

deepest recesses of the soul that one gets at attitudes, at moral dilemmas, at *motivation*—out of which comes understanding, empathy, and all the rest of it.

Oddly enough, Tom Wolfe himself provides an interesting case study of this thesis. Wolfe, who had spent a wonderful journalistic career plucking from scenes the most delicious details that said everything about class and status, became a novelist with the publication of his hugely successful *Bonfire of the Vanities*. At least part of what prompted Wolfe to write the book was to show the world that a novel on the Dickens model could be written about America today. *Bonfire* has the sweep of a Dickens novel, all right, and it is full of those telling status details—the cut of a man's suit; the make of his car; the fact of his pinkie ring; and so on. Yet despite its enormous commercial success, the novel simply falls flat as a work of fiction. It's all sheen, all surface—to be blunt, all journalism gussied up as a novel—and what it lacks most of all is precisely that sense of having peeled back the layers and exposed the souls of his characters. They are better

than cardboard, but not much better.

More recently, another ex-journalist, Ward Just, had his most recent “Washington” novel published, entitled *Jack Gance*. It is as small and quiet as *Bonfire* is loud and flamboyant—and it succeeds where *Bonfire* fails. Although there are moments of drama in *Jack Gance*, it does not tell a particularly dramatic story; what pulls you along instead is the explication of relationships—between father and son, most tellingly—that speak truths to us all. It cuts to the bone. Just also dots his book with sentences that seem unerringly right in describing the mores of modern Washington. (One example, among many: describing a big-shot columnist, he writes, “His investigations often turned on the misuse of money, but since he had become rich himself, he discovered that money was more subtle than it had seemed when he was poor.”) In a sense, Just, like the best modern novelists—Anne Tyler, Phillip Roth, Raymond Carver, and a substantial handful of others—is descended not from Dickens but from Dostoevski. How can that not be worth applauding? □

THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY Journalism Award

for December 1988 is presented to

Ralph Blumenthal
Sam Howe Verhovek
The New York Times

The decentralization of New York City school boards was supposed to strengthen parental control of the schools. But the *Times* explains how members of a Bronx school board have subverted that goal by turning the schools into objects of plunder, profit, and patronage for unqualified relatives and political supporters. Their students ranked lowest in test scores of the city's 32 districts.

Peter Luke
Mark Hornbeck
The Ann Arbor News

This series on the state lottery documents in persuasive detail an old charge and a new one. Luke and Hornbeck use census and betting data to prove the familiar charge that lotteries rely on bets from the poor. But they add a new wrinkle to the story by showing that the profits from inner-city betting get channeled disproportionately toward subsidizing schools in wealthier parts of the state.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to the best newspaper, magazine, television, or radio story (or series of stories) on our political system. Nominations for any newspaper, magazine, or radio or television station in the country are welcome. The subject can be government in its federal, state, or municipal manifestation.

The award for stories published or aired in January will be announced in the April issue. Nominations for stories published or aired in February will close March 15. The winner will be announced in the May issue. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination.



Act II, Winning an Election

by Nicholas Lemann

The day that I had my job interview at *The Washington Monthly* a new issue had just come into the office. In huge type, the cover said, CRIMINALS BELONG IN JAIL. It's a sign of how much the liberal world has changed that at the time, February 1976, this seemed shocking to me—it was the kind of thing that you just couldn't say, even if it was true. In order to restore vitality and intellectual honesty to liberalism, much of the psychic energy of the magazine in those days was devoted to raising all the points that liberals felt shouldn't be discussed because it would give the conservatives ammunition. But the assumption was always that liberalism would remain the reigning creed in America. We were not trying to move the Democratic Party to the right. We were not ourselves moving to the right. We were trying to make liberalism even better and stronger than it already was.

Even more than the urge to avoid issues like crime and defense, the aspect of conventional liberalism that the magazine most disliked was its elitism—its snobbery and its mistrust of politics, which seemed rooted in a belief that most people simply weren't very bright. So it's ironic, and sad, that *The Washington Monthly's* greatest success over the 20 years of its existence has been in influencing the liberal elite—not about elitism, but about issues. On most public policy questions, the Eastern Establishment, such as it is these days, has come around to the positions this magazine has been advocating since its founding. You can bet the rent that the next Democratic presidential candidate will point out that criminals belong in jail.

The problem that nags the most right now is that the acceptance of *The Washington Monthly's* positions is limited to a fairly small group. Neoliberalism, in essence if not by its unfortunate name, would win in a referendum taken among journalists and policy analysts. But it's still death on election day because of what comes after the "neo." The 1988 presidential election was especially depressing in this regard, because George Bush,

unlike Ronald Reagan, is not a great political candidate, and seemed to draw his electoral strength mainly from tapping a reservoir of public distrust of liberalism. The unpopularity of liberalism is obviously rooted more in "populism" than in substantive disagreement; conservatives have been able to sell most people on the idea that liberals are powerful and contemptuous, the way bankers used to be in Thomas Nast cartoons. Liberal elitism and conservative presidential landslides are intimately connected. *The Washington Monthly* doesn't really need an infusion of new ideas right now; its 20-year-old ideas are still the right ones. The next great task for the magazine is figuring out how to bring about the political triumph of neoliberalism—and doing this will require completing the great piece of unfinished business in the establishment, which is overcoming its suspicion of democracy.

There are three prevailing theories about how to revive the Democratic Party in presidential politics. One, which might be called the Sam Nunn theory, holds that the Democrats should become more conservative, especially on defense and foreign policy, and thus win back the South. Another, the Barney Frank theory, is that if the Democrats could rid themselves of a few exotic positions (such as the idea that criminals don't belong in jail) they would get the middle class back. Finally, according to the Bob Kuttner theory, if the Democrats ditch the social issues and fully embrace class- and constituency-based economic politics, they could build a working-class majority. All these theories have crucial flaws. The Nunn theory assumes that the South is winnable for the Democrats, which last fall's election results call into question. The Frank theory takes away the Democrats' negatives without adding positives. The Kuttner theory seems to work only in hard times.

Neoliberals are frequently accused of lacking a political base—except for journalists, it's often added with a snicker. Actually, there is an encouraging historical parallel for the position of neoliberals today, which is the Progressives. They too proceeded from an interest in government to a mastery of politics; Progressivism first flowered among journalists and reformers, and elected local and state officials before it was a force in national politics. In retrospect the key to the Progressives' political success was not their clever stitching together of con-

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