

Pure Nofziger

AN INTERVIEW WITH LYN NOFZIGER

*The judge is ruling against us today
It's morning, he's not quite awake
It takes him a while to remember
The rest of my life is at stake*

REPORTER, PRESS secretary for Ronald Reagan's first run for office, official in the Nixon White House and the Reagan presidency — and poet: Lyn Nofziger has observed American politics from every angle. He penned the lines above, and many more, "to stay awake," he says, during his 1988 trial. (Nofziger was an early victim of Congressional efforts to criminalize opposition to Democrat policies. As has now become commonplace, this politically-inspired prosecution came to nothing when Nofziger's conviction was thrown out on appeal, but only after robbing him of untold dollars in attorney's fees and three years of his life.) Here he discusses, from his consummate insider's perspective: Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, Pete Wilson, the GOP — past and present, conservative and moderate — and his recently-published memoir, *Nofziger*.*

California Political Review: Early in your book, you write that "the eight years I spent as a reporter in Washington were the best years of my working life." Do you ever regret having moved from reporting into politics?

Nofziger: No, not really. I look back once in a while and say gee, that was a good job and it was fun and all that, but, by getting into politics and working for Reagan, I've had a chance to have an impact on things and be a part of making things happen instead of just watching them.

CPR: Towards the end of the book you say: "I had 20 years of fun, excitement, and, on occasion, even had a chance to have an impact on what was happening. It would be hard

to ask for anything more." What would you say your impact has been?

Nofziger: That's pretty difficult. Just having helped elect Reagan president, obviously there is an impact. Having been a part of an inner circle of sorts meant that I was involved in getting some things done and ensuring that some things were not done. I don't want to sit here and say I am responsible for any one particular thing, but I think there are a number of things I had a hand in.

CPR: You noticed something in Ronald Reagan that was missed by many people in both parties considered highly astute in politics, men who tended to write Reagan off as dumb, a light-weight, and certainly not someone who would become one of America's most popular presidents. What did you see and why did they miss it?

Nofziger: I don't know what I saw there. It was not a question of seeing so much as a question of sensing — just the feeling that Reagan communicated with his audience, with the people he was trying to convince to vote for him. Some speakers drive people away; others bring them in. Reagan was the kind of a candidate and the kind of a speaker whom people immediately liked for the most part, felt friendly toward, and thought of him: gee, here's a guy I can vote for. And I don't know what it is; if I did I'd be rich because I'd go peddle it.

CPR: Wasn't part of it what he was saying and what he was proposing to do?

Nofziger: Oh, yeah, but a lot of people have said those things and have not gotten very far. Sure, a lot it was what he said but a lot more of it was the way he said it. When Ronald Reagan spoke, he was believable; he was sincere. There was nothing ever phony about him or anything that made people back off or say, hey, this is just another politician.

CPR: Why did his opponents so regularly underestimate

**Nofziger*, by Lyn Nofziger, Regnery Gateway, 1992, 370 pages, \$21.95, cloth.

him? Why, no matter how many times he won, did the other side always expect him to lose?

Nofziger: I think a lot of it had to do with the media saying, or implying, that he wasn't very bright, saying or implying that he was lazy, saying or implying that he was just a kind of a dumb actor who was repeating lines, none of which was true but, if a thing is said often enough, people tend to believe it, especially if they want to believe it. Politicians who didn't know him very well — Pat Brown didn't know him very well, Jimmy Carter sure didn't, Gerry Ford didn't — liked to believe this and they just all underestimated him.

CPR: Your book recounts an interesting story about how Henry Salvatori, one of Reagan's most important supporters before the 1966 primaries, almost dropped him during that campaign. What was your role in keeping that from happening?

Nofziger: Reagan attended a meeting of black Republicans along with the other candidates, George Christopher and William Penn Patrick and both Christopher and Patrick, were implying pretty generally that Reagan was a racist. He became angry and stomped out of the meeting. There was a bad story in the *Los Angeles Times* the next day that said Reagan had blown his cool, which basically was true. Henry Salvatori, who'd been one of the early people, along with Holmes Tuttle, to urge him to run, all of a sudden decided that Reagan was, well, not stable and not a good candidate. He told Bob Mardian, who, at the time, was the state campaign chairman, that he wanted to dump Reagan and run Goodwin Knight, who had been governor in the 1950s. Knight had run for the U.S. Senate, and lost, in 1958.

Mardian called me — I was in the Sacramento area with the campaign — and said get down here; we've got to talk Salvatori out of this. When the three of us met at Salvatori's home, I argued that Reagan was doing very well out on the hustings, that he *was* a good candidate and that Knight was not a good candidate. We spent most of the afternoon, but we finally convinced him.

CPR: So, could it be said that you averted an abrupt end to Reagan's political career at its very beginning?

Nofziger: Well, for one thing, Henry was kind of volatile himself. I don't know if he ever would have followed through on this and, two, I don't know if it would have made any difference anyway. Knight was not exactly the most prominent Republican in the state and he'd lost the Senate race.

One reason the so-called 'moderate' Republicans never won an election is because they always wanted to keep other people out of the Party. The Party was their own little playground and they didn't want to let people in unless they agreed with them 100 percent.

CPR: In the book you mention that, early in his career, Reagan referred to himself as a "citizen politician" but that, later on, he stopped doing that. What do you think makes that change significant?

Nofziger: Well, when Reagan first got into politics, he didn't see himself as a politician; he saw himself as an American citizen who was doing his duty to his country

because it had been good to him. So he called himself a "citizen politician": he was not going to make a career out of politics. Of course, he limited himself to two terms as governor and was out of office for six years before he was elected president. But, by this time, you know, he was, in fact, a politician. That's what he had done; that's what he was involved in. I don't think he ever forgot his general philosophy of government, but I do think that, in some ways, he forgot what his initial reason had been for getting into politics.

CPR: Was Reagan's ceasing to see himself as this "citizen politician" in any way similar to Bush's breaking his "read my lips" pledge; in the sense that, in both cases, you seemed to have a man who began as one of "us" — the ordinary citizen out here in the country, with Reagan explicitly calling himself one and, later, Bush making promises that said, in effect, I am one of you; your battle is my battle against those in Washington who always want to take more from you. I won't betray you. But then this man, again in both cases, seems to turn into one of "them" over time. For instance, Reagan raised taxes in 1982 — with the so-called TEFRA bill — long before Bush did so.

Nofziger: Well, first of all, Reagan never made a "no new taxes" pledge, although he clearly opposed them, the more strongly the further along he went in his political career. But I don't think he consciously walked away from the citizen politician idea. It just happened

as he went along. Really, I think, by the time he ran for president in 1976, he was not thinking in those terms. As for TEFRA, you want to remember that Reagan eventually decided that he'd been snookered on that. He said himself that it was a bad bill, that we should never have agreed to it. And of course, the fact is, Congress lied to him, or the Congressional leadership did. If he had gotten his three dollars in cuts for every couple of dollars or every dollar, whatever it was, in new taxes, that could have made a significant difference in the budget and in the deficit. That's what he was looking at but, clearly, it didn't work out that way.

CPR: Wasn't it also a brilliant political stroke by the Democrats — it seemed to take the wind out of Reagan's sails politically, the same thing that happened to Bush later and, in California, to Wilson — did it not undercut the political appeal of all three men?

Nofziger: Oh, sure it did. That's especially true with Bush because Bush had been so adamant about it. He had not left himself any wiggle room at all. He was unable to justify it beyond saying, well, the Democrats made me do it, which is hardly justification.

CPR: Especially when Reagan had been fooled by the same trick?

Nofziger: That's right, exactly. You'd have thought he'd have learned, wouldn't you?

CPR: You initially opposed TEFRA, you say in your book, but then worked for its passage out of a sense of loyalty to the president after Reagan asked for your help. Wouldn't it perhaps have been more loyal to tell him he was making a mistake, to try to save him from it?

Nofziger: We'd already told him he was making a mistake. I don't know; I suppose it depends on how you look at things. It's very difficult to turn the president of the United States down when he asks you to do something, especially when he's a man you admire and a man you work for. So, sure, you can second guess all you want. I didn't do that. I knew what I was doing and I wasn't very happy about it but I did it. That's all there is to it.

CPR: The section of your book that describes your time working in the Nixon White House tells of Nixon's many efforts to build political support out in the country for his policies. Was this sort of basic political effort as completely missing from the Bush White House as it seemed to be?

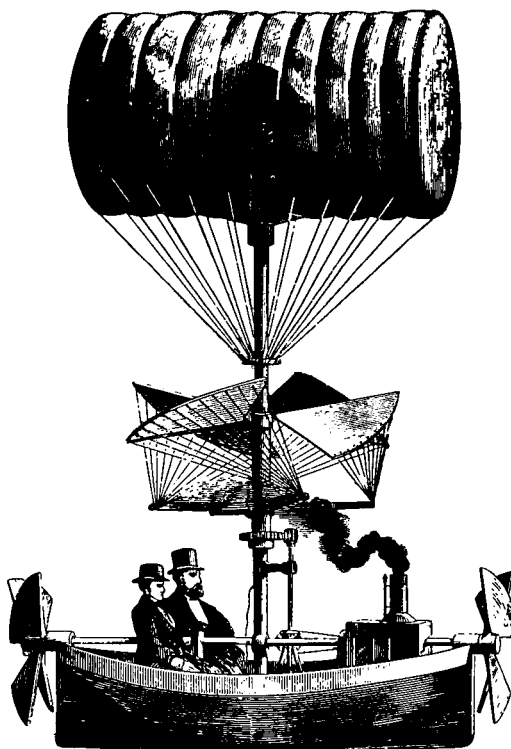
Nofziger: Well, he not only had no sense that he had to build support, he went out and drove support away. They set out, right after he was elected, to get rid of the Reagan people. They would not hire Reagan people for the most part. They did nothing at all to keep together the Reagan coalition: the blue collar workers, the ethnic Catholics, the fundamentalists, up until the very end when it was too late.

CPR: Regarding coalition building, when you worked in Gerald Ford's re-election campaign, one of your projects was a publication called Heartland "which," your book says, "attacked Carter from the standpoint of the religious right." It was, you say "an effective publication." Wasn't the revival of conservative Christians as a Republican political force seen in those days as a great positive, part of the reason Reagan won in 1980? What became of this effort?

Nofziger: Well, I suppose that when your leader goes people drift apart. Reagan was the leader, and no one came up, certainly not George Bush, to seize the leadership of that coalition.

CPR: Pete Wilson, so far from picking up that leadership, seems rather to be determined to drive religious conservatives away. How do you explain that?

Nofziger: What you have here, of course, is a resurgence among the so-called "moderate" Republicans. One reason they never won an election is because they always wanted to keep other people out of the Party. The Party was their own little playground and they didn't want to let people in unless they agreed with them 100 percent. So now you've got these moderate Republicans saying, oooh, the religious right is dangerous; they're trying to take over our Party. And, you know, I laugh at them. I say, hey, they can't take over a party if the party won't be taken over. That's number one. And number two, what we want to



do is get them inside the Party so they're helping us. What this basically is is the pro-choice movement out after the prolife people. That's what it boils down to.

CPR: But aren't they the ones who talk of the "big tent"?

Nofziger: Oh yeah, that's right — there's a lot of room in the tent, but not many people.

CPR: If you were to counsel Gov. Wilson on how to improve his re-election prospects, what would you tell him?

Nofziger: I'd tell him to go sit down with all of those right wing nuts that he's contemptuous of and see if he can't reach some kind of an agreement with them so that they will go out and work. But the problem is, even if he did that, Pete doesn't agree with them. It would be very hard to give Pete Wilson some advice that he could take and still maintain his own credibility because to have him bring back the conservatives in the Party would mean he would have to walk away from a lot of the things he's said and done.

CPR: It wouldn't be the first time a politician . . .

Nofziger: That's very true but the last time George Bush tried it, it cost him an election. So, you've got to be careful how you do these things.

CPR: You suggested earlier that that was because Bush waited too long. Wilson still has a fair amount of time.

Nofziger: He has almost two years, sure, but he has to start catering to them a little bit. Certainly when you're out fighting them all the time you make it very difficult for them to come back. And Pete's the guy who's taken the lead in the fight.

CPR: They deny that.

Nofziger: I can't help that. When you call your delegates and ask them not to go to the convention, I think that's a pretty explicit sign of disagreement.

CPR: On the other side, if you could counsel conservatives, some of whom are in an anybody-but-Wilson mood — rather like the mood about Bush in many Republican circles last year — what would you tell them?

Nofziger: Oh, I don't know. So many things can happen and you don't know where Pete's going to be. I would tell them right now hold your fire for the next six or seven months and see what the situation is then. I would certainly not go out and start an attack on Wilson right now because I think it would be counterproductive. The proper time to do that is, if you want to

run in a primary, fine, go ahead, but try to do it in such a way that you don't tear your Party apart.

CPR: A friend of yours from the Reagan White House, John Herrington, is now a candidate for California Republican Party vice-chairman, a job that usually leads to the Party chairmanship after two years. Please tell a little about him.

Nofziger: John is a good, solid Reagan Republican. He was an advance man for Reagan for years and years and years, worked in the Reagan administration, is a solid, sound conservative and a first-rate guy.

CPR: Is Wilson's support for him a sign, then, that the governor is perhaps looking for ways to end the warfare in the Party?

Nofziger: Well, maybe. But, on the other hand, maybe he thinks that Herrington is a reasonable person, and Herrington is a reasonable person, but if Pete thinks that John's a moderate Republican in his image, he's seriously mistaken.

CPR: I'd like to end by asking for some predictions about four things: Clinton, the GOP, the Reagan legacy, and, finally, Lyn Nofziger. What's the future hold for Clinton?

Nofziger: Too early to tell; you can't tell what kind of a president a man will be until he gets in there. My own feeling is that he'll probably knuckle under to the pressures from his Party and move leftward and if he moves too far left, he'll be a one-term president. But he's a very shrewd politician and you'll have to take that into consideration when you're looking at him.

CPR: Will he rise or fall with the economy?

Nofziger: No, not unless we have a recession again at the end of his term. But this economy clearly is getting better and will probably continue to get better regardless of what he does for the next couple of years. The only thing is, if it is getting better and he raises taxes he'll hurt it and that could be harmful to him. But I think he's smart enough to know that so we're just going to have to wait and see.

CPR: How about the GOP?

Nofziger: Well, it'll come back. Parties always do come back. You'll see some turmoil; you'll see some people trying to form little groups within the Party and all that kind of stuff and out of all this turmoil some people will

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Arts and Culture

Criticus

Doo Dah

G.B. Tennyson

THE APPEARANCE in Southern California over the Thanksgiving holiday of Messiah Elect Bill Clinton was hard to distinguish from the contemporaneous antics underway at the 17th Occasional Doo Dah Parade, that madcap mockery of traditional parades that occurs in Pasadena only just down the road and only just round the corner from several of the venues of the Clinton triumphal weekend.

The Redeemer jammed up the Glendale Galleria shopping mall by engaging in what the British call a "walkabout" and what Clinton aides call a "meet and greet" session but which most resembled what used to be known as a Royal Progress, when the monarch visited the provinces, or even the events of the first Palm Sunday.

William Jefferson Blythe Clinton also darted up the coast to Santa Barbara where he kept "spontaneously" mingling with the proles, ranging from an AIDS protester to a group playing beach volleyball. Among the latter he was heard to respond to the questions of passers-by as to which one was Clinton by calling out, "I'm the one with the white legs." Luckily, it wasn't an inner city basketball game or he'd have found himself in the deposed George Bush's deep doo doo. He was transported back one night to Pasadena itself to participate in a "surprise" birthday party at a lavish hotel for one of his benefactors, the

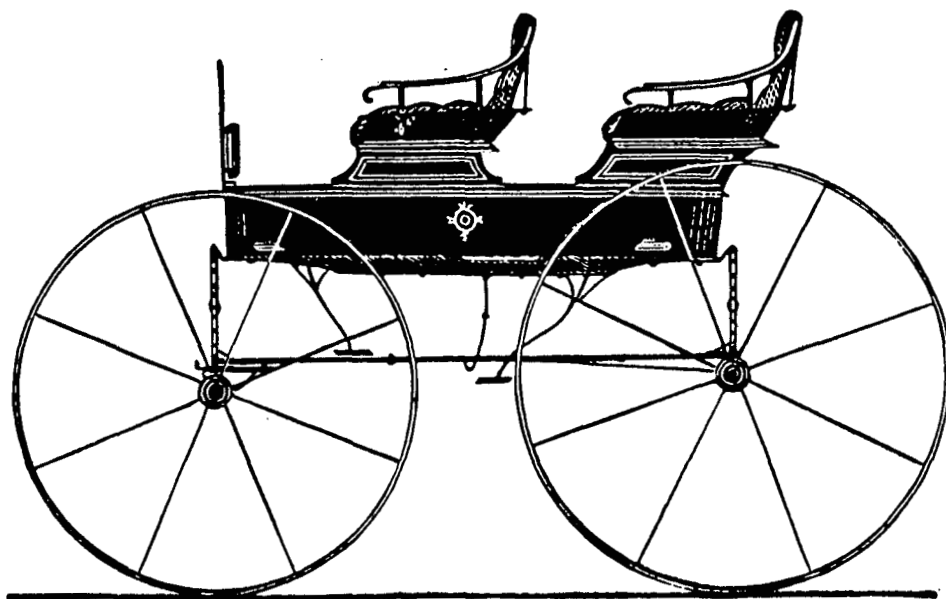
same one who has provided the Clintons with the multi-million dollar beachfront hideaway south of Santa Barbara. Near this spot the proprietor of a local restaurant bought a much publicized saxophone to lure the Clintons in, and they duly appeared there for yet another photo op, though Clinton blessedly forbore to play the instrument.

Amidst these shenanigans, the intentional lunacy of the Doo Dah Parade seemed fairly tame. In fact, it was the Doo Dah that appeared to be engaged in politics while Clinton was engaged in street theatre. To be sure, the Doo Dah has always made fun of public events, including political ones. Last year, for example, they restaged the Zsa Zsa Gabor face slapping of a Beverly Hills policeman; this year the best send-up demonstration was a "float" of the Los Angeles riots, with a policeman eating a doughnut as he lazed alongside a shop called something like "Kim's Liquor Store" while manic characters raced unimpededly in, out, and about with loaded grocery carts full of loot.

A close second in the topical vein was a celebrity look-alike float featuring a very plausible John Paul II ripping apart a photo of Sinéad O'Connor (loud cheers!) and a moderately convincing Bill Clinton carrying a large toy saxophone, which he explained he didn't actually play or inhale as this was an instrument for "Safe Sax."

So much for the fun. But this year also the Doo Dah Parade had a disturbing number of purely political statements: female persons dressed in judicial robes calling themselves the "New Supremes" as a symbol of their demand that there be more women on the Supreme Court; additional militant she-beings parading with the circular coat-hangers-prohibited sign to proclaim their unyielding dedication to abortion on demand.

THE PROBLEM with these and similar demonstrations was not that they expressed a political point of view — so, after all, did the riot float and it was a view hardly flattering to the police, yet nevertheless amusing — but that they were not at all funny and not even trying to



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