

POLITICS

Billy in the Lowground

by Janet Scott Barlow

“You may look bad, Bill, but we look just plain stupid.” That was the wounded and furious summation of *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen upon Bill Clinton’s inglorious exit from the presidency. Many questions are raised by that single sentence from a lone writer, the first being: Who is the “we” Cohen referred to? His answer: We is “me and everyone else who has ever defended [Clinton].”

Ah, already we’re getting somewhere, although it’s not where Richard Cohen would take us. For the fact is that Clinton defenders have never been only Clinton defenders. They are part of a larger collective and are identifiable as such. They are the liberal establishment, the media and political elite. And since the self-assumed intellectual superiority of every liberal elite precludes, above all else, stupidity, and—at the same time—the life’s purpose of all liberal elites is to point out the stupidity of others, it follows that the mother of all nightmares for any elite liberal is to find himself in Richard Cohen’s position, i.e., looking stupid. For eight years, liberals responded to the truism “We are known by the company we keep” by redefining Bill Clinton, at every turn, as worthy of association. They are now surprised to discover that Clinton’s behavior ended up defining them. What dopes.

But they are dopes in misery, nonetheless. And if it’s Bill Clinton who is responsible for their suffering, you can bet the Spode china it’s Bill Clinton who will pay. It is one thing to have adulterous sex in the Oval Office, to lie under oath, to suborn perjury, and to obstruct justice. It’s another thing altogether to make the Richard Cohens of the world look stupid. The first series of actions is debatable and therefore defensible, while the second part, the stupid stuff . . . well, you try that one, mister, and you’re dead meat.

There are *standards* at stake here, after all: You may be dishonest but not tacky; immorality is relative, but bad taste is not. Values come and go, but style is eternal.

Like no other figure in living memory, Bill Clinton brought into high relief the two opposing worldviews into which Americans are often divided. The first group is made up of people who believe that behavior is identity (a man who tells lies is a liar) and character is destiny (indecent people generate indecency). The second group believes that identity determines behavior (smart people don’t do stupid things) and destiny is a validation of character (a baby-boomer Democrat who rises to the presidency is, *ipso facto*, a person of positive substance). Within this second group there exists a subset, a collection of graying and bifocaled boomer hipsters who approach politics armed only with the standards of popular culture and the yardstick of celebrity. It is their self-appointed task to judge a given politician’s hip quotient—which, in the case of Bill Clinton, they immediately determined, in joyful delirium, to be quite as high as their own.

This hipster subset has been easily as affected by Bill Clinton’s ups and downs as have the two main groups. For them, Clinton was a gift straight from boomer heaven, what with his affinity for movies (not to mention movie stars), all the Elvis business, and, of course, that dumb saxophone. Through Clinton, the hipsters were able both to cling to their youth and to ease vicariously into a really cool middle age.

But despite all that clinging and easing, the hipsters are now suffering nearly as much as Richard Cohen. After projecting the image of their most desirable selves, both personally and generationally, onto Bill Clinton—after, that is, fishing for years in highly polluted waters—they are now shocked to discover that they have reeled in nothing but tin cans and old shoes. To them, it doesn’t much matter what Bill did. The important thing is that his image, and therefore their image, suffered in the process. On the day he left office, Clinton granted a presidential pardon to an unrepentant, tax-cheating, fugitive crook, and he hogged the limelight with a series of graceless speeches. Question: Which action was worse? Don’t laugh. If you once

believed that Bill Clinton was destined for presidential greatness because he shared your political origins (the 60’s) as well as your pop-culture fixations, it can be really tough (especially while surrounded by tin cans and old shoes) to weigh genuine corruption against absolute tackiness.

Mere weeks into the post-Clinton era, the resounding question from all elite quarters was “Will it ever end?” And with the dawn of each new day came the answer: Don’t hold your breath. Imagine, for instance, the shudder that went through the liberal establishment upon learning that the first media figure through which Bill Clinton chose to defend his last-minute presidential actions was that low-rent journalist and full-time sensationalist, Geraldo Rivera. Rivera’s scoop: Clinton was “bewildered,” “stressed out,” and, yes, “hurt.” Think of it: Just Bill and Geraldo, a couple of misunderstood guys feeling each other’s pain via cell phone. The unambiguous shabbiness of it was enough to give the entire liberal power structure a case of the vapors. (What? He’s calling Geraldo? Oh, God, you’re kidding, right?) In reality, of course, the only surprising thing about the Clinton/Rivera chat is the fact that America possesses technology sufficient to handle the simultaneous transmission of the world’s two most overheated egos (that is, the phones didn’t melt).

Bill and Hillary Clinton (and how can we discuss one without discussing the other?) are in a new and possibly deadly kind of trouble: Each is now afflicted with what was once the other’s problem. Bill’s problem is that he no longer holds elective office. Hillary’s problem is that she now does.

Bill Clinton sought the presidency because it is the world’s biggest stage. What is obvious now is that he regarded the stage as portable—something he could pack up and take with him, unfolding it for use as the spirit moved him for the rest of his natural life. That is such an exquisitely gauche assumption, such a traumatically embarrassing spectacle, that it has brought liberals, hipster subset and all, to a point of crisis. Without the mantle and the trappings of the presidency, Bill Clinton is just a deluded narcissist, preening for love and grubbing for money upon his imaginary stage. What the elites once saw as fascinating—the complex psychology

and varied (facile) talents of our first baby-boomer president—are now, when observed in an ex-president (*ex*: Has there ever been a more powerful prefix?), not a source of fascination but a source of chagrin. The people who believed that Bill Clinton made the presidency interesting are finally confronting their 180-degree mistake: To the extent Bill Clinton was interesting, it was the presidency that made him so.

As for Hillary Clinton, her problem, in an immediate sense, is bigger than her husband's, and more ironic. After nearly eight years of hearing "Who elected her?" every time she tried some inappropriate power grab, Mrs. Clinton came up with an answer: She would legitimize herself and her political views by running for office. By all appearances, she was a hardworking candidate, and she was rewarded with a decisive victory.

So Mrs. Clinton's legitimization as a politician has liberated her, right? Well, no, as it turns out, not really. For the first time in her very political life, Hillary Clinton now has a fixed, defined identity. She is an elected official, a *professional* politician, an identity that carries many more constraints than freedoms. No longer can Mrs. Clinton slide with her customary expediency into the role of First Lady, or Bill's Wife, or Just A Mom, or Brilliant Lawyer, or Generally Superior Human Being. She can no longer evade accountability by choosing at will among the many titles at her disposal. She has only one title now: United States senator. And as such, she appears, at least in these early months, miserable: confined, stifled, angry. (And what else is new?)

Hillary is not alone in her unhappiness. While Bill Clinton's supporters placed themselves, through Clinton, upon a boomer pedestal, Hillary's loyalists, always more cult-like and worshipful, elevated Mrs. Clinton herself to iconic status. Thus, the revelation that she joined (perhaps even led) her husband in their vulgar exit from their White House left her followers to wrestle with their own questions. Does an icon go trolling for soup plates? Does a saint pocket the silverware? Does a goddess walk off with the rugs?

While these issues can get complicated, one thing remains simple—and it forms the crux of the problem for both Mrs. Clinton and the Church of Hillary: A U.S. senator had better not pocket or walk off with anything. One wonders if, when she

decided to run for office, Hillary Clinton realized that victory would subject her to the same standards of behavior as, say, Jesse Helms. One wonders further whether her most fervent supporters realized that victory would end her reign as free-floating high priestess, reducing her to the size of, well, Jesse Helms.

Pain, pain, everywhere you turn. How to ease all this suffering? Let us start by revisiting Richard Cohen's brief sentence: "You may look bad, Bill, but we look just plain stupid." If the rule in political corruption is to follow the money, the rule in intellectual and moral corruption is to follow the language. The nugget of discovery in Cohen's sentence rests in his choice of verb: Bill *looks* bad; we *look* stupid. The meaning of "look" in this context: to give the appearance of. What Richard Cohen is saying, then, is that after all that has gone before, Bill Clinton merely gives the appearance of badness. And Cohen? After misjudging the meaning of all that has gone before, he merely gives the appearance of stupidity.

Richard Cohen's choice of equivocal language reveals his equivocal conclusion about both Bill Clinton and himself, and reveals, too, why he (and others like him) can't find peace: He cannot admit the raw truth. Bill Clinton doesn't look bad; he *is* bad. Likewise, when it comes to Clinton, Richard Cohen doesn't look stupid; he *is* stupid. That's the fact, Jack; that's the truth. And it shall set you free.

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RELIGION

The New Anti-Civilization

by Anthony Harrigan

Vaclav Havel has said that we are undergoing "the brutal destruction of a cultural landscape that has taken centuries to develop"; within this decaying global civilization "is in essence the first atheistic civilization in the history of mankind." This use of the word "civilization" is a contradiction in terms, since

the new moral and intellectual world order is the very opposite of what civilization has always meant.

Havel's basic case is that atheism is making the long march through Western institutions, thereby profoundly changing the tone and behavior of global society. But that does not mean that Christianity is dead—or waning—as a vital force in human life. There are as many as two billion Christians worldwide. Spiritual leaders such as Pope John Paul II continue to receive the admiration and respect of believers. And there have been wondrous events that have brought joy to the hearts of the faithful, events that could not have been anticipated even 15 years ago—notably, the death of atheistic Soviet communism and the return of millions of Russians to the faith.

The people of Eastern Europe provide the most inspiring example for all believers across the globe, for they kept Christianity alive in their hearts despite 75 years of persecution under militant, atheistic communism. But in many other parts of the world—notably America and Europe—the powers of darkness have gained an unprecedented advantage over Christendom, forcing changes in intellectual life and social conditions that strike at the heart of the Christian message. The powers of unbelief have come to dominate the great universities and the engines of opinion.

At the end of the second millennium, Christians are besieged and threatened like the early Christians of Rome and elsewhere in the ancient world. We may not have to worship in catacombs; in countless ways, however, Christians are forced to live an underground existence, since the ruling elites view faith as—at best—irrelevant.

Our vulnerability lies in our technical view of life. In the West, we look for leaders who are technicians in national and international affairs, dismissing the ancient view that real leadership is to be found in the human character. For many Westerners, moral distinctions are secondary to expertise and effectiveness at handling social problems.

Time and again, we hear people say that they like a public figure's policies, even though they disapprove of his behavior as a person—and usually, they end up supporting the person whose policies they find worthwhile. This is a far cry from the attitudes held by citizens when religion occupied a commanding place in American life. Back then, Amer-

icans understood that character was central, that what a politician espoused could not take precedence over his personal life, that the policies he favored could not be the final yardstick for judgment. These days, the worst kind of people can retain popularity simply because of their political stance. This, of course, is what happens in a totalitarian society, where moral judgments are replaced by party judgments. This makes possible atrocities on a colossal scale; they are justified as ideological necessities.

Organized religion is not immune to the twists, turns, and distorted thinking of the postmodern era. Disbelief is the new orthodoxy, cropping up even within churches. It manifests itself in the repudiation of beliefs held from the earliest days of the Church. In his passion for multiculturalism, the Rt. Rev. Michael Ingram of the Anglican Church of Canada has proclaimed his faith in a new "interfaith deity who inspires modern pluralists." He condemns what he calls "Christian exclusiveness," which teaches that salvation is found only through Jesus Christ.

Attitudes such as these, says George Forsyth of the Catholic Campaign for America, "led modern civilization into a moral wilderness in which the only guidelines are derived from emotional intensity." This message is one of moral destruction.

Anyone who truly understands and appreciates the spiritual richness of Western civilization is appalled at the prospect of a materialist, technological society devoid of spiritual aims. The technologizing of Western society leads to an impoverishment of the spirit and the loss of genuine cultural diversity. The rhythms of nature and ordered social life, the rituals of community and celebration of the spirit established over the centuries, are displaced by the demands of a technological regime. The teacher stands in danger of replacement by a computer, and correspondence, a rich mine of human interaction, has been virtually wiped out by impersonal, impermanent e-mail. Every aspect of life is being dehumanized, eliminating personal contact.

While many of us have adjusted easily to the new machines, the technology and its intellectual and spiritual ramifications have barely penetrated our consciousness. Most people see the new technology only as a tool for organizing and storing information. They don't see the rift between the use of the new machines

and our aims as human beings. Unlike the Marxist revolution of the early 20th century, the technological revolution does not deliberately set out to mold a man.

Of course, it would be utterly absurd to suggest that the mere use of computers turns people away from a Christian worldview. But over a lifetime in which every aspect of life is computerized, computers undoubtedly have the potential for changing a person's view of existence. Instead of making people feel closer, the change is likely to produce isolation.

With the spread of the technological society, deconstructionism has become influential. Deconstructionism is the denial of permanent truth and the devaluation of language and cultural authority. President Clinton, for one, clearly viewed language as a mere social construct in which the meaning of words is indeterminate. This erosion of meaning in language has a certain relationship to the erosion of belief—the understanding of the fixity of spiritual truth.

Although belief in God is not dead, the number of communities of believers in the West is down compared to the overall population. The force of Christianity depends on communities of believers. The Church is the Body of Christ; Christianity is not a solitary affair. From the beginning, Christians have organized themselves in communities led by bishops. They do not have to be large communities. For Christians, organized worship in tiny chapels is as valid and compelling as worship in giant Gothic cathedrals.

Since the earliest days of Christianity, men and women have lived in monastic communities separated—to some degree—from the surrounding world. The monastic life is alien to much of the modern world and has suffered severe setbacks in the West in the last 40 years. Still, it persists. While it is unlikely that, in the 21st century, monasticism will reclaim the place that it held in the medieval world, it is possible that it will enjoy some degree of revival, due to the increased pressures and horrors of postmodern life. Once again, monasteries may become islands of civilization in a world where authentic faith and civilization are beleaguered.

The main theater of spiritual struggle, of course, is the Western world, where the threat of postmodern technonihilism is greatest. As the communists used to say, the front is everywhere. Education,

social life, the family: All the institutions of the Western world are under an unceasing barrage from the nihilists. Whitaker Chambers, writing in *Witness*, said that "history is cluttered with the wreckage of nations that have become indifferent to God, and died." Indifference characterizes scores of millions in our time, who are obsessed with the consumer culture and its ways.

Christianity is under siege and retreating in the face of secular materialism, which advances through both moral indifference and outright hostility. In this country, once proudly Christian, recognition of God in the public schools and other public places is prohibited. Religious freedom may be better protected in Russia than in the United States. In America today, Christians—who, in the early days, would not bow to the will of the caesars and who accepted martyrdom for their faith—yield their rights with only the mildest of protests.

As Christians struggle to strengthen and expand the influence of believing communities in the face of postmodern technonihilism, they cannot permit themselves to think that everything can be accomplished on this side of eternity. The forces opposed to Christianity are stronger now than ever before.

The Most Rev. Fabian Bruskewitz, bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska, reminds us that

there are times and places when we must share in our common humanity the concerns and values of the world around us. There are other times when we must flee from them, oppose them with all our strength and dare to be different.

There are parts of this world, he continues, that are "aggressively anti-Christian," where manipulation and control extend to "false beliefs and evil morals."

To resist those beliefs and pseudo-morals, to struggle with all our moral and intellectual energy against the new anti-civilization, is the great mission and task facing Christians in the new millennium.

Anthony Harrigan writes from Washington, D.C.



Duke Chapel, Then and Now

by Mark Tooley

In December, the dean of the chapel at Duke University in North Carolina, along with the school's president, announced that same-sex "weddings" could be celebrated at Duke's imposing Gothic chapel. The announcement came as somewhat of a surprise: Duke is affiliated with the United Methodist Church, which officially disapproves of same-sex unions. Moreover, the dean is William Willimon, a United Methodist minister who is usually an ally of evangelicals within his denomination. Duke will now join the ranks of Harvard, Yale, Stanford and other prominent universities whose chapels are open to homosexual "weddings."

According to Duke's reasoning, "diversity" on Duke's campus requires toleration of same-sex ceremonies conducted by religious denominations that do not oppose them. Potentially, this could include services led by clergy from the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association, some Jewish groups, and perhaps a few others. Most Christian clergy would be forbidden by their own denominations from conducting such ceremonies, including any clergy from the United Methodist Church.

"It is not, in our opinion, a matter of the Chapel approving or disapproving of this liturgical innovation, but rather a question of how much religious diversity we should accommodate," explained a statement from Willimon and Duke's president, Nannerl Keohane. Willimon had previously opposed same-sex ceremonies in the chapel. He now says that allowing the ceremonies "in no way legitimizes these unions from a United Methodist point of view."

The recommendation from Duke's Committee to Explore Blessing of Same-Sex Unions admitted the chapel's "rootedness in specifically Christian tradition." But its statement notes that many of its committee members believe that it is that very tradition that mandates the chapel's offer of "hospitality" to same-sex couples who "seek support in pursuing their faith development." The committee generously promises that no clergy will be compelled to perform homosexual "marriages" if their consciences preclude it.

Most of the verbiage from the chapel's dean, the university's president, and the Same-Sex Unions Committee presumes that Duke Chapel is a crossroads of interfaith, social, and sexual diversity. Duke officials grudgingly admit that it is primarily a Christian church. But their definition of "church" is noteworthy. For them, the chapel, as a church, is assumed to be a religious marketplace where there is a cacophony of divergent voices, with no single unifying message but tolerance. There seems to be no thought that United Methodists have a right to ask others, in an ecumenical spirit, to refrain from activities that Methodists (and almost all other Christian churches) would consider abhorrent.

Duke's current vision of its chapel, not surprisingly, is quite different from the vision offered by the chapel's founders. The sermons from its 1935 dedication ceremonies still make for fascinating reading. For its founders, the chapel was not to be a debating hall, or a laboratory for social experimentation, but preeminently a pulpit of Christian proclamation and truth. A current Duke website describes the chapel's founding ceremony as "interfaith." But the documents from that day show only Christian hymns, Christian prayers, and Christian sermons.

The world of 1935, amid the Depression and the rise of both fascism and communism, seemed to be engulfed in secularism and paganism. Nearly all the speakers at the chapel's dedication portrayed it as a spearhead for reclaiming a waning culture for Christianity.

In a statement that would not be expected from President Keohane, then-president B.R. Lacy declared:

The chapel says to the world that here God has the preeminence and that all life should be lived under His shadow, within the sound of His voice, and under the influence of His beauty and holiness.

Duke's 19th-century founders, along with the 20th-century tobacco heirs who endowed it with money and a new name, envisioned the university as a Christian center of higher education, under the tutelage of the Methodist Church, with the chapel at the spiritual center of that Christian oasis.

"This chapel must speak of Christ," President Lacy insisted, and "its simple ceremonies of our Protestant faith [must] center in the open Word of God . . ." He

imagined a "thousand voices" within its walls reciting the Apostles' Creed. In contrast to young people elsewhere in the mid-1930's who were following Mussolini, Hitler, or Stalin, he saw the chapel leading Duke's students to "Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord." They would "form a deathless loyalty and a glowing love for Him who gave Himself to reveal the Father's heart and to bring all men under the Father's reign."

As St. Paul appealed to the younger Timothy and Titus of his day, Duke Chapel would make disciples for the Lord—or so Lacy hoped. "It is for this we pray as in this high day this chapel is dedicated to God." Duke's president, along with the other speakers, portrayed the chapel as a seedbed for future generations of Christian scholars who would conform a fallen world to the will of the Triune God.

The Right Reverend Edwin Penick, in his sermon at the dedication, saw in the chapel's dominance of the campus skyline the hope that God's truth would guide the university.

A Christian pulpit, set up in the center of such a university as this, calls not for mere approval of the life of Jesus or pious recommendation of the principles of His teaching, but for an intrepid demonstration of how that life may be emulated, and specific directions as to how His teaching may be applied to modern life.

Penick saw Duke Chapel as sounding the "passionate crusader's call" and "rallying men to standards of righteousness against disintegrating social forces."

Like other speakers, Penick saw the Gospel proclaimed in Duke Chapel as part of a coherent presentation of God's truth throughout a Christian university. The various departments and courses were not to be unrelated or pursuing separate "chaotic" paths; each was to be a spoke of the wheel of God's revelation. "May God abide in this holy place, and the Spirit of Truth keep the message and usages of this chapel, like light, pure and undefiled," he concluded.

The Reverend Willis Richard Cullom of Wake Forest College, a Baptist institution, saw the chapel as a sign of hope against the "well-organized spread of secularism." It would aid in "capturing and subduing to Christ and His ideals the new civilization which is emerging from the shattered ruins of the old." The