

Slogging Through Gomorrah

The world according to Bork bears little semblance to reality

By David Cole

THIS COULD ONLY BE THE WORK of Joe Klein. The further I read in *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, the new best-seller ostensibly written by Robert Bork, the more convinced I became that the book was in fact an elaborate parody. It's a brilliant idea: Take all the nasty lies those liberal special interest groups spread about then-Judge Bork during the battle over his Supreme Court nomination, exaggerate them a hundred-fold, and then publish a book as if it were written by the demonized Robert Bork. For good measure, have him attack not only the right of privacy and judicial activism, but rap music, portable radios, and the ordination of women priests. The left will love it, because it will confirm all their worst fears about Bork; the right will love it, because it will confirm all their worst fears about the nation. Best-seller.

As parody, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* barely succeeds. Its vituperative tone and inflated rhetoric quickly become tiresome, its arguments are all too familiar, and its complaints numbingly repetitive. One begins to feel like one is seated at a family dinner next to a cantankerous great uncle who can't stop talking about how bad things are these days long enough to pass the mashed potatoes.

As a thoughtful work of non-fiction, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* is hard to take seriously, in part because it's difficult to believe that Bork is serious. The book broadly indicts "modern liberalism" for all of our ills, from increasing crime to decreasing civility, from affirmative action to the feminization of religion and the military, from non-harmonious pop music to sexy television shows. Somehow all of this is linked to the 1960s, of course, and more specifically, to the advent of portable radios at that time, which allowed youth to listen to music without parental oversight. The result: "modern liberalism," which is one part "radical individualism" and one part "radical egalitarianism," the

**SLOUCHING
TOWARDS
GOMORRAH**

By Robert H. Bork
Regan Books, \$25

extremes of which, respectively, are nihilism and fascism. To Bork, we are virtually, if not already, there.

There are several reasons why it is difficult to take this argument seriously. The first is that Bork fails to engage any of the serious defenders of that which he criticizes, preferring instead to attack

straw men of his own creation. Thus, he attacks modern liberalism without even discussing the work of today's pre-eminent defenders of liberalism, such as Isaiah Berlin or Ronald Dworkin. He does the same thing with feminism, abortion, and affirmative action.

It is also difficult to take Bork seriously because he practices precisely what he preaches against. He laments the left's "tactic of assaulting one's opponents as not merely wrong but morally evil," but his book is nothing more than an extended assault on the left as morally evil. He criticizes the president of the ACLU for calling Bork a fascist just because he advocated censorship, disparages the civil rights movement for using "incendiary" rhetoric, and scolds feminists for "whining." Yet Bork himself repeatedly labels modern liberalism as fascist, totalitarian, and even Nazi-like. He cannot resist incendiary rhetoric when describing his opponents. (He declares that "multiculturalism is barbarism," that "feminists' ideology is a fantasy of persecution," and that the federal courts have "increasing[ly] accept[ed] nihilism as a constitutional value.") And when it comes to the victimization of white males, no one can whine like Bork.

One wonders whether Bork ever looks in the mirror. He contends that the "politically motivated scholar and teacher is engaged in a dishonest act: pretending that his conclusions are reached impartially when they are not." Yet one would be hard-pressed to name a more politically motivated scholar than the author himself, the John M. Olin Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He criticizes those who would apply reason to religious faith, and castigates "cafeteria Catholics" who subscribe only to those religious dictates with which they agree, but then argues that the Catholic Church's call for "a just wage" is based on "misunderstood economics."

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Perhaps most ironically of all, Bork sees “the end of Western civilization in living color” in the televised hearings of Anita Hill’s charges of sexual misconduct by Clarence Thomas, but then turns around and concludes that the American public’s failure to show interest in sexual misconduct charges against Bill Clinton is a sign of our moral decline. Apparently, moral fiber means being interested in sexual misconduct charges only when they are leveled against one’s enemies.

Bork’s proposals for reform also seem at sharp odds with his critique. This is in part inevitable, because the critique is so all-encompassing—not an institution in our society escapes his wrath. The government, the universities, the arts, the press, and even religion have all been ravaged by liberalism, and have all contributed to our collective moral degradation. After 330-odd pages of venting his fury and rage, Bork does append a 10-page discussion of “hope,” but it’s awfully half-hearted—the best he can do is suggest that religious fundamentalists and talk radio hosts may be able to reintroduce morality into our degraded liberal culture.

In the course of the book, Bork does advance two concrete proposals, but neither makes any sense. He calls for censorship to stem the tide of sexually explicit and offensive speech that has proliferated under the First Amendment’s protection. But he never explains why he trusts the censors to suppress the right stuff, particularly in light of his assessment that all institutions in our culture have been polluted by modern liberalism’s creed.

Still more provocatively, Bork calls for a constitutional amendment allowing Supreme Court decisions to be overridden by a majority vote of Congress. While presented as a mere “amendment,” the effect would in fact be to abandon the Constitution. The whole point of the Constitution is to be supra-majoritarian, in order to constrain the momentary impulses of transient majorities, who have sometimes done terrible things to unpopular minorities. In its supra-majoritarian character, of course, the Constitution is a deeply conservative document. Yet under Judge Bork’s rewrite, the Constitution would have no more status than a piece of legislation. For a man who laments the loss of constraint in the modern world, this is a strange proposal indeed.

Not content to limit his analysis to that about which he should know something—constitutional law—Bork extends his analysis to “all human behavior and institutions.” This leads him, of course, to rock-and-roll and rap music. In Bork’s world, the following passes for cultural criticism: “Rock and rap

are utterly impoverished by comparison with swing or jazz or any pre-World War II music, impoverished emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually.” He contends that it is bad enough that black youth listen to rap, but what’s worse, rap is not just “black music,” but has white fans too. His explanation for rap’s popularity in the suburbs? It is white youths’ revenge against “the domineering whining feminists.”

In the end, Bork’s book does raise questions, but the principal one is: What planet does he live on? Bork claims that the Supreme Court, seven of whose justices were appointed by Republicans, is doing the left’s bidding. He maintains that the court has been relentlessly expanding criminal defendants’ rights, but cites only the exclusionary rule and Miranda warnings, rules that were developed 80 and 30 years ago, respectively, and which have been substantially undercut by today’s court, which has issued an unrelenting series of pro-government decisions in criminal cases. In a remarkable feat of stretching the facts to fit one’s theory, Bork explains that the reason antitrust defendants now get a favorable hearing in the Supreme Court is because the left is no longer interested in economic justice. Neither the proposition about the left’s interests nor the claim that the Supreme Court cares about the left’s interests are defended. Bork barely mentions that the court’s activism these days is in the name of invalidating affirmative action, striking down electoral districts designed to encourage minority representation, and limiting federal power over states and private property.

Bork’s America is simply unrecognizable. In his view, we have been overtaken by “radical egalitarianism,” even though we boast the largest income gap in the developed world. He claims that we are soft on crime, yet we have the highest incarceration rates in the industrialized world. He asserts that “there are no artificial barriers left to women’s achievement,” and that racism and sexism today “are mere wisps of their former selves, except when it comes to white, heterosexual males.” Indeed, in his view, “it would be difficult to contend that, the end of racial segregation aside, American culture today is as healthy as the culture of the 1950s.” The 1950s? If Bork had bothered to ask the question from the perspective of anyone other than himself—women, the poor, gays and lesbians, immigrants targeted by the McCarran-Walter Act, criminals convicted without counsel, or any of those blacklisted as Communists—Bork might not have found it so “difficult to contend.” But Bork is evidently not interested in listening to their voices; he’s too busy launching his own diatribe.

Please pass the mashed potatoes. ●

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Political Booknotes

The Prince Of Spin

By James Carville

AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POWERS Lee Atwater attained a level of spin that made you stand in awe. He was just so good at it. Obsessive, bright, paradoxical, ambitious, a scheming but likable guy. From *Bad Boy: The Life and Politics of Lee Atwater* by John Brody emerges a portrait of a man who was all of these things. Trustworthy? You could trust Atwater to always act in his own interests. Lee Atwater was a man who was obsessed with Lee Atwater, and now here's this book obsessed with the same thing.

Brody is the Jack Webb of political biography—"Just the facts, ma'am,"—and his book is relentless in its details. If you wanted to know that Atwater named his first political consulting firm Baker & Associates after a man whose portrait he had purchased at a garage sale and that its office was situated above a chicken-wing restaurant, here's the goods. It's fascinating that someone went to the trouble. Not only does Brody tell you that James Brown attended Atwater's funeral, he gives you the color of the Godfather of Soul's shirt (black) and tie (white).

Brody had access to Atwater's childhood scrapbook, his high-school letters to his mother, his incomplete doctoral thesis, his medical records. (My wife, however, takes vehement issue with Brody's assertion that Atwater was abandoned by the Republican National Committee. It's not my role to defend the RNC, but I was dating my wife at the time, and I do happen to know first-hand that they paid for the staff that was attending to him at the end, his car, his driver, the hot tub that was built in his backyard, and his around-the-clock nursing.) Brody also accumulated a tape deck full of unvar-

nished conversations among the major Republican players in the White House and on the campaign trail. And I thought it was just Democrats who talked to reporters. These people talked about everything!

Atwater's political successes are well-documented here. After losing a South Carolina Republican gubernatorial primary for General William Westmoreland, he had the dry heaves for two days (I can relate to that), but things went pretty much straight up from there. It's been proved over and over again that the public likes stories about process, and there's some good inside

baseball about Atwater's early technique. I liked his approach to manufacturing a response to a candidate's speech—strategically placing loudly enthusiastic supporters at home plate down in front of the microphone and then putting smaller pockets at first, second, and third base to create a home run effect on the rest of the crowd.

Atwater had a whole staff to generate stories about himself, to spin his past in order to weave his future, and some of that whole cloth has apparently been accepted here as fact. South Carolina Governor Carroll Campbell said, "He was a BS artist of the highest order," but Brody does his best to wade through. "I tell 'em I learned a lot about politics from going to wrestling. Audiences at professional wrestling matches are the swing voters in election." Who knows if Atwater meant it? Sounds good. On the other hand, Brody traces the development of Atwater's "Southern Strategy" and "permanent campaign" concepts to a 1947 memo by Clark Clifford.

Atwater called some of what he did "strategic misrepresentation" and bragged that he read Machiavelli's *The Prince* 23 times. He didn't read Machiavelli 23 times. I've read *All the King's Men* four times, and he didn't like *The Prince* as much as I liked *All the King's Men*. Machiavellian scholars haven't read

The Prince 23 times, and it would be very un-Machiavellian to admit it if you did.

Bad Boy is most powerful when it's most personal. Brody presents the case that much of Atwater's development can be traced to a tragic childhood accident that killed his brother and let him live. The writer asks, "Had he wronged so many others because he felt so deeply wronged himself?" Brody never satisfactorily answers that question, but he goes a long way in documenting the Atwater transgressions, both political and personal. The book comes most alive when Brody is talking about Atwater's personal affairs, the career-defining office politics that are the heart of Washington and the extramarital experiences that were an open secret. Here you really get a sense of the kind of guy Lee Atwater was, and it all dovetails around the details of his death and the spinning of his legacy.

Brody asks, "Can someone who had so many flaws be considered great in the final analysis?" For all his details, Brody doesn't have the answer. He seems caught between the polar emotions of admiration and revulsion; admiration for a guy who really got the job done, revulsion for what Atwater did to the people he brushed up against in the process.

JAMES CARVILLE is a founder of the political consulting firm Carville & Begala and the author of *We're Right, They're Wrong*.

Wealth Maintenance Organizations

By Joshua Sharfstein

MY PATIENT WAS LYING IN THE Cardiac Intensive Care Unit, connected to continuous monitors and dripping intravenous lines, but he couldn't stop thinking about his last tip.

"I carried this lady's groceries up to the third floor," he told me. "Soon I was sweating all over. My chest was killing me. I could hardly breathe. I was having a heart attack, and all she gave me was three bucks!"

My patient returned to his taxi and