

# Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN  
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

## The Tax Collector Who Turned

The Accounting Hall of Fame, located at Ohio State University, attracts considerably fewer tourists than the nearby Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton. (Though just wait until the accountants get their interactive depreciation games installed.) The shrine is worth the trip, though, to pay homage to its most radical inductee: T. Coleman Andrews.

Andrews, a Virginian who sang barber-shop quartet, was the first accountant to serve as the U.S. commissioner of internal revenue. Until one day, in the Washington version of a Damascene epiphany, the nation's head tax-collector denounced the very taxes he was collecting.

Born in 1899, Thomas Coleman Andrews became the youngest CPA in America at age 21. He served in a variety of private and public positions, including Comptroller of Richmond, where he "dramatically increased the collection rate on delinquent personal property taxes"—not exactly the mark of a "Taxation is Theft" libertarian.

After a stint as president of the American Institute of Accountants, Andrews was appointed Commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Internal Revenue by President Eisenhower in 1953. The new commissioner promptly renamed his fiefdom the Internal Revenue Service and went about cleaning up the corrupt mess left by the Truman administration. Andrews was "a blunt and hard-driving" fellow who had "trodden on many a toe" in previous jobs, noted an admiring *Time*. In his new job, Andrews gave greater power to IRS field offices and launched "Operation Snoop," under which revenue agents went door to door sniffing out tax evaders.

Andrews was widely lauded for his efficiency as IRS head, but at some point during his 33 months in Washington he

began to wonder if efficiency was really the alpha and omega of governance. And so on Halloween 1955 he quit. Four months later, after what he deemed a decent interval of silence, Andrews came out swinging. The income tax was a "devouring evil" that is "slowly but surely destroying the middle class," Andrews declared to a disbelieving press. Unless repealed, it would "penalize outstanding ability and success until the will to achieve has been destroyed throughout

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the nation and we've all been reduced to the aimless status of an indifferent conglomerate of bone, tissue, and blood."

Having walked away from power, T. Coleman Andrews was now a crusader. Whereas as IRS commissioner he had instructed the agency to send income-tax kits to every school in the country so that between gym and social studies teens could learn the basics of tribute-paying, he now suggested that "every person who gets a tax return receives a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* with it so he can see what's happening to him."

Why hadn't he spoken up earlier? "My job was to enforce the law, not philoso-

phize," he said. "I was happy as far as doing a challenging management job was concerned," but "I was constantly unhappy about what I saw the income tax doing to us."

Andrews liked to quote Elbert Hubbard's description of accountants: "sparse, wrinkled, intelligent, cold, passive, non-committal, with eyes like a codfish.... Happily they never reproduce and all of them finally go to Hell."

But once he saw the light, the renegade IRS commissioner was about as passionate and committal as they come. In a truly quixotic act that added up only in the ledger of the heart, he announced his candidacy for President on the Independent States' Rights ticket. The Republicans and Democrats "have converged onto their common highway to one-doctrine, one-party dictatorship, under which...the people are permitted only a choice of men, never a choice of political philosophies." Andrews won 167,000 votes in the 14 states in which he made the ballot. He ended his career in a business rather nobler than politics: insurance.

As IRS commissioner, T. Coleman Andrews liked to joke about the time he was getting a trim in an airport barber-shop. The tonsor, ignorant of the identity of his client, was bragging about how he never declared his tips on his income tax. When the haircut was done, Andrews rose and said, "For your information, I'm the collector of Internal Revenue." To which the quick-thinking barber replied, "Shake hands with the biggest liar you ever met."

The longer T. Coleman Andrews ran the IRS, the less funny the joke seemed to him.

—Bill Kauffman

## Narcissus Enters the Press Pool

**F**act: Everything interesting that has been written about Bill Clinton this decade, pro and con, has been about his personality. That is the nature of 1990s journalism.

The rush to therapeutic, personality-based reporting kicked into high gear eight years ago at the hearings on Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court. Feminist bleatings provided the script for a new sort of media drama, one emphasizing private psychic travails over public deeds.

The psycho-battle pitted Anita Hill ("the poised daughter of so many generations of black women who have been burned carrying torches into the battle for principle," gushed *Time* editor Nancy Gibbs) against Clarence Thomas (put "a little flour on his face, you'd think you had David Duke talking," sneered pundit Carl Rowan). The ratings-fest that followed convinced the media that in a world without the kind of hard news that the Cold War used to provide, talking endlessly about peoples' private lives could be their best new way to make a living.

This is not to say that private lives aren't sometimes worthy of investigation and understanding. But '90s-style press coverage has created two serious problems: 1) The press has often become infatuated with documenting trivial aspects of *personality* rather than focusing on fundamentals of character. (Do we really need to know so much about our President's taste in junk food?) 2) More seriously, arguments over facts are increasingly fought through personal appeals that call into question the motives of those using the facts. (Way back in the 1930s Hannah Arendt exposed this as a favorite left-wing trick.)

The best of the new breed of journalists have been rewarded handsomely for their dives into the quicksand of motivation and

personality. Maureen Dowd was given a *New York Times* column for brilliantly, and sometimes not so brilliantly, mocking public figures (calling Elizabeth Dole, for example, a "throwback to the days of unasailable girdles and unmussable hairdos"). Beneath its snarky wrapping, the substance of Dowd's column is mostly very conventional wisdom.

Similarly, *Vanity Fair's* Gail Sheehy has created a cottage industry around her gift

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for slumber-party psychobabble, on display most recently in her new Hillary book. As Judith Shulevitz of *Slate* observes, "Sheehy is a therapist to the stars, not a political reporter. She tells us how our leaders *feel*, not what they stand for...or even what we should think about the things they do."

And of course there's Sidney Blumenthal, whose political journalism landed him a White House job as Hillary Clinton's "plumber." In one infamous article for the *New Republic*, he equated the war record of President Bush—one of the youngest combat pilots in American history, shot down in action—with the war record of Bill Clinton—pot brownie addict at Oxford, constantly trying to give free mammograms to co-eds—by suggesting Bush's fear and uncertainty in a flaming plane over the Pacific were somehow equivalent to the angst of a guy writing term papers by the light of a lava lamp.

Some would object that journalists have always dissected the personalities of powerful people. True, but generally "personality" was searched for hints of the individual's professional judgment. Remember all those stories suggesting that Reagan's "cowboy" nature would be a bad match with control over nuclear weapons. But by the time Clinton's impeachment came around, the press had stopped connecting private actions to professional judgment. Clinton had become just another fascinating celebrity.

Perhaps this fixation with personality is a phase, a moment of the giggles after the tension of the Cold War. That may be the best way to understand Edmund Morris's recent biography of President Reagan, for instance. Morris began working on that book just as personality journalism was hatching, and his eventual text read much more like a *Vanity Fair* profile than a serious work of history. The book almost entirely ignores politics and policy—allotting a mere page and a half to the election of 1980, for example.

The future of this trend is unclear. On the one hand, magazines that have placed personality above politics—like Tina Brown's *Talk* and especially JFK, Jr.'s *George*—are foundering. On the other hand, Edmund Morris may simply have been ahead of his time when he inserted himself and his emotions, as a fictional supporting actor, in his supposedly non-fiction biography. The *New Republic's* Stephen Glass wanted to be part of the story so much he actually fabricated events, with himself at the center.

Such narcissism is the logical outgrowth of personality reporting and I/me journalism.

—Jonah Goldberg