

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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SOMETHING'S WRONG, AND THE 'POLITICS OF MEANING' AIN'T IT Mark L. Melcher

With summer reading season upon us, I thought it was time to begin making an occasional book recommendation. I'm aware that I should be writing this week about the economic and legislative consequences of Bill Clinton's continuing blunders. But I weary of that topic. Besides, the media are doing an excellent job covering it. It would seem, in fact, that they haven't had so much fun since Amy Fisher shot Joey Buttafuoco's wife.

In any case, how can a conservative like me compete with the likes of the *Washington Post's* super liberal political guru David Broder, who last week described Clinton's meltdown (under the headline, "Another Carter?") as an "international disaster;" or with the ultra liberal *Time* magazine's cover story entitled "The Incredible Shrinking Presidency"?

If I were to write specifically about Clinton this week, I would warn those people who think he might be in for a rebound that this is unlikely; that his political problems will probably worsen over the next few months, and that there is a strong possibility that attacks about his personal life will accelerate. But I'm not going to do that.

Why? Because beach season is hard upon us, and books beckon. Last spring, I recommended three. The theme I pursued was the detrimental effect on society of the rising influence of "the masses." The books were Ortega y Gasset's classic study, *The Revolt of the Masses*; Aaron Wildavsky's, *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism*; and the eminent historian, Daniel Boorstin's *Hidden History*.

This year, I'd like to work around a theme that Hillary Rodham Clinton seems to be worrying over a lot lately; i.e., the notion that "something is wrong" with our society. According to the *New York Times*, Ms. Clinton has decided that the best way to approach this issue is to simply find "The Answer." She is, the *Times* says, seeking a "sort of unified-field theory of life."

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I wouldn't even attempt such a thing, especially in light of the fact that Ms. Clinton has warned that "it's not going to be easy." But I think it is worth exploring the nature of the problem that she perceives. Indeed, some people think this would be a logical first step in pursuit of "The Answer." But what do they know?

Now don't worry. I won't recommend books on "The Politics Of Meaning." Ms. Clinton's guru Michael Lerner can tout his own books. Being an Iowa boy, who grew up thinking Yale was a type of lock, I will take a much less existential approach.

I will offer instead a great social satire and a wonderful old novel. Neither of these books has "The Answer." But together, they provide an interesting and entertaining look at American society today and yesterday. And in doing this, I think they help explain, in part, what's bothering Hillary (although she'd never admit it), and why the rest of us, especially those of us over 50, often feel a bit like the greyhound Lancer in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *"Breakfast of Champions."*

Lancer lives with his owner in a one room apartment in a six story New York walkup. His entire life, Vonnegut says, is devoted to relieving himself each day in a roasting pan in front of the Westinghouse refrigerator. This dog, Vonnegut says, has a very small brain, but is still capable of suspecting from time to time that some kind of terrible mistake has been made.

My first recommendation is Florence King's *With Charity Toward None: A Fond Look At Misanthropy*. This marvelously funny book was published in March of 1992 by St. Martin's Press. I have mentioned it in past articles, but I never really explained why I liked it so much.

King, who is often compared to Dorothy Parker and has been described as a female Mencken, is wonderful. She is the antithesis of "political correctness." She is the antithesis of Hillary Rodham Clinton. She is despised by all the right people. And she doesn't mind being despised by them. She is a self described misanthrope. Misanthropes, she says "don't commit crimes because we know that prison life is communal," and adds that "if you ever meet someone who cannot understand why solitary confinement is considered punishment, you have met a misanthrope."

It is clear that King doesn't spend a lot of time seeking "the politics of meaning." She simply blames much of the mess society is in today on what she called the "feminization of America." This trend, she says, "has mired us in a soft, sickly, helpless tolerance of everything . . . We are a single-parent country with no father to cut through the molasses and point out, for example, the inconsistency of embracing warm and compassionate `values' while condemning cold and detached `value judgements.'"

American "niceness," she says, has made us "so afraid of the hostility within us that confrontations barely get started before somebody pops us and announces `the healing has begun.'"

This trend, she says, is further exemplified by the fact that the last segment of news shows "is likely to feature individuals who do strange things for muzzy reasons. A man stands on a street corner every morning and evening during rush hour to wave at passing motorists. A woman in a

state that renews driver licenses on the driver's date of birth stands outside the motor vehicles office singing 'Happy Birthday' to everyone who goes in. A man cuts the trees on a mountain slope into the shape of a heart that can be seen from miles away so that weary travelers can 'take heart': Christ of the Andes meets Burma-Shave."

"After years of consensus seeking, reaching out, coming together, building bridges, linking arms, and tying yellow ribbons . . . American men have been turned into their own secret police, under orders to kick down their own doors in the middle of the night and arrest themselves for 'insensitivity.'"

American men have even changed the way they talk, she says, not just their tones but the whole thrust of their conversations.

"Persuaded that normal masculine directness and unequivocalness might make people angry, today's men have adopted the age-old feminine stratagem of hurt feelings and the newer feminist technique of politicized nagging to get their points across. Our national discourse now is conducted in a baritone tsk-tsking tut-tuttery, as when a snippy Dan Rather demands of his man in Alaska: 'Did Hazelwood ever apologize for the Valdez oil spill?'"

Besides Rather, King doesn't like *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen, who she says is "foremost beau ideal of the New Man," the paper's resident "oh-dear." Cohen, she says, is the "undisputed champ" of soul-searching, "having searched his own so often that he has become Butterfly Dundee, the man every woman would least like to have with her if she met a mugger."

King doesn't have "The Answer" Hillary is seeking. Indeed, she wouldn't be caught dead looking for it. But she contends that an "examination of misanthropy" would do a world of good "for Americans who do not necessarily hate everybody, but are tired of compulsory gregariousness, fevered friendliness, we-never-close compassion, goo-goo humanitarianism, sensitivity that never sleeps, and politicians paralyzed by a hunger to be loved."

Regarding this latter category, King claims that America has become such "a captive of female priorities," that it "instinctively shrinks from the only kind of personality capable of solving the problems we constantly deplore. From the White House down, she says, "we vote only for candidates whose eyes plead 'Like me.'"

And this brings us to my second book recommendation, which is Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *All The King's Men*. The hero of this book is the populist southern politician Willy Stark, whose eyes never pleaded "like me," any more than did those of Warren's real life model for Stark, Louisiana's governor Huey Long.

For people who love the English language, Warren is an icon. The prose of America's first Poet Laureate is beautiful, mesmerizing. But there is another reason for reading this book this summer. It is to contrast the style of Stark, the quintessential southern populist, with the style of Bill Clinton.

For Stark has much in common with Clinton. He is a southerner, who stands up for the "little guy," who thinks "the rich" don't pay enough. He's a roll-up-the-shirtsleeves politician, who loves to campaign. He isn't hung up on "dignity." He by-God wants to "change things." He's exuberant, energetic. He's deeply cynical about politics and politicians. He lies. And he's a cigar smoking ladies man.

But Stark lights his cigars. Clinton just chews on his. And Stark doesn't care if his wife likes it or not. And he's a gut-tough street fighter. And as I said earlier, his eyes never begged "like me," as Clinton's do all the time. And Stark would never, as Clinton did last week, turn policy details over to the legislature, asking only that they stick to a few "principles" he had previously articulated.

Stark disliked the legislature, and those in it. But he knew how to make the system work. "You got to use what you've got," Stark said. "You've got to use . . . that scum down in the Legislature. You can't make bricks without straw, and most of the time all the straw you got is secondhand straw from the cowpen. And if you think you can make it any different, you're crazy . . ."

I don't want to become too carried away in this comparison. Stark is, after all, fiction. And Clinton is real life. But a look at the traits of a stereotypical southern populist, from the eyes of a great student of human nature and politics like Warren, provides an insight into the failings of Bill Clinton's populism. And this is an insight that can't be gained from comparisons to any real life politician alive today. Because, as Florence King says, most of them are just like Bill. They just don't make 'em like they used to. So listen to Willy on the stump.

"I will do those things. So help me God. I shall live in your will and your right. And if any man tries to stop me in the fulfilling of that right and that will I'll break him. I'll break him like that! He spread his arms far apart, shoulder-high, and crashed the right fist into the left palm. 'Like that! I'll smite him. Hip and thigh, shinbone and neckbone, kidney punch, rabbit punch, uppercut, and solar plexus. And I don't care what I hit him with. Or how!'"

"There he was," Warren says, "with the papers about his feet and one arm up, the coat sleeve jammed elbow high, face red as a bruised beet and the sweat sluicing, hair over his forehead, eyes bugged out and shining, drunk as a hoot owl, and behind him the bunting, red-white-and-blue, and over him God's bright, brassy, incandescent sky."

If Clinton had Stark's starch, things might be different. Oklahoma Senator Dave Boren would have at least known he had been in a fight after he took on Clinton's tax and budget proposal in the Senate Finance Committee. And Bob Dole would be on notice. And Lani Guinier would have, at worst, been able to tell her grandkids how she and the President of the United States had once fought a knock-down, drag-out brawl, side by side and never gave an inch till they went down in the sawdust together.

But folks say Clinton doesn't want to make anyone angry. He doesn't want to make it personal. Warren points out that Willy knew all about the fallacy of the "argumentum ad hominem." And

here's what he thought: "It may be a fallacy, but it is shore-God useful. If you use the right kind of argumentum you can always scare the hominem into a laundry bill he didn't expect."

Stark knew what Clinton doesn't, that any ground given in politics, without a fight, is ground lost forever; that control is everything, or the big office is nothing. Listen to Willy (who never painted his father's old farm house, even "after he got his front feet in the trough," because he didn't want the fellow down the road saying he was "putten on airs") talking to a bureaucrat who was caught stealing, and not sharing the spoils with him.

" . . . and you can just damn well remember you aren't suppose to get rich. A fellow like you, fifty years old and gut-shot and teeth gone and never had a dime, if God Almighty had ever intended you to be rich he'd done it long back. Look at yourself, damn it! For you to figure you're suppose to be rich it is plain blasphemy. Look at yourself. Ain't it a fact?"

Listen once more to Willy on health care and contemplate how Bill has abrogated most of the responsibility for his health care project to Ms. Clinton, and has hardly mentioned it since, even though he has described it often as his most important initiative.

"I'm going to build me the God-damnedest, biggest, chromium-platedest, formaldehyde-stinkingest free hospital and healthcenter the All-Father ever let live. Boy, I tell you, I'm going to have a cage of canaries in every room that can sing Italian grand opera and there ain't going to be a nurse hasn't won a beauty contest at Atlantic City and every bedpan will be eighteen-carat gold and by God, every bedpan will have a Swiss music-box attachment to play 'Turkey in the Straw' or 'The Sextet from Lucia,' take your choice.

"By God, I don't care how fine [other hospitals are], mine's gonna be finer, and I don't care how big they are, mine's gonna be bigger, and any poor bugger in this state can go there and get the best there is and not cost him a dime."

Anyway, there you have it. Neither book has Ms. Clinton's "Answer." You'll have to wait on her for that. In the meantime, these two books will, I hope, provide some great fun and some insight into the changing nature of American politics today; at least for us old dudes, who remember when things were different. Old dudes, like Florence and me.

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