

THOSE LITTLE GENTLEMEN

By Michael Ventura

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"When no personal authority exists in a leader, a country sinks into the authority of public relations -- it has a vacuum at its center." Norman Mailer wrote that sentence nearly 40 years ago; today America is living it again. A week has passed since the election, as I write; perhaps when you read this we will know the name of our next president, perhaps not. No matter when we know the name, and no matter whose name it is, this much is clear: Each candidate is speaking for effect, for public relations, swelling the vacuum, the vacuity, the selfishness, the distrust, that has become our politics. And America, that once dared imagine itself as "a shining city on a hill" ... America, the first viable republic in history, not flawless but dedicated, remarkably, to fighting its own flaws, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth ..." America is embarrassed, humbled, confused, and trying not to be frightened. America is stumbling, too strong to fall and too weak to stand. America does not remember what it's for and does not know itself well enough anymore to know what to do.

In such times, when neither our government nor our politics (and they are not the same) represent what is best in us, it falls to individual citizens to hold the country's dream as best and as selflessly as we are able. If there is any good in this election, it is that its very lack of outcome throws us back upon ourselves ... reminding us that we, each of us, represent the country, and that it will not, can not, be better than we are. These candidates embarrass us precisely because they reflect what we've become; but this election is teaching us that we cannot afford to remain what we've become: a people who've traded the American dream for the American fantasy. The fantasy is that everyone can become rich and comfortable; the dream is that everyone can become free. We have forgotten, and we do not want to face, that freedom is never comfortable -- the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, are not comfortable documents, they are not comforting words. They are challenges to accept the cost, the contradictions, the responsibility, and the necessary generosity toward one another, that are essential for freedom to thrive. Only a citizenry that once again feels personally responsible for their own freedom and each other's, can call forth from itself leaders who are worthy of that dream.

It happens ... and then it doesn't ... then happens again ... then fails to happen again: The American ideal is a state toward which we rise and from which we fall in erratic rhythms, sometimes rising in one way and falling in another at the same time, in a constant effort that constantly and unsparingly reveals us to ourselves. That is the price of founding a nation not on what is but on what might be. Freedom will always force you to face not only what you are but what you are not. Freedom will always demand that you do more than you think you can. Freedom will always force you to choose between convenience and justice. And because you cannot be free unless your neighbors are free, freedom will always force you to tolerate what is alien to you or lose your freedom in the effort to deny freedom to what and whom you find alien. And that is the great truth from which Americans of all camps are running headlong. If some of us, if enough of us, don't

remember and stand for the tolerance and generosity necessary to freedom, we will not generate leaders who can make, or attempt to make, a politics of freedom.

So the spectacle of a presidential candidate (Bush) denying the accuracy of a voting method (the hand count) that has in fact served us well for two centuries, and in effect declaring himself president before the election process has come to its constitutional conclusion ... the spectacle of a presidential candidate (Gore) jogging and playing touch football as though a pretended nonchalance and cheerfulness could somehow answer the bafflement of a world awaiting a moral stance from our leaders ... the spectacle of a presidential candidate (Nader) snidely denying what he and everyone knew to be true, that his candidacy was the deciding factor in this crisis ... the spectacle of the elected officials of Florida claiming objectivity while acting in the most blatantly partisan manner possible ... the spectacle of a newly elected senator (Hillary) promising a jihad against the electoral college, knowing that electing a president by popular vote without the most stringent campaign-finance reform will quadruple the cost of presidential elections and make money even more the deciding factor than it is now ... the spectacle of a powerful congressman (DeLay) threatening a congressional invalidation of "tainted" (read: Democratic) electoral votes ... the spectacle of a national communications system (the news networks) caring more for their ratings, and for one-upping each other, than for the patience that the integrity of this system demands ... the spectacle of an electorate expecting precise perfection in a human effort involving tens of millions of hands and machines, in which a certain percentage of error must always be inevitable ... the spectacle, on all sides, of the letter of the law being used to subvert the law's intent ... the spectacle of no more than half of our enfranchised voters bothering to exercise their precious right ... this spectacle has endangered, and cheapened, the idea of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," more than any terrorist or fascist could hope to do. The will of the people has been made to look ridiculous ... inconvenient ... inconclusive ... when actually, seen another way, a great thing has happened and is unfolding.

No one will ever again be able to claim that their vote doesn't count. The fate of the world hinges on merely a few hundred votes in Florida, a minuscule percentage of the national electorate, precisely because every vote is a voice, a call, a decision, a stand. Even more: a fate. The closeness of this election proves that every vote takes you further toward, or further from, a way to live, a range of options, a spectrum of freedom (or the lack of it). Your vote is not simply a number. It is a pressure upon history. It moves history this way or that. It is a piece of you -- unsigned, not glamorous, but effective.

And there is this: The United States has the most powerful military that has ever been, yet, unlike almost anywhere in any time or place, the military is not a consideration in the outcome of this election (except in the votes of its individuals) -- though the two most popular generals of our era (Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf) side openly with one candidate. Our republic works so well that brute force is not a consideration, not a concern, in the outcome of this election. A cursory study of world history, past and present, teaches that this is nothing short of a kind of miracle -- the miracle of a republic that, in spite of all its cynicism and failings, has a bedrock faith in its institutions that is deeper than it knows, deeper than it values. We will bumble toward a constitutional decision. However imperfect that decision will turn out to be, it will not be imposed by force. Manipulated, cajoled, coerced, and perhaps cheated, but not enforced by arms.

And there is this: It is hard to find a nation, in history or in the present, which in the midst of such a pivotal crisis can afford to allow unfettered freedom of speech. This,

too, is miraculous, and hard won, and proves the strength of institutions we regularly denigrate and take for granted.

Which is to say: The republic and its ideals are still alive, even when we fail to breathe life into them. If we don't stand by our ideals this grace won't last forever; but as of today, the republic of the Founders is still viable, still vital enough to be salvaged, embodied, strengthened.

When asked what he thought of America's presidential prospects, Fidel Castro replied, "I do not think about those little gentlemen." That is a luxury we don't have, but I can't help but like his phrase, "those little gentlemen." One of those little gentlemen will take the oath of office on January 20. Their littleness reflects our littleness, while the office that they seek reflects what's left of our inner strength -- and what is left is still considerable.

But the most disturbing aspect of this election has generally gone unremarked: What ignited this crisis is the myopia of the Greens, but what made the crisis possible is the growing drastic divisions between our rural and urban citizens. From Maine to California, rural counties went overwhelmingly for Bush; urban and suburban counties went largely for Gore. (Those who press to end the electoral college are in effect pressing to squelch the rural voice, for without the electoral college candidates would be forced to play only to the major population centers.) We have two major ways of life here, each with its virtues, that are losing the ability to listen to and respect one another. It will take people bigger than these two little gentlemen to address this breach. But it must be addressed, because a house divided against itself cannot stand for very long, and this election could yet prove the beginning of our dissolution.

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