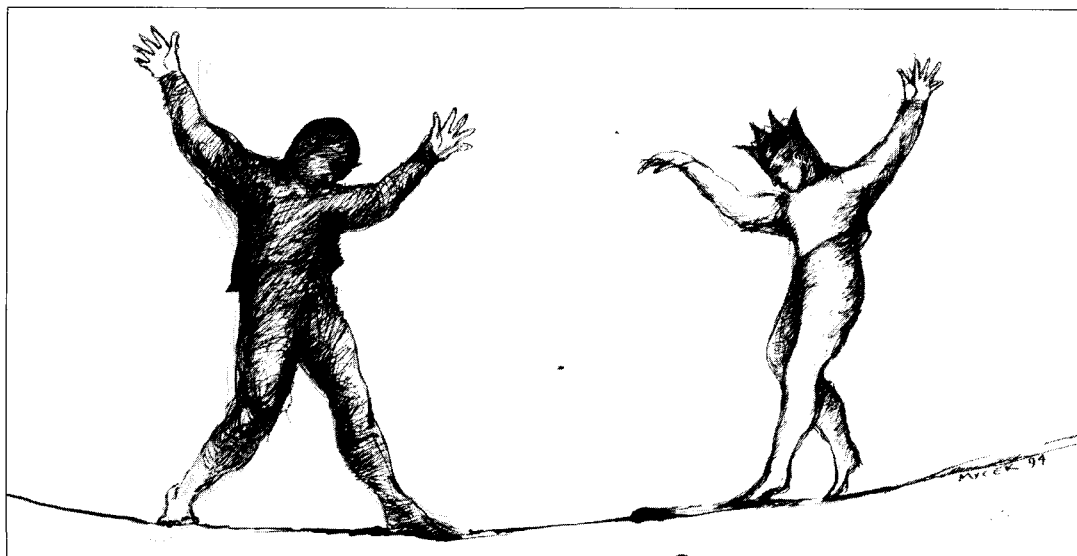


The First Arkansas Bill

by Bill Kauffman

"The price of empire is America's soul and that price is too high."

—Senator J. William Fulbright, August 8, 1967



Anna Mycek-Wodetki

The oily whoremaster in the White House dodged the draft thanks to another Arkansas Oxonian named Bill, but the debt remains unpaid. For the shirker is viciously conventional, as the ambitious young always are, while his benefactor—Senator J. William Fulbright—is an 89-year-old man who bewails “how little criticism of the conventional wisdom is tolerated in this country.”

A rich boy from a poor state, a bookish football hero, an Ozark Anglophile, Senator Fulbright operated outside the dismal confines of left and right. He was a Confederate anti-imperialist. A George Kennanite. The Prince of Fayetteville. A Southern Whig. And the most trenchant Senate critic of empire since Robert A. Taft departed this vale of tears.

I.F. Stone conferred upon Fulbright in 1966 the dubious title of “the most civilized and urbane man in the U.S. Senate.” Fulbright was tough to peg, Stone wrote, “because he does not fit the easy stereotypes of American politics. He is not a rebel, a dissenter, a crusader, or a fighting liberal. He is not a liberal at all.” In Britain this “well-educated young country squire of minor but inherited and ample wealth” would have been a respectable if maverick Tory.

Well, perhaps. The issue of another of Arkansas’ great families, the agrarian aristocrat John Gould Fletcher, commended Fulbright for his “enlightened conservatism,” which, when the light slants just right, blends into the poet’s own “rebellious Americanism, my individualistic anarchism.” Sweet dreams—and pariahs—are made of these.

Bill Fulbright was the golden boy of Fayetteville. Moody scion of the wealthiest family in town, he starred as halfback on the university’s football team, won a Rhodes Scholarship, married a girl from Philadelphia’s Main Line, earned a law degree

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at George Washington, and worked in a minor way for the New Deal-era Department of Justice before moving back to Arkansas to teach law and practice gentleman farming. Quite unexpectedly—and with his mother’s running interference—Fulbright acceded to the university’s presidency in 1939 at the tender age of 34.

The green president jumped into extracurricular frays. An ardent warhawk, he denounced “the weasling, timid, and fearful policy of the isolationist senators.” Fired the next year at the behest of a new governor, Fulbright ran for Congress in 1942 on the family money. Though he had never set foot in six of his Ozark district’s ten counties, he won, and thus began a 30-year career representing a constituency he viewed as “self-reliant, industrious farmers and small businessmen.”

Fulbright was an internationalist, as Oxonians are wont to be. He joined the Foreign Affairs Committee and gained early note as sponsor of a 1943 House resolution favoring American participation in whatever worldwide organization might emerge from what he queerly termed a “creative war.” (The fabled Fulbright Resolution was so vague that even isolationist tackle Hamilton Fish, another football hero, voted for it.)

Fulbright rapidly became the pet Southerner of Eastern liberals. “This man is destined for greatness,” Dorothy Thompson cooed. Fulbright’s high-minded internationalism provoked Colonel Robert McCormick’s *Chicago Tribune* to animadvert on the “first-termer from Arkansas, who in his formative years was sent as a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford to learn to betray his country and deprive it of its independence. In this instance, as no doubt in many others, Mr. Rhodes appears to have got his money’s worth.” It was a good decade for Anglophiles. In 1944, when Fulbright defeated Huey Long protégé Hattie Caraway for her Senate seat, so passionate was his Atlanticism that populist foes derided him as “British Billy” and “Lord Flushbottom.”

Young Fulbright was no heretic, though as a young senator he caught hell from Harry Truman when he mused aloud that because the GOP had captured both houses of Congress in the 1946 election, the President might want to appoint a distinguished Republican as Secretary of State and then resign. (There was no Vice President at the time.) Truman was not amused by British Billy's parliamentary daydreams. He called the freshman senator "an overeducated Oxford S.O.B." who would have been better off going to a good land-grant college (which in fact Arkansas was).

Fulbright hiked an unusual path, compiling a standard Southern Democrat voting record while making a reputation via highfalutin speeches. (This is not to give Fulbright—or any contemporary politician—credit for the style of his "writings," which are usually done by a factotum.) Like the Beats, he lamented the subtle strictures that were squeezing out free speech. In January 1955 he decried "the narrowing effect inherent in the concentration of managerial control of the press, the radio, the movies—and, in the foreseeable future, television. . . . People hear, see, watch, read, and listen to only one side of public questions. . . . The public man . . . may know the truth and want to speak it. Yet he doubts whether his views, as transmitted to his constituents by those who control communications channels, will be fairly presented, or presented at all."

This hymnodist of dissent had as yet done little of it himself. In foreign and defense matters Fulbright clove to the Cold War consensus, even urging the more sensible President Eisenhower to send ground troops to Indochina in 1954. Like other mid-century enthusiasts for a muscular presidency he called for "a more assertive exercise of executive power" in international affairs. "The consequences of our global interventionism were not a major concern for me in the 1950's," he later admitted. Then in 1959 he assumed chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the world turned.

To his great and everlasting credit, Fulbright recoiled at the adventurism of Democratic Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Disturbed by the Bay of Pigs, distressed by the invasion of the Dominican Republic, the chairman at first played the good soldier with respect to Vietnam, shepherding through the fraudulent Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. But two years later, Fulbright had become the chief "nervous nellie" in Johnsonian demonology; meanwhile, Warren Hinckle in *Ramparts* was hailing him for sailing "in the mainstream of native American radicalism." He had broken, finally and fully, with the Democratic Vietnam War, and the series of hearings on American foreign policy that he chaired over the next lustrum legitimized the dissent whose praises he had sung so hollowly a decade before.

Fulbright was the first foreign relations chairman to defy a President of his own party since the great Spearless Leader of the Western Progressives, Idaho's William E. Borah, took on Coolidge over Silent Cal's gunboat diplomacy in Nicaragua. Borah and Fulbright both emphasized the paramountcy of domestic affairs. Empire, the Arkansasyer complained, forced us to "reverse the traditional order of our national priorities, relegating individual and community life to places on the scale below the enormously expensive military and space activities that constitute our program of national security."

Borah was a congenital dissident, a leader of the GOP's trans-Mississippi populist antipode. His defiance, while noble,

was unsurprising. A better analogue to the Bourbon Fulbright was Massachusetts Senator George Hoar, a gentleman Republican who with bitter eloquence split with his friend William McKinley over the President's decision to suppress the Filipino independence movement.

At least George Hoar had company; the Anti-Imperialist League was chock-full of Mugwump Republicans. Fulbright's lonely apostasy came at a time when the same mind-our-own-business voices of Main Street had been silenced. Our two-for-the-price-of-one parties were monolithic in support of American Empire: the Western isolationists were all superannuated or dead, the Midwestern Republicans (with the shining exception of Iowa's H.R. Gross) had stolen the 1948 Democratic Party foreign policy platform, and the shrunken Henry Wallace peace wing of the Democracy was sponsoring "Ban the Bomb" rallies at which doe-eyed Laura Petries held hands and sang Negro spirituals.

Enter J. William Fulbright, quondam booster of "creative wars," now a Southern constitutionalist dove. The breed is rare, though the pedigree is honorable. The great Southern populists stood foursquare against war: Georgia's Tom Watson was a ferocious foe of the Spanish-American and First World Wars, and Louisiana's Huey Long promised to make the legendary Marine Corps Major General Smedley "War is a Racket" Butler his Secretary of (Anti)War. Yet with few exceptions the states' rights Democrats of the South—whose belief in limited constitutional government ought to have engendered a skepticism of empire—whooped it up for our frequent overseas interventions.

"No other section of the nation gave President Franklin D. Roosevelt such unified support in his efforts" to involve these United States in the Second World War, historian Wayne S. Cole writes of the South. The overwhelming support of Southern members of Congress saved such critical 1941 measures as the draft extension and the revision of the Neutrality Act. Only at the region's periphery—beyond Arkansas—did antiwar groups such as the America First Committee enjoy even meager support.

Something—Democratic Party loyalty, an inordinate enthusiasm for things military, the need to preserve foreign markets—kept even the wisest of Southern conservatives quiet. For example, Georgia Senator Richard Russell, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was a thoughtful states' rights advocate who drily observed that "if it is easy for us to go anywhere and do anything, we will always be going someplace and doing something." Alas, like the Fulbright of 1955, Senator Russell never translated his sapient maxim into practical action. Harshly critical of our Vietnam War in private, he was the dutiful hawk in public, caught up in the idiotic delusion that politics stops at the water's edge.

Fulbright was a friend and admirer of Russell's, and though the Georgian was regarded as the apotheosis of the courtly Southern senator, Fulbright, in his own way, was an even truer son of the Old South. What liberals viewed as the wart on the great man's profile was in fact the source of his greatness.

Let's step back for a moment. Even at his career's apex, J. William Fulbright made a lousy saint. He took a states' rights position on integration and stuck to it, much to the discomfort of otherwise worshipful northerners. He signed the March 12, 1956, Southern Manifesto attacking the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision for its exercise of "naked judicial power," and unlike nimble opportunistic old segregationists like Strom

Thurmond, Fulbright never recanted.

His obduracy consisted of equal parts expedience and principle. There was an element of cowardice in Fulbright's position; to have come out for the various civil rights measures would have been "political suicide," he said. And "I did not feel like giving up my career in politics because of it." This is a frank admission—of gutlessness. On the other hand, one finds in the Fulbright record residual Confederate resentment of Yankee meddlers. Looking back, he says of the Manifesto signatories, "There was a sense that we were the poor part of the country, that we had historic reasons to band together against northerners who were imposing on us."

For all his aristocratic suavity, Senator Fulbright was capable of regional defenses that have the populist flavor of a Pitchfork Ben Tillman. As he said in 1948:

The people of the North are extremely solicitous of our welfare and progress. They assure us that if we will furnish better schools and abolish poll taxes and segregation that strife will cease and happiness reign. They are critical of our relative poverty, our industrial and social backwardness, and they are generous in their advice about our conduct. Their condescension in these matters is not appreciated . . . because these people . . . have for more than half a century done everything they could to retard the economic development of the South. It is no secret that the South was considered like a conquered territory after 1865. Since that time, the tariff policy and the freight rate structure were designed by the North to . . . keep [the South] in the status of a raw material producing colony. Above and beyond these direct restrictions, the most insidious of all, the most difficult to put your finger on, is the all-pervading influence of the great financial institutions and industrial monopolies.

This self-aware Southernness (which, despite James Carville's cosmetic magic, one *never* descries in Bill Clinton) was Fulbright's saving grace. His northern friends thought it his handicap, but in fact his anti-imperialism got its fillip from the South. "Small countries wish to find their own way, make their own mistakes," he said by way of explaining why our presence in Vietnam was unwise. So, too, for the South, whose autonomy and independence—even in the years 1861-1865— he always defended.

Revolted by the swollen, belligerent leviathan that was crushing the states' rights democracy in which he believed, J. William Fulbright emerged as a full-fledged Confederate anti-imperialist by 1966. He was never labeled as such, of course—it would have raised too many unsettling questions—but in his unread valedictory, 1989's *The Price of Empire*, the Senator explained himself: "Maybe I am the heir of the South with regard to the Civil War period. I may have absorbed an attitude towards big powers and big countries that has its roots in my Arkansas cultural background. You were not inclined, if you came from Arkansas in the years when I was growing up there, to be very arrogant. We were poorer than almost anyone else and there was a tendency to look down on Arkansas as backward and uneducated. It seems logical to me that this should have had an effect on my attitudes when I considered relationships between the United States and smaller, underdeveloped countries."

Given the cosmopolitan surroundings Fulbright chose from early adulthood—Oxford and Georgetown parties and all that rot—*only* his Arkansas roots immunized him against the disastrous "pay any price, bear any burden" globalist virus that was going around in enlightened Democratic circles.

The scariest thing about Bill Clinton is that despite all the "Man from Hope" balderdash his veins were long ago drained of Arkansas blood. There is nothing of the Confederate or rebel in this bootlicker. When the *Wall Street Journal* asked him, "What event before 1900 shaped your vision of American society? Your view of America's place in the world?" ahistorical Bill blithely answered, "None, because most of the things the U.S. did before 1900 were totally inconsistent with the global role I'd like us to play, or were narrow disputes over territory."

Where Bill Fulbright bemoaned "the loss of individuality" in an America that was becoming "shiny, sterile, anonymous and grimly, aggressively standardized," Bill Clinton is a Wal-Mart Democrat whose imperialism is of the Happy Face brand. Come, browse the aisles of his global marketplace, where the Little Rock shelf is identical to the Chicago shelf, which in turn is indistinguishable from the shelves of Brussels and Manila and Moscow.

Why Champ Clinton—whose trajectory from Hot Springs through Georgetown and Oxford and Yale to Washington is a lot like Fulbright's—seems bereft of even vestigial sympathy for smallness is an interesting question, one perhaps answered by the glimmer from Virginia Kelley's zircon-studded fist.

In contrast, Fulbright's Confederate anti-imperialism was fortified by the surety that comes from being the fair-haired son of the biggest family in a small city. One pictures young Billy as the Georgie Amberson Minafer of Fayetteville. "You'll never understand Bill until you realize what a secure basis he had," a friend told biographer Tristram Coffin. "The most important family in town. Never had to worry about money. Tremendous support from the family."

Fulbright fits into Kenneth Rexroth's pattern of patrician American dissent: "Most American families that go back to the early 19th century . . . have a sense of social and cultural rather than nationalist responsibility. The sense that the country is really theirs, really belongs to them, produces radical critics, rebels, reformers, eccentrics."

Looked at this way, it all falls into place. Fulbright's sense of responsibility was ultimately so strong that he broke loose of the shackling postwar conventions and drifted back, back, back into the glorious tradition of localist Southern dissent. If he never quite got around to prescribing "a wise and masterly inactivity" for Washington, as did Virginia's John Randolph, he did offer what he termed a conservative "defense of traditional values and protest against the radical departure from those values embodied in the idea of an imperial destiny for America." That his fellow conservatives vilified him for this only goes to show that empire blinds as well as bankrupts.

Fulbright's transformation ran counterclockwise. How many dreary tributes have been written to Arthur Vandenberg, the Republican senator from Michigan who shed his moderate isolationism and helped Harry Truman "scare hell out of the American people" as the premier Republican Cold Warrior? (Compare Vandenberg's press clippings from before and after his "conversion"; the wages of conformity are great indeed.)

By the late 60's, court journalists such as William S. White

had caught on that “what the Fulbright people really represent is a new and embittered crypto pacifism-isolationism.” This is overheated, but Fulbright did come tantalizingly close to advocating something like the paleo-isolationism he had fought two decades earlier. He was now saying that becoming a “global interventionist power” after World War II was “a mistaken ideal.” He was weary of the best and brightest: “I think the world has endured about all it can of the crusades of high-minded men bent on the regeneration of the human race.”

The whole Vietnam episode seemed to him a burlesque of misguided liberalism: “Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, and others used to say that I was a racist, and that was why I didn’t like the war in Vietnam. I didn’t think ‘the little brown people’ were entitled to democracy. ‘We want to bring them the Great Society,’ Hubert would say. ‘We’re not racists. We have a great interest in those brown people.’ And all the time bombing them from five miles up.”

Fulbright, like most men who taste power, hung around too long. His reputation for aloofness grew—“no man, however strong, can serve ten years as schoolmaster, priest, or senator, and remain fit for anything else,” said Henry Adams, who should know—and toothless populist Dale Bumpers routed his elder in the 1974 Democratic primary.

Though it cannot have been the critical factor, given the margin of defeat, outside money helped do in the senator. He had committed the capital crime of candor in 1973 when he told *Face the Nation* that when it comes to Middle East policy, “Israel controls the Senate” and “we should be more concerned about the United States’ interests.” The pro-Israel lobby directed its considerable energy into teaching Fulbright the cost of dissent.

The experience made Fulbright, in retirement, a sharp critic of “the subservience of our foreign policy to domestic lobbies,” and he is not talking about the Burmese-American Friendship League. Liberated by age and irrelevance, and insisting that he is “pro-American” and not “anti-Israel,” Fulbright declares, “We have lost our freedom of action in the Middle East and are committed to policies that promote neither our own national interest nor the cause of peace. AIPAC and its allied organizations have effective working control of Congress. They can elect or defeat nearly any congressman or senator that they wish.”

This may be an overstatement, pace Charles Percy and Paul Findley, but President Clinton is unlikely to provide us with a test case. He pledged to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in March 1993 that our \$5 billion annual subsidy of Israel and Egypt shall remain inviolate. Clinton’s extremely tepid budget-cutters will swipe food from the mouths of destitute children before they will slice a sacred piece of the foreign apple pie.

Fulbright’s row with the Israel lobby probably explains Bill Clinton’s disregard of Arkansas’ towering statesman. If the now-ailing Fulbright is half the man I think he is, he doesn’t care. At an inauguration party, he told a *New York Times* reporter that the recent Arkansas governor who’d really impressed him was . . . the left-wing segregationist Orval Faubus.

Wendell Berry counsels:

As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it.

Senator Fulbright did. His detractors have said so for years. His admirers cherish him for the wisdom gained in loss. <C>

1-800

by R.S. Gwynn

Credit cards out, pencil and notepad handy,
The insomniac sinks deeply in his chair,
Begging swift needles in his glass of brandy
To knit once more the raveled sleeve of care,
As with control, remotely, in one hand he
Summons bright visions from the midnight air:

The six-way drill! The eight-way folding ladder!
Knives that pierce coins or thin-slice loaves of bread!
Devices that will make one’s tummy flatter,
Rout car thieves, and purge household taps of lead!
All made of stuff no earthly force can shatter!
Their lauds ascend Olympus in his head.

And yet how little will his days be brightened
By *Opera Favorites* or, if he feels lewd,
Even THE SWIMSUIT ISSUE. Briefly heightened,
His hopes, ephemeral as stir-fried food,
Vanish like screws his six-way drill has tightened,
Leaving him just like them—completely screwed.

“Buy houses and apartments with no money!
Discover how today! Write this address!”
Snapping alert and clicking with his gun, he
Draws a bead on the forehead of Success,
Whose orchid lei is fresh, whose teeth are sunny,
Whose tapes will soon arrive via UPS.

But anger, with succeeding snifters, passes
And soon all softens in an amber hue.
As through a pair of UV/blue-block glasses,
Doubt fades before the testimony—true
Accounts of hair sprouting like jungle grasses!
Of lifeless penises lifting anew!

Of bags and wrinkles blotted out! Of dumber
Than average kids who, spared the wrath and rod,
Have learned to multiply! He fights off slumber
The moment that his head begins to nod
And resolutely punches the first number
Of what may be the area code of God.