sharpton appeared to possess plenipotentiary gravitas by comparison. Of course, one can argue that the two events did no more than accurately reflect the public personae of the deceased, but it was instructive to compare the ensuing media commentary: Brown, with a few notable exceptions, was pushed onto the public as an invigorating free spirit and social crusader (I gave up counting the use of the word *empowering*), while Ford and his cortège clearly belonged among the waxworks. As is so often the case these days, the unmissable message of the mainstream news coverage was that our hearts should not only be in the right place, but worn on our sleeves. Whether this is a psychologically sound development is not for a journalist to say. But it marks a major shift in what were, within living memory, deeply embedded traditions in this country that encouraged self-control and disparaged exhibitionism,

which should not be allowed to pass unnoticed.

Thanks, in large part, to the insatiable growth of talk radio, and television's pervasive *Entertainment Tonight*-style programming, even the most peripheral "celebrity" is now positively exhorted to favor us with his or her thoughts on war, peace, and the state of our culture. A major milestone in this direction came at the 2003 Academy Awards, an occasion on which Michael Moore took the opportunity to share his concerns, soon to be echoed from the same stage by the likes of Nicole Kidman and Chris Cooper, on the imminent Iraq invasion. On receiving his Best Actor award for his role in *The Pianist*, Adrien Brody, in turn, chose not so much to offer the traditional thanks to his colleagues on the film but to ruminate on his "buddies" currently serving (much, one gathered, to his distaste) overseas. Both sides of the unrelenting public debate that followed treated these well-scripted performers as though they had something genuinely of interest to say, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the conspicuously limited intellectual background, blinkered political judgement, and lack of substance behind the wisecracks and slogans of the celebrities involved. Television pundits such as Chris Matthews recycled their views for days afterward, a courtesy that it would be hard to imagine them extending to a mere party politician. We can be thankful, at least, that the same ceremony spared us the insights of Roman Polanski, who won his first and as yet only Oscar in the category of Best Director. Having fled the United States in 1978 immediately before sentencing on a charge of unlawful intercourse with a 13-year-old girl, Polanski prudently declined to appear to collect his statuette in person.

Whether or not it is a healthy development that the likes of Michael Moore seek increasingly to educate rather than merely entertain their audience, disappointingly few of their public effusions would seem to challenge the prodigious indifference of the American electorate effectively. Most of the ideologies in question remain largely a mélange of utopian-socialist mumblings, interspersed with greeting-card pleas for world peace and universal good health. Moore himself, a gifted propagandist, makes some typically astute if selective points in his latest manipulative documentary *Sicko*, but then rather spoils the effect by indulging in a long, uncritical paean to the British National Health Service, an institution, as any Briton knows, of quite staggering backwardness and administrative sclerosis. To cite just one recent example, the NHS saw fit to withhold the clinically proved cancer-fighting drug Herceptin for more than five years after it was made readily available throughout the rest of Europe and the United States, in order for the relevant body to conduct "additional cost-benefit analyses." There are no immediately available figures of the number of patients who died while awaiting the outcome. And it isn't just Herceptin. The British cancer charity BACUP recently published a list of 23 such drugs it says are being unnecessarily denied to patients at any price, a statistic somehow omitted in Moore's at times unintentionally comic film. Nor does the director dwell at any length on the ramshackle, amateurish ministrations of a healthcare system in which many of its leading practitioners are at best barely conversant with the English language, while others, it now emerges, have been more concerned with injuring or murdering their fellow citizens with car bombs than in discharging their traditional duties as healers.

For sheer arrogant naiveté, even Moore must defer to George Clooney, a man whom *Forbes* has named among the "ten most trusted" individuals in America, and who, as such, enjoys sig-

nificantly higher ratings than such traditional authority figures as the president and Congress, the Catholic Church, or even Walter Cronkite at his most avuncular. In February 2006, Clooney made the less-than-startling announcement that he is a liberal and went on to say that “the liberal movement ethically, you know, has stood on the right side of an awful lot of issues. We thought that blacks should be allowed to sit at the front of the bus and women should be able to vote. It was us [sic] who knew that McCarthy was bad, and that the Vietnam war was a mistake.” Clearly, anyone rash enough to take issue with the “liberal movement,” as defined by George Clooney, is not only on the wrong side of history but morally faulty.



Melanie Anderson

Steven Spielberg, another of those who periodically enjoy “America’s most trusted” status, revealed this past summer that he had taken the time to familiarize himself with the “impressive field” of Democratic presidential candidates and was convinced that Hillary Clinton was the best qualified among them. “Hillary,” he elaborated, “is a strong leader and is respected the world over. As president, she will bring all America back together, rebuild our prestige abroad and ensure our protection here at home.” Spielberg’s remarks were instantly emblazoned around the world and are said to have been responsible for an overnight four-point rise in the poll ratings of the junior senator from New York. Mrs. Clinton, by all accounts, is a ruthlessly accomplished political operator, from whom doubtless we will hear much more over the next year. But the president to “bring all America back together”? Spielberg possesses some sterling qualities, but an unerring grasp of the political landscape would seem not to be among them.

Meanwhile, many of the same performers from 1985’s Live Aid, a seminal pop-political event that successfully raised not only money but the participants’ profiles, returned to bring us the Live Earth concerts of July 2007. The singer and sometime actor Sting took the opportunity to remind us all of our responsibilities to the planet, a cause in which he is something of a pioneer among the performing arts. This, of course, is the same paragon of self-denying minimalism who, at the last count, was known to own four properties in the United Kingdom, in addition to a New York condominium, a beach villa in Malibu, and a 600-acre estate in Tuscany. That makes a total of seven residences—each, one can only imagine, equipped with rather more than the most basic domestic amenities. One might tentatively hazard the guess that Sting similarly has ac-

cess to a significantly larger-than-average number of high-performance vehicles and is on terms of some familiarity with the concept of private jet travel. Sting’s friend Sir Elton John, for his part, continues to pronounce at length on America’s troubled post-September 11 mores and has spoken of the vigorous, law-enforced “suppression” of any and all artistic dissent from the Washington “regime.” Yet the ruthless Bush dragnet somehow fails to account for Sir Elton himself, whose various grievances are taken at face value by the mainstream media, and whose numerous causes and campaigns remain visible to the point of ubiquity.

Just last year, pop’s equivalent of the unquiet dead, the Rolling Stones, found themselves lavished with critical goodwill on the somewhat tentative basis of a song called “Sweet Neocon” from their most recent CD, *A Bigger Bang*. On their accompanying U.S. tour, for which they charged between \$160 and \$350 per seat, the newly radicalized group, sexagenarian millionaires all, were sponsored by the Ameriquest company, known for its robust marketing of loans to the fiscally challenged or dispossessed. In 2005, Ameriquest set aside \$325 million to settle a predatory-lending case, in which 30 federal and state prosecutors had accused the mortgage provider of charging “hidden fees and higher-than-promised interest rates.” That same day, President Bush named Ameriquest’s chairman and CEO, Roland Arnall, as ambassador to the Netherlands. Arnall and his wife, Dawn, had previously contributed some \$5.5 million to Bush’s 2004 political campaign.

I have had occasion to spend extended amounts of time in the company of most of the above pop performers, and what strikes me is not so much the cynicism that normally accompanies such a conveniently flexible morality, but a naïveté bordering, in at least one or two cases, on a baby-seal-like innocence. One could argue that this is a function of the pop musician’s chosen career path, where the premium is on arrested emotional development, or, to put a psychoanalyst’s spin on it, that such individuals have no “insight” into their compulsions. There may be less excuse for those in the media and elsewhere who treat the stars’ every paroxysm as holy writ. In this respect, we might reasonably single out the British patronage system as interpreted for these past ten years by Tony Blair. Like so many other aspects of Blair’s hapless administration, his wholesale distribution of the nation’s highest honors to such brazen self-promoters as Sir Mick Jagger was characterized by dazzling cynicism and corruption masquerading as populism. It says something for our degraded political values that a cloaca-tongued singer whose most memorable public utterance remains his assurance that “We piss anywhere, man” (whereupon he promptly illustrated the fact) should be officially recognized on terms denied the vast majority of those who served their country in foreign wars.

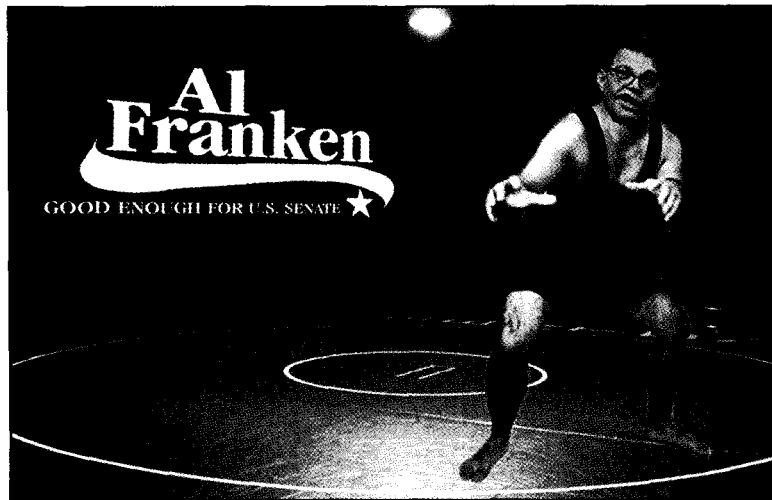
Policy was constructed from a wholesale borrowing of ideas, the intention being to make the regime look progressive and in tune [with] a debased culture. Measures and ideas did not need to be consistent, so long as they were popular, showy, easy to administer, preferably non-committal, and pre-digested enough to need no extra thought.

That was Denis Mack Smith’s assessment of Mussolini’s polity. It would seem that all too many of our modern masters have recycled it.

From Wellstone to Franken

The Era of Gopher Goofiness

by Ronald Kyser



What happened to Minnesota—the stolid Nordic-and-German prairie republic, the mother of vice presidents, the place where Democrats were “Farmer-Labor” and seemed to mean it? Lately, when it comes to statewide office, Sven and Ole have been serving up not their usual hotdish and egg coffee but an uncharacteristic booya of Slavs and Jews, Easterners and wrestlers.

That the menu had changed was obvious by 1990, in what we might call the Minnesota’s Rudy Awakening. Iron Range dentist and Democratic-Farmer-Laborer Gov. Rudy Perpich was a relic of a day when a double prole—pro-life proletarian—could still rise to the top of his party. He may be best remembered for an unsuccessful states’ rights lawsuit against the Reagan administration concerning the use of the National Guard abroad. Another Rudy, Senator Boschwitz, who fled Nazi Berlin as a child, rose from a New York upbringing (the beginning of a Gopher State trend) to become the plywood king of the rapidly suburbanizing Upper Midwest. That success and the direct-mail skills he acquired along the way carried him to Hubert Humphrey’s old seat as a Republican—or an “Independent-Republican,” as they were called in 1978. He was, and is, a top fundraiser, who would soften his tough-guy pitches with a girlish smiley-face signature.

In 1990, Boschwitz was seeking his third term in the Senate; Perpich, his fourth as governor. Opposing them were Paul Wellstone, a Carleton College professor of political science (and 1964 Atlantic Coast Conference wrestling champion) who collected volunteers like Boschwitz did cash, and Arne Carlson (imagine Nelson Rockefeller, but poor, Swedish, and actually born in New York), who wanted Perpich’s job. The Independent-Republican nomination went to Jon Grunseth, however, an Adonis with social views more palatable to regular

churchgoers. Not so palatable, though, was the late-October story that he had hosted nude pool parties a decade earlier and had chased and pinched one of his teenaged daughter’s bikinied friends. True or not, the charges were fumbled by the candidate, who desperately blamed Perpich for cooking the whole thing up, before finally ceding his ballot spot to Carlson. (The last-minute charge that emanated from a Boston women’s group smells more like an effort to put the Roe-friendly Carlson back into the race).

While this fiasco unfolded, Wellstone rode around in his \$3,500 green school bus and ran a remarkably cheap and innovative television campaign. “Fast Paced Paul” squeezed in all of his major positions before he rushed onto the bus, implicitly mocking the high budget of the other campaign. Ultimately, though, Senator Boschwitz was done in by his own people. Tired of putting up with constant references to Goliath, the Boschwitz campaign sent out a letter insisting that their candidate was the “Rabbi of the Senate” and a much more authentic Jew than Wellstone. There are better ways to win an election in Minnesota than accusing your opponent’s wife of practicing Christianity. The letter was the talk of the state over the last weekend of the campaign, and Wellstone’s final ad morphed that signature smiley face into Mr. Yuck, the children’s poison warning.

In 1994, John Marty, son of Lutheran theologian Martin Marty, took on Carlson, only to show that voters, even liberal ones, prefer a secular Republican to a religious Democrat, and that turning down PAC money is not a smart move. Boschwitz decided in 1996 that, if Wellstone had the best political ad-man in the country, he would counter with the worst. Arthur J. Finkelstein, king of blunt-force attack ads, chose to run spots labeling Wellstone “embarrassingly liberal.” (Everyone knew Wellstone was liberal, and, with Rod Grams now the state’s junior senator, voters might have cut even the old Iron Range

Ron Kyser writes from the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes.