

## The Monkey Chronicles

I want to make something very, very clear. This column's review of the autobiography of Cheeta, Tarzan's chimpanzee, has absolutely nothing to do with the man who just got elected to the White House last month. Cheeta's 336-page opus was published in Britain two months ago by Fourth Estate and has become a runaway best-seller. Is it a spoof? Obviously, but it's a brilliant one, taking us back to the good old days of Hollywood when stars kept their mouths shut about politics, and their noses clean from cocaine—at least in public.

For any of you who have not heard of Cheeta, he is the longest-living chimp, 76 as of this writing, whereas most of his kind live only up to 40 or 45 years in the wild. Which goes to show the Hollywood jungle may not be such a bad place after all. Cheeta ascribes his longevity to his daily injections against diabetes, and the benefits of a civilized society. *Me Cheeta* may well be among the finest Tinseltown memoirs ever written, rivaling those of David Niven and Errol Flynn. He was shipped over from Africa as a baby and hit the big time right away with *Tarzan and His Mate* in 1934. His costars were the great Johnny Weissmuller and the beautiful Maureen O'Sullivan, both of whom received top billing, although it was Cheeta who stole the show.

Once in training by the Sammy Glicks of Hollywood, who knew they had a money-spinner in their pay, the chimp became a star as soon as the first Tarzan movie was released. I remember seeing the film in Greece as a child—one of the few American movies allowed by the Germans to be shown—and the German officers laughing loudly when Cheeta would open his mouth and stick out his tongue and make fun of the strange Anglo-Saxons trying to capture his boss, Tarzan. Cheeta did not pull his punches back then, and does not pull them now, in print. His au-

tobiography sticks very closely to the facts. He did not like Charlie Chaplin and calls him “a world-historically unfunny charlatan,” but in Chaplin's case I tend to disagree with the chimp. I was among the last people to photograph Chaplin, for *Paris Match* in 1969, and I found him to be extremely charming and rather conservative in his views of the Cold War. (The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia had him hopping mad.)

Otherwise, Cheeta is right on the money. Rex Harrison was among the most repellent of men, a conceited creep who was rude to underlings and people who couldn't answer back—the great Noel Coward always pretended to kick a tire upon seeing him, as Harrison reminded him of a used-car dealer—and Cheeta lets Harrison have it. The chimp's last movie was with the ghastly Harrison—*Doctor Dolittle*—and Cheeta recounts how he had been deposited by the dastardly Harrison at the top of a monkey-puzzle tree. Harrison had a bet with his wife, Rachel Roberts: “If the monkey makes it down you can sleep with Richard Burton, if he'll have you, and if it doesn't, then I can divorce you.” Nice guy, this Harrison. Cheeta did not make it down the tree, much to the distress of animal lovers on the set. The chimp finally falls down, unhurt, and the overpaid creep Harrison loses his bet.

To my surprise, Cheeta is very rude about Esther Williams, the swimming beauty, as well as the fabulous Errol Flynn. The latter I met during my youth, and he was a much misunderstood man. He was extremely well read, and his parents were academics. He treated Hollywood's world with the disdain of an aristocrat toward the great unwashed. Perhaps if Cheeta had made a movie with him and gotten to know him better, he would have changed his mind. Cheeta also disliked Mickey Rooney, which in my



mind is like hating apple pie, the corner drugstore, and cheerleaders on a Saturday afternoon. Never mind. At one moment, Cheeta is having dinner with Joan Crawford's poodle Cliquot, a terribly boring evening, and then he is witness to a steamy lesbian scene between Marlene Dietrich and Mercedes de Acosta. “You can well imagine how bored I was watching them, and I scampered off to look for Johnny.”

And so it goes. I knew most of the stories, but, after all, I've been around since donkey's years. Cheeta writes well and has strong views on human beings and sex. When I called the publisher and asked for the identity of the ghostwriter, the answer was that Cheeta wrote it himself. I do not doubt it. “How could I not envy humans?” asks the author. “They were so much more interesting than anything other species had come up with.” Hear, hear! Still, although I agree with Cheeta that we humans are more interesting than the rest of God's creations, I have to wonder how we have come to this: to have posturing peacocks like Joe Biden spouting gibberish that would have the hook working overtime in a beer hall, or egregious self-publicists like Christopher Hitchens preaching on prime-time TV about the evils of the Catholic Church. Ours is a scene of Hogarthian squalor and retching, and you and I, dear readers, are responsible for it. We have allowed those beyond redemption, the utter scum of this world, the coarse, the greedy, and the avaricious to lead us, and now it's time to pay. Long live Cheeta. ◊

# The Fall of the House of Utter

by Clark Stooksbury

*“Arrogance and boldness belong to those that are accursed of God.”*

—Saint Clement of Rome

## The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism

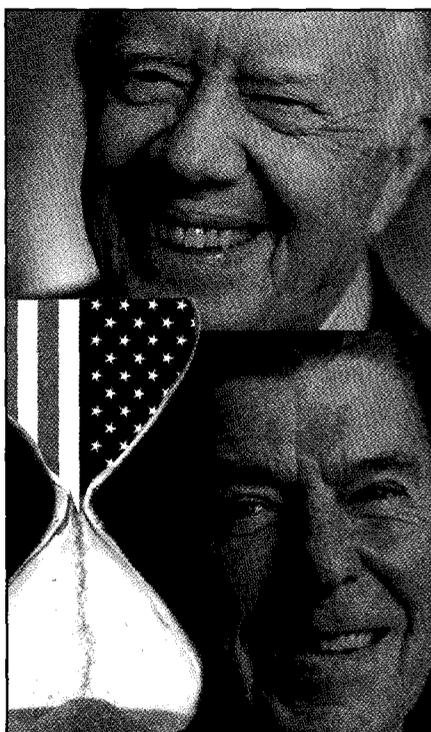
by Andrew J. Bacevich  
New York: Metropolitan Books;  
206 pp., \$24.00



After the end of the Cold War, reasonable people might have expected the United States to withdraw from her many foreign commitments and become a normal country again. Yet the opposite has happened. Rather than dissolve, NATO has expanded. Instead of settling back to enjoy a peace dividend, the United States has intervened militarily in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans, and numerous other places. In *The Limits of Power*, Andrew Bacevich investigates why the United States did not return in the 1990's to what President Harding had called “normalcy.”

The first section of his book recalls Bill McKibben's *Deep Economy* (2007), a condemnation of American hyperindividualism and rampant consumption as a source of personal dissatisfaction and as a threat to the environment. Bacevich goes a step further than McKibben by tying the American culture of consumption to an expansionist foreign policy.

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Melanie Anderson

The impulses that have landed us in a war of no exits and no deadlines come from within. Foreign policy has, for decades, provided an outward manifestation of American domestic ambitions, urges, and fears. In our own time, it has increasingly become an expression of domestic dysfunction—an attempt to manage or defer coming to terms with contradictions besetting the American way of life.

Bacevich characterizes the essential threat to the country as the “crisis of profligacy.” His point is that the wasteful and energy-intensive American way of life drives and influences our foreign policy.

Bacevich quotes extensively from President Jimmy Carter's “malaise speech” of July 1979. Carter had numerous failings, but he did understand the importance of the energy issue and of American profligacy. The malaise speech, Bacevich notes, violated a cardinal rule in American politics:

In American political discourse, fundamental threats are by definition external. Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, or international communism could threaten the United States . . . Yet Carter now dared to suggest that the real danger to American Democracy lay within.

The gist of the speech was that Americans are spiritually unsatisfied by material consumption. Bacevich writes that Carter's “conception of authentic freedom was qualitative: It meant living in accordance with permanent values. At least by implication, it meant settling for less.” This message did not catch on. The speech was not welcomed by self-indulgent postwar Americans. No president since that time has made the mistake of telling Americans that they might be better off settling for less. The political beneficiary of Carter's gloomy assessment was his political and (more importantly) temperamental opposite, Ronald Reagan.