

Letter From New York

by Murray N. Rothbard

When Democracy Comes to Town



It was one of those political pundit panels on C-SPAN. Mona Charen, neo-conservative columnist, was asked to sum up her experiences in the Kempfor-President campaign in 1988. Miss Charen grew unwontedly misty-eyed: "The [democratic] process," she sighed wistfully. "The process was so wonderful."

It is doubtful if any of the presidential candidates or their handlers would ever become misty-eyed over "the process" in New York. New York, ever rude, feisty, and anarchic, is always a meat grinder for presidential candidates, and often their graveyard. Four years ago, Senator Al Gore, young handsome Tennessean admired by the left neoconservatives, was chopped up and destroyed in New York, despite the blessing of Mayor Ed Koch.

This year, the two fiery weeks of New York campaigning seemed like a perfect place to bury the hopes of Bill Clinton. The signs were auspicious. In the first place, in a year when everyone hates Washington politicians, New Yorkers are especially equipped for the task. The New Yorker, ever scornful of authority, habitually hates all politicians as crooks and hypocrites. New Yorkers get their energy from hate vibes, which are almost tangible in the city. The New Yorker imbibes hatred of his fellowman with his mother's milk. Everyone remarked on how thoughtful and well-read New Hampshireites were in this year's primary. New Yorkers, always interested in presidential politics, are equally well-read. The difference is that they have no respect, and are not slow in expressing their disrespect for (or "dissing") the candidate.

The second reason for having anticipated the destruction of Clinton is that New Yorkers are particularly contemptuous of Southerners (hence the mugging of Al Gore). There are many

sources of this contempt. First, the New Yorker regards everyone west of the Hudson as a rube and a hayseed. He often refers to crossing the Hudson as "hitting the dunes." Southerners, in particular, are scorned for their drawl and their legendary courtesy. The New Yorker is convinced in his bones that slow talk reflects a slow mind; and since he himself is rarely polite, he can only regard a courteous Southerner as a con man, a forterior any Southern politician. The contrasting speech patterns of the two regions reflect the attitudes toward courtesy. The New Yorker's speech is terse, direct, candid, in-your-face; he can only regard the Southerner's loquacity as oafish, repetitive, an unintelligent bombast. Fred Allen's "Senator Claghorn" immortalized the New Yorker's view of the Southern politico: "Ah say, suh, ah say. . ."

Unfortunately, the performance of the two Southern senators at the Clarence Thomas hearings was scarcely calculated to dispel the New Yorker's stereotype. Senator Heflin's seeming inability to complete a single question in his allotted half hour, coupled with Senator Thurmond's incomprehensible gibberish, paved the way for the New Yorker's reception of Governor Clinton. "Dumb, verbose con man" would about sum up the instinctive New York response; I don't know who coined the immortal phrase "Slick Willie" for Clinton, but it should have been a New Yorker.

The third reason for having expected a Clinton Waterloo in New York is the state of its media, especially its press. There was a lot of confusion about the media reaction to Clinton, whether or not it was favorable. The only way to grasp the situation is to separate the media into the Respectables and the Non-Respectables. The Respectable Media have anointed Clinton with respect and adoration from the very beginning of the campaign. Hence the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *New York* magazine, and network pundits were not only extremely pro-Clinton; they formed a virtual *cordon sanitaire* to try to defend him from the continuing character charges. Not so the Non-Respectable Media, which uncovered and spread the charges. Unlike the Respectables, the

Non-Respectables are not committed to left-center ideology; instead, they are much more interested in high ratings or selling papers. Uncovering the shocking truth comes long before ideology in their book. In New York, the Non-Respectables are legion, including the inevitable radio talk shows, and local television.

It is particularly important to understand the unique role of the New York press. Most cities in America are now one-newspaper towns, their "Front Page" glory days of battling competitors for a scoop long behind them. Hence, most newspapers have become fat and respectable, content to accept handouts and mouth the common ideological party line. Not so in New York, a town of three fiercely competitive tabloids, each perpetually on the verge of bankruptcy. So, the frenzied pace of New York media, added to the habitual New York lack of deference, leads to brutal assaults on visiting presidential hopefuls, coupled with old-fashioned enthusiasm for digging up the dirt on politicians.

And so I had hope that New York would do in Clinton. For a while it looked as if this would come true. Even though the *New York Post's* neoconservative editorial page editor, Eric Breindel, endorsed Clinton, its news pages and columnists, headed by street-smart liberal and friend of the Cuomo family, Mike McAlary, savaged Clinton daily. The first week of the Clinton campaign was New York rudeness and irreverence at its most bracing. One of Clinton's favorite gigs and photo opportunities in his campaign has been visiting high schools, where the kids have been deferential, asking him puffball questions and docilely accepting Slick Willie's usual evasive answers. Not so New York, baby. Clinton and his television retinue addressed a group of eager kids at Bay-side High School in Queens. The tone was set at the very beginning. The student president introduced Clinton as follows: "Mr. Clinton is trying to become President, but I'm already president." It was downhill from there. Asked about gun control, Clinton gave the usual liberal answers, and was stunned to find the mainly black and Puerto Rican student body scornful: "Jeez, everyone knows that any criminal can buy a gun anytime he wants!" The

students also perceptively accused Clinton of not caring about their answers and only using the occasion as a photo opportunity. "There are more cameras than kids in here!" Clinton soon dropped the high school gambit in New York.

Then, at a Clinton rally, the Governor retreated in confusion when Lenora Fulani, the black Marxist candidate of the New Alliance Party, interrupted him and started a speech of her own. Not knowing what to do, Clinton beat it out of there.

From the very beginning Clinton was met with bitter scorn, his Southern region mocked. He was first greeted by a typically New York placard, "Bubba Stinks!" Taken aback, Clinton and his advisers were bitter about being called "Bubba"—not exactly appropriate for a Rhodes Scholar, they felt. By the second week, however, Clinton, with his usual Eveready rabbit persistence, was ready to claim that "Bubba" was really a welcome mark of respect from his New York fans.

One time at noon, Clinton paid a brief visit to a Manhattan drugstore. On emerging, he encountered a guy walking his dog. Immediately, this typical New Yorker called out: "Hey, Governor, are you going to grant amnesty to *all* drug pushers, or just to your buddies?" Slick Willie bristled at the knowledgeable, if impudent, remark.

Governor Clinton has built much of his campaign on obtaining black and Jewish support. Advised correctly that New York is a seething ferment of special-interest groups, Clinton was prepared to be a "pander-bear" (in Paul Tsongas's memorable phrase) to the maximum. Addressing a group of Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn, however, Slick Willie almost went too far. He pledged that when he gets to be President, the White House would keep a "glatt kosher" kitchen, that is, a rigidly kosher kitchen under the continuing supervision of an Orthodox rabbi. The assembled Orthodox laughed, seeing the absurdity. Apparently, Clinton did not realize that Orthodox Jews have no interest whatever in gentiles keeping kosher, and in fact regard the whole idea as ludicrous—sort of like Jews or Muslims pledging to Christians that they would take communion. One rabbi at the gathering laughingly commented that Clinton must be trying to sell a lot of Arkansas chickens.

Of course, the most damaging admission of the entire Clinton campaign was elicited by a feisty female local TV reporter. Asked about ever smoking a marijuana cigarette, Clinton had always solemnly replied, "Ah have never broken the laws of the United States." Grasping Slick Willie's pettifogging mind-set, she asked Clinton: "Have you ever violated the laws of any other nation?" At which point Clinton, sworn to tell the truth according to his fashion, conceded that he had smoked a few in England, and then added the killer: "But ah never inhaled; ah never enjoyed it." The never-inhaled line will haunt him from now on; already it has drawn guffaws from routines by Billy Crystal at the Academy Awards and by Jay Leno. Jokes such as "I once gargled some booze, but I never swallowed it," followed inevitably.

For a while, indeed, it looked as if Governor Brown would trounce Clinton in New York. Barreling into the city after a smashing triumph in Connecticut, Brown at first did very well, tapping into the New York anger and hatred of politicians. Brown needed to overcome the New Yorker's conviction that all Californians are flakes, and that Governor Moonbeam was a particularly wacky specimen of the breed. Brown began with his youth support, as well as endorsements by the leaders of left unionism, in particular the much lionized Dennis Rivera, of the longtime leftist Drug and Hospital Workers Union.

Unfortunately, Brown was badly advised, and he came a-cropper in New York with his rash pledge to select Jesse Jackson as his vice-presidential candidate. Jackson didn't say yes, but he sure didn't say no, and he happily stumped the city with Brown. By this pledge, Brown irretrievably lost the crucial Jewish vote, for almost every Jew, left or right, is deeply convinced that Jackson is an anti-Semite. The reaction was symbolized, and replayed over and over, on TV: Brown, addressing the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, was interrupted and angrily challenged by fiery Brooklyn State Assemblyman Dov Hikind, an Orthodox Jew replete with *yarmulke*, who denounced Brown for selecting the "anti-Semite" Jackson. Hikind, though a Republican, had already endorsed Clinton. Even though the Jewish leadership hustled Hikind out of there, most of the audience shouted agreement with the dissident. Brown's

liberal pieties about "bringing black and white together" and about "healing" were not going to work with *this* crowd.

Presumably the French moviemaker Jacques Barzaghi and Brown's other advisers know nothing about New York; perhaps they thought that the loss of Jewish voters would be made up in black support. The fools! When Pat Buchanan moved on from New Hampshire to Georgia, a Georgia political scientist was asked whether Pat would do well with the crossover "Bubba" vote in Georgia. "Bubba don't vote in primaries," the political scientist astutely replied. In the same way, blacks and Puerto Ricans don't vote in New York primaries. It's true that the blacks had trooped out in unaccustomed numbers to vote for Jesse in 1988; but they're not going to turn out like that for any white guy, pro-Jesse or not. Indeed, the total black vote in New York fell by no less than 60 percent from 1988. On the other hand, Jews always vote in primaries, so that they, though only 11 percent of New York's population, can constitute 30 percent or more of the total Democratic primary vote.

And so the Brown disaster in New York, winning only 9 percent of the Jewish vote. Clinton did not get a landslide of Jews, however; about 35 percent of them voted for Tsongas, despite his leaving the race earlier. Partly, Jews were reacting to the general upper-middle-class attraction to Tsongas; partly they were taking Ed Koch's advice of voting for Tsongas as a convenient protest vehicle against both front-runners, and hoping for a brokered convention (and perhaps a final "Mario Scenario") in August.

Heartland Americans might have been confused by the primary results, in which Clinton came in first with about 41 percent of the vote, and confused by the ethnic breakdown in the polls: Jews with a majority for Clinton, blacks with a plurality for Brown, and white Catholics about equally split between the three candidates. But where were the WASPs? Was their absence a typographical error? No, for the bewildering but undeniable fact is that there are no WASPs voting in New York's Democratic primary, or at least not enough to become statistically significant. WASPs in New York all vote Republican, while Irish and Italian Catholics are split between the two parties.

As a result, the complexities of New

York politics can only be understood by grasping its powerful ethno-religious dimension. When centrist Irish Catholic Pat Moynihan first ran for U.S. Senate, he only defeated the popular and pugnacious left-wing Jewish Congresswoman Bella Abzug by a tiny margin in the Democratic primary. Bella, however, would have been smashed by the far more conservative WASP, Irish, and Italian voters in the general election. But once having squeaked through the primary, the election became an inevitable romp for Moynihan. And, since then, the advantage of incumbency has meant that Moynihan has become invincible, facing no primary opposition and virtually no opposition from the Republicans in general elections.

This year's senatorial race is harder to figure. Senator Al D'Amato has the requisite abrasive style, but various ethical peccadilloes have made him vulnerable. Originally, four candidates were battling it out for the Democratic spot. One, unknown in the city but commanding centrist support "upstate" (anywhere outside of New York City), was Long Island Representative Bob Mrazek. It turned out, however, that Mrazek was one of the worst check-bouncing offenders in the House (he was immediately dubbed "The Bouncing Czech" in the tabloids), and he was obliged to drop out of the race and even out of any race for his old House seat. This left three ideologically indistinguishable left-liberals: Attorney General Bob Abrams, City Controller Liz Holtzman, and the legendary Geraldine Ferraro, trying for a comeback. The powerful feminist vote, torn at first between the two ladies, at last reacted against the tough, glowering (dare I say "mannish"?) style of ex-Congresswoman Holtzman, and in favor of the warm, feminine style of Ferraro, a choice the feminists rationalized as honoring the pioneer female vice-presidential candidate. At this writing, it looks like either Abrams or Ferraro in the primary, with the November election too close to call.

So, because of Brown's gaffe, New York did not succeed in putting away Slick Willie, but it did manage to crush Brown, and perhaps to wound Clinton permanently for November. The total Democratic primary vote was down by a full 38 percent from four years ago, a clear indication that Clinton's nomination may not be worth much more than Mondale's or Dukakis's come Novem-

ber. All in all, a pretty fair piece of work for two weeks in the Big Apple.

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Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

The Texas Wild Card



One evening last winter my buddy Eugene and I were shooting the breeze while we sort of half-watched the new, citified *Hee Haw* (it's not the sort of show you want to watch alone, and my wife, a nose-breather, won't watch it with me). Eugene had just finished telling the one about the difference between Fidel Castro and a jockstrap (you really don't want to know) when he volunteered that if he lived in Michigan or someplace he might vote for David Duke. I asked him what Michigan had to do with it. (I don't always follow his thought processes.)

"I wouldn't want to make North Carolina look bad."

That made sense, in a way. But Eugene is a patriot who hasn't forgotten World War II, so I asked him why he'd even consider voting for the boy Nazi—even if he lived in a state he wouldn't mind embarrassing.

"Well, I probably wouldn't do it. But who do you have to vote for to put a stop to this stuff?"

Of course, I knew what "stuff" he meant. The President we voted for raised our taxes, after saying he wouldn't. He signed something that can be distinguished from a quota bill only by the eye of Faith. His Justice Department has been trying to reinstate *Plessy v. Ferguson* in Alabama higher education, and it's using what Eugene calls the "Vote Right Act" (as in, vote right or we'll change the rules) to create Bantustan congressional districts in North Carolina. Our sickly industries face more regulation now than Jimmy Carter ever dreamed of, and now we're looking at a

me-too health-care proposal that threatens to combine National Health efficiency and fee-for-service prices. Even in foreign affairs, where the President is supposed to know what he's doing, he sucked up to the dictator of Communist Russia a lot longer than he had to, and he arranged the demise of a few hundred thousand Iraqis, none of them named Saddam Hussein. Now he's put a smarmy junk bond king on his campaign finance committee, which confirms everyone's worst suspicions about Republicans.

That's just for starters, and without even going into what he *hasn't* done. So, yeah, I knew what Eugene meant. You could say that George Bush has been a disappointment. "But give him credit," I said. "It looks like we're finally going to get an Elvis postage stamp." Eugene nodded. "There is that." "Besides," I asked, "who else are you going to vote for? Bill Clinton? The guy whose wife dissed Tammy Wynette?" "Naw," said Eugene, "he ain't nothing but Jim Hunt with a sex drive." (I guess you have to know our former governor, but maybe you can work backwards.)

We were sitting there feeling pretty blue about all this, when some old weepy country song came on the TV to remind us that there are worse things in life than politics gone bad.

How small of all that human
hearts endure
That part that kings or laws can
cause or cure.

Sam Johnson's words, but a pure country music sentiment.

Still, I wasn't surprised when I ran into Eugene a few months later and found him sporting a Ross Perot button. "What do you know about Perot," I asked him. "Not a damn thing," he said. "That's the beauty part of it."

Well, that appeal won't last. By the time you read this we should all know a lot more about Mr. Perot. He could have decided not to run after all, or he could be becalmed in the single digits where most independent candidates wind up; as I write, though, the polls show this political cipher, basically a "none of the above" candidate, giving Clinton a run for second place nationally, and leading both Clinton and Bush in Texas. This could be even more entertaining than *Hee Haw*.

One thing that's already fun is watch-