

ELVIS HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

By Michael Ventura

February 2, 2001

What the 21st century deserves is a New York mayor with a Southern accent. Many persuasive New Yorkers have begun whispering to Bill Clinton that the office is his for the taking. And of course it would be, what with New York City's long tradition of bad-boy mayors and how its media flies swarm upon celebrity shit -- New York's self-importance and Clinton's self-indulgence would dovetail perfectly into a politics-of-theatricality that would command national attention, brewing a stew of cant that might out-stench even the swill spewing daily from George W. Cheney. Clinton, the Southerner who was ultimately rejected by the South as no Southerner has ever been -- will spend the rest of his life as a refugee from history, and no place offers refugees more welcome or possibility than New York City. That the voice of New York would speak with a Southern lilt ... it's the sort of surreality which commentators these days mis-define as "irony," and might at least distract us from Bill Clinton's true and sinister legacy.

That legacy is, of course, the Tom DeLay-Trent Lott Congress, which came into being and has thrived on the strength of Clinton's weaknesses. (How a president who practically handed over Congress to the opposing party, and was never able to get it back ... how such a president can be praised by analysts of all stripes as a political strategist without peer ... remains a mystery to me.) The harm this Congress has perpetrated dwarfs the few positive claims of the Clinton administration. Add to this his gutting of federal habeas corpus ... the utter shambles of American foreign policy ... the deification of the "free market" above all other values ... a president who pointedly called a press conference to lie to the American people, and then (unlike any major politician of a not-so-far-gone era) did not have the decency and/or patriotism to resign when that shameless lie was exposed ... had he resigned, Gore would have had nearly two years as president before the 2000 election ... W. wasn't able to win the popular vote as it was, so it's unlikely he would have had a chance against Gore as a sitting president ... well ... one could rumble on in this fashion, but what's the point? As carried forward by George W. Cheney, Clinton's "legacy" will infect American life for a long time to come, and, anyway, Elvis has left the building.

During the 1992 election I was working for a weekly that considered itself "liberal," though in the long run its liberalism was indistinguishable from white affluent complacency, but that's another story ... in any case, that paper's election cover trumpeted in huge type: VOTE FOR ELVIS. Identifying Clinton with Elvis apparently began with his '92 campaign staff, was taken up by journalists, and has been fodder for commentators ever since. When I think of the drug-addicted Elvis accepting an honorary narcocrime-fighting title from the war-criminal Nixon ... the likeness fits. But when I think of that torn soul who, all his working life, sang with an unforgettably sincere and transformative voice; when I think of the man who, in his youth, had the courage and/or compulsion to move in a way that revealed male sexuality as no one in history or in any other art (save Michelangelo's) ever had ... then I know we've perpetuated an injustice upon Elvis Aron Presley by associating him in any way with William Jefferson Clinton.

In the summer of '74, before he'd gone to fat, I saw Elvis perform in Amarillo. It was a small-ish hall, seating only a few thousand. He didn't have to be there. It increased

neither his rep nor his wealth. (There were so many musicians and singers on that stage, and the ticket price was so modest, it was hard to figure how he profited.) In the hour or so he spent on that stage, it was clear why he was there: He wanted to sing to us. Not to anyone, but to us. That, palpably, was the feeling. He sang of love and fulfillment, love and loss, love and anything. He sang with passion, and humor, and mockery -- mockery of himself, never of anything or anyone else. Twenty yards away from him, his stardom wasn't a myth but a radiance -- and he gave of it freely, for that's all that could be done with such radiance. He clearly had no other use for it. It did him no good (as we all know now) but in the giving. When he sang he was a living emblem of what life promises -- and, sometimes, some rare times, delivers. *That* Elvis never leaves the building. In 20 years, Clinton will be a dimmer public memory than Reagan, and both will pale beside the ever-more-forceful visage of Lincoln; but Elvis will still sing only to you. And you'll feel a little more alive for having absorbed his song. Which is why "Vote For Elvis," and any other conflation of Elvis and Clinton, was and is an unconscionable travesty.

But if you want to understand Clinton, forget Elvis and remember Orson Welles.

Welles' great theme was the self-corrupting power of ego. From *Citizen Kane* on, Welles taught that you didn't need wealth, or the pressures of society, or anything else, to corrupt you; he taught that you come into the world fully equipped with all that's needed to fill your soul with pus: a do-it-yourself corruption kit featuring your own private, secret, grandiose self-importance -- your unconfessed conviction that you deserve what others don't, that your needs are more noble and urgent than anyone else's, your convictions and purposes are more pure, and that something God-ordained and God-protected happens whenever you get your way. The protagonists of *Citizen Kane*, *The Lady From Shanghai*, and *Touch of Evil* can convince themselves of almost anything, right to the end -- can justify anything that satisfies their ambitions and their lusts, as long as it somehow embellishes and confirms their secret, self-pampered image of themselves. That's Clinton.

In *The Lady From Shanghai*, Welles' character is svelte and handsome, graceful and confident. He shines with intelligence, charisma, and certainty. In voiceover, he narrates the story of himself with false contempt -- false, because his voice fairly drips with fascination at his every move. No one who's having such fun despising himself really despises himself; rather, he's despising a planet that fails to comprehend and accommodate so grand a character as himself, while he marvels at every slippage of judgment and decency that could fell one such as he. "It's a bright, guilty world," he opines, but he says so while high on a cliff, looking down at that world. After all whom he touched have destroyed themselves through his agency, through his catalytic power, he walks away into the darkness of his dream, pretending not to be ruined by virtue of being the teller of the story. Welles-the-filmmaker, as opposed to Welles-the-character, shows that the others are at least honest enough at the moment of their doom, while Welles-the-character can't admit he's doomed as long as he has the power to tell their story. He escapes unscathed because his self-love is invulnerable -- so he was the really doomed one all along.

Touch of Evil was filmed only 10 years later. It is incredible that so handsome a man could, in such a short time, become possibly the ugliest human specimen ever filmed. Double-chinned, baggy-eyed, warty, blowzy, belly-burdened, and limping of his own weight, Welles-the-artist had the astounding courage to use himself as the ultimate image of a pus-swollen soul. He is a human boil about to burst. Welles' Sheriff Quinlan is so utterly ashamed of himself that he has fallen into the last trap of all: He has made a

monument of his shame; has made his shame a last outrageous act of pride -- he will be more shameful than anyone, he will make of his shame a weapon to destroy others. If he can soil others, then he is still grander than they.

Cut to Bill Clinton. Even under the pressure of a 24-hour-a-day adrenaline-rush presidency, he had trouble controlling his weight -- and the most expensive tailors on earth had a hard time concealing this. He's 54. By the time he's 60, he's going to be fat, very fat, oh so fat. He's going to drink. He's going to bloat. He won't be able to bear Hillary coming into her own. He'll need to be serviced by whatever Monica will diddle him. He's not going to be able to conceal the impacted swelling of his pus-filled self. He's going to use his monumental shame against us, which isn't hard to do, since we in turn are ashamed of him. He ain't Elvis (who was only fat in his last year), he can't sing. He's Sheriff Quinlan. He's a human boil, and he's going to pop -- unless a gracious Providence takes him out with something sudden like a heart attack. He's not an artist, so he won't be redeemed by the telling of his story, as Welles was. He's going to fester. His ego, left with no object but himself, is going to do what it did to everyone and everything he touched: It's going to eat him alive.

In *Touch of Evil*, Quinlan's old whore, Marlene Dietrich, speaks his epitaph: "He was some kind of a man. What does it matter what you say about people?"

Clinton won't get off so easy. Historians, our culture-vultures, will peck out his eyes.

May Chelsea hold his hand. Mercy. No, it doesn't matter what we say about people, but we say it anyway.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.