

IS THE CONSTITUTION JUST A SCREENPLAY?

By Michael Ventura

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Contrary to most of what you read and hear, there is perfect bipartisan agreement in Washington concerning all the major issues. A few details need to be negotiated, and that will be called "news," but the areas of major disagreement are minor. Both parties agree the Pentagon needs at least a \$100 billion budget increase. Clinton proposed that figure; Republicans think it should be slightly higher. There is equal bipartisan agreement on the impossibility of spending such money on education, the environment, our shaky infrastructure, or for the over 40 million Americans with no medical insurance. Not one week after announcing an arms investment comparable to Reagan's, Clinton proposed an additional \$7 billion (more than the entire welfare budget *before* "reform") to jump-start Reagan's favorite fantasy, the "Star Wars" missile defense system. Republicans, of course, were overjoyed. How's that for bipartisan?

Both parties also agree not to reform the legalized bribery that passes for campaign finance. *The New York Times* reports that anyone running for president in the year 2000 must raise a minimum of \$2,893 *an hour* in order to have the \$25 million that experts agree make a candidate "competitive." This kind of money is available only from the very rich and from corporations. That's why every viable candidate, from George W. Bush to Bill Bradley, crows their passion for "a free market economy." That's a code phrase meaning: Our biggest corporations can do whatever they want, anywhere they want, with minimal interference from government or citizens. Now the \$100 billion "defense" buildup becomes more clear: The United States wants an economically strong Europe to play "free market" footsies with, but does not want serious competition for world resources, and is willing to back up what it wants militarily. That may be why the new defense policy was announced the day before an economically united Europe introduced the euro as the only currency that can compete with the U.S. dollar. The participating European countries surpass the U.S. in population (consumers); so for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union the U.S. may have a true competitor. In effect, the Pentagon budget hike is a cannon shot across Europe's bow: Do business, but don't compete too much for raw materials and foreign markets.

Of course, that \$100 billion could be spent to make a world in which cannons are less necessary, but there is complete bipartisan agreement in our "Christian" country not to try.

Yet all the commentary about the impeachment proceedings emphasizes partisan wrangling and political theatre. In fact, the commentators take on the tone of theatre- or film reviewers. There's much talk about "the American character" and the symbolic significance of Clinton vs. Starr, and who will finally win the "cultural war" of the Sixties -- as though the fundamental conflict between our Puritanism and our free-spiritedness could be resolved for more than five minutes by anything that happens in Washington. The outcome of Clinton vs. Starr will not change how every human heart desires both stability and change, safety and danger, the certainty of rectitude and the uncertainty of inspiration; and how it always has, and always will; and how every day every heart is torn as it decides between one and another impulse, always second-guessing itself, never satisfied, always hungry. Commentators are using the impeachment proceedings as a

marvelous symbolic palette with which they can finger-paint their latest ideas. The trouble is ...

Politics is not a play or movie. Politics is about power. Politics is about two essential and interlocking concerns: who controls a nation's capacity for lethal force, from the local to the international levels; and who determines the rules, the nature, and the flow of economic resources. The rest *is* theatre: a show that continually changes (while staying essentially the same), and that serves to distract the citizens from the essential issues of power. There is at present *no* dialogue in America on these crucial issues -- which is exactly what's wanted by the 1% of Americans who control more than 90% of our economic capacity and who are paying for the campaigns of every single person involved in the impeachment process. This same 1% pay the salaries of the people who pay the salaries of the commentators. So virtually the only commentary we're getting is a form of film review.

I enjoy reading film reviews -- when they're about films. But any political commentary worthy of the name must be about the nature of power. And I repeat: Political power is about who controls the resources, what are their means and ends, and how much or how little say does a citizen have. Without public dialogue about the nature of American power, the Constitution is reduced merely to a kind of screenplay that will have a happy or sad ending until a sequel is made and the ending changes.

Not that there aren't important constitutional issues at stake with impeachment; but they are only important, ultimately, as they influence the distribution of power, the allocation of resources. With complete bipartisan agreement on arms spending, campaign finance, and corporate capitalism; and with no serious presidential candidate offering an alternative to the consensus; and with most commentators exercising their precious freedom of speech by essentially making faces in the mirror (we call that "the media") -- then the real outcome of this impeachment is a foregone conclusion. The screenplay we call the Constitution will tilt to the right or left for a time, while the essential distribution of power remains exactly as it is.

Meanwhile ... as you could discover by reading the shorter items on the inner pages of *The New York Times* ... three out four children in the undeveloped world are receiving no education, and are not likely to. Twenty percent of the world's adults are unemployed. Roughly 16% of the world's population is "chronically hungry." Since 1987, 2 million children have been killed in war, and 6 million have been seriously injured. Most of the continent of Africa is at war in one way or another, and in some African countries a third of the population is HIV-positive. Iran is buying germ warfare technology from Russia, and god knows what else. India and Pakistan, who are now nuclear powers, have an active border shooting war in which several hundred on each side died last year. Pakistan also has admitted to holding 50,000 in forced labor -- i.e., slavery; while India's Hindu government is doing nothing to stop escalating violence against that country's 25 million Christians. Indonesia, the fourth largest country in the world, is in a state of virtual anarchy. Much the same could be said of two countries crucial to America's future: Russia and Mexico, both suffering criminal corruption at every level of activity while their populations live in increasing poverty (there are two million homeless orphans in Russia alone). There was a 14% increase in AIDS in Mexico last year, and many of those unfortunates are coming here. China is suppressing "dissidents" (people who speak their minds) more harshly than at any time since Tiananmen Square. Japan and Brazil are economically just as shaky as they were last

summer, if not more so. Israel and the Palestinians are on the verge of war again. The Balkan states are still on the brink of genocide.

Not one but many beasts are slouching toward Bethlehem, or the millennium, or however you wish to put it. The 21st century is rushing at us like a tidal wave, and no elected official in Washington, no one seeking to be elected, and virtually no journalists with a major-market venue, address these issues in policy terms that could have any impact -- except for a \$100 billion hike in Pentagon spending, surrender to the economic system that gave us this world, and a refusal to change how elections are paid for (and thereby who gets elected and why). The present excuse for this poverty of concern, this utter moral and political vacuum, is the Clinton vs. Starr impeachment circus. The "issues" are whether Monica Lewinsky should testify, or whether this or that constitutional guarantee is being bent this way or that way.

My constitutional liberties are precious to me. But how long can I, can you, can any of us, expect to keep our liberties in a world where three out of four people can't read, one out of five is unemployed, almost one out of five is hungry, and whole continents are ravaged by disease and chaos? Where is the guarantee of freedom, when corporate short-term profits are virtually the sole motivation for our nation's decisions? How safe are you in a country where virtually all Americans are spending more than they earn, and any serious economic setback will leave millions resourceless?

We watch television, where news is safely contained on a screen, and think we have control just because we have the power to shift our attention from one channel to another. Some of us read newspapers, where the world is presented in separate items that are rarely written of as though they interact with each other or have the power to reach us. Meanwhile the planet is screaming. It's as though time itself is screaming -- suffering and uncertainty on a scale that any sane person would have thought unimaginable even a few years ago. There is nowhere to hide. Nowhere but in ourselves. And, as a people, that is where we're hiding, trying to believe that this fragile thing we call "security" is sustained by anything more than our willingness to hide. And, at the moment, our hiddenness is our only contribution. What we will have left to give when we can't hide anymore?

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