

This Is the Time to Remember

Every city is made up of innumerable stories, some overlapping, most not. And, thus, every city needs many storytellers to provide a full account of its life, because—humans being finite—no one is likely to be able to encompass all of those stories in his work. Few cities, however, are so lucky. The best most cities of any size can hope for is an Anthony Bukoski, who knows the East End of Superior, Wisconsin, as intimately as he knows himself—knows the people, the places, the history, even the way that both the physical and the human landscape of the East End change with every change of the seasons. For a city to have a second Bukoski would be a gift beyond imagining, and it would require an extraordinary people to be worthy of such a blessing.

These thoughts ran through my mind on the night of February 6, when, at the generous invitation of Alberto Altamore, more than 100 people from across Rockford gathered at Altamore Ristorante to mourn the passing of radio talk-show host Chris Bowman and to celebrate the life of a man who, over the past decade, was perhaps less of a storyteller himself than an editor and publisher of other people's stories—the people in that room, and many more besides. Rockford has not yet been blessed with even one Tony Bukoski, but, in the hands of Chris Bowman, the stories of these people had burst the bounds of their private lives and been woven together in a tapestry—incomplete, yes, and even a bit ragged, but that's a pretty good description of Rockford itself.

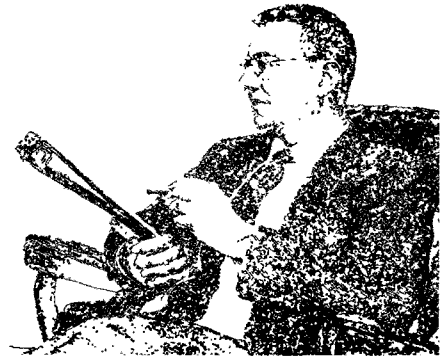
Many of us gathered there that night first came to know Chris during the 12-year-long struggle against federal-court control of the Rockford school district—Mary Hitchcock, the founder of Rockford Educating All Children (R.E.A.CH.) and Barb Dent, her successor as R.E.A.CH. chairman; Ted Biondo, Stephanie Caltagherone, Dave Strommer, and Patti Delugas, all school-board members during the height of the battle over court-ordered taxation (ultimately declared unconstitutional) to pay for the elaborate social-engineering scheme that resulted from the lawsuit filed by a group perversely known as People Who Care; activists Bill Me-

gan, Sr., and Bill Megan, Jr., Mark and CeCe Dahlgren, and Dick Kuberka, the unofficial historian of the desegregation suit; and many others who spent countless nights at school-board meetings and days collecting tax protests and, of course, calling Chris's show to discuss the latest developments.

Chris played a pivotal role in *Chronicles*' involvement in the battle over judicial taxation. Twenty-one years after John Howard founded The Rockford Institute, the Institute remained better known in London than in its hometown. Tom Fleming put the Institute and *Chronicles* on the local map with his February 1997 *Perspective* "Here Come the Judge," but it was Chris who distributed the updated map all over town when he read Tom's words on the air. Over the next seven years, Tom would become one of Chris's most-frequent (and most-favorite) guests, commenting on everything from local politics and national culture to foreign policy and international affairs. And Chris hosted both of The Rockford Institute's local forums on judicial taxation, in February of 1997 and 1998.

When the local Gannett paper, the *Rockford Register Star*, which officially supported the school-desegregation lawsuit, grew alarmed over the incipient tax rebellion and decided to kill the messenger, running an unprecedented two-day front-page series accusing the Institute of racism, Chris turned the airwaves over to Tom for days on end to defend our position. A moderately conservative Republican himself (in the 1980's, he had been chief of staff to Illinois Congresswoman Lynn Martin, deputy executive director of the National Republican Congressional Committee, and political director of the Republican National Committee), Chris did not agree with all of our positions (he was, for instance, never pro-life, though, in recent years, he had begun to have his doubts about the pro-abortion position), but he realized that the Institute and *Chronicles*—unlike the "local" daily—shared his devotion to his hometown, and that was enough to command his loyalty.

Chris's devotion to Rockford was evident in his decision, after a decade in



Washington, D.C., to return to his hometown and begin a career in radio. Over the years, he was repeatedly condemned as a "naysayer," even by some (such as *Register Star* political editor Chuck Sweeney) who now find that label attached to themselves. If Chris's daily program often came across as negative, however, it was because, through his criticisms of local politicians, developers, and businessmen, he was calling on all Rockfordians to make his hometown—suffering from the identity crisis that has afflicted working-class cities across the Midwestern Rust Belt—the kind of city he remembered from his childhood. If anything, Chris was too much of an idealist, often allowing himself to be talked into supporting ballot proposals and programs—such as the open-ended one-cent sales-tax increase in 2002 to build a new jail for Winnebago County—that he later realized worked against his vision for Rockford. He always tried to make good on his mistakes, however. His devotion to the fight last fall to protect St. Mary's Oratory from the grasping hands of county-board members and officials, for instance, was fueled by his sense of betrayal over the way the jail tax was being used.

When we first introduced this column in *Chronicles* (as a "Letter From Rockford" written by Chris's friend and sometime competitor Frank Schier, the editor and publisher of the weekly *Rock River Times*), we asked Chris to write for us. A busy man, he never did, but, when the column fell to me, I often turned to his show for inspiration. In our last chat, just two days before he fell ill and another three before he passed away, he urged me to devote my March column to the Rockford Area Chamber of Commerce's "One Region, Four Rivers" initiative. "Go get 'em," he said, before he abruptly signed off, without saying goodbye. <C

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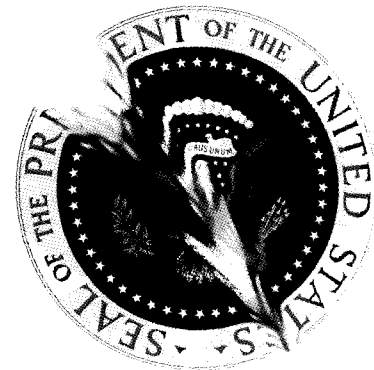
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THE NONPATRIOTIC PRESIDENT



A Survey of the Clinton Years

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Genetic Roulette

Once, a long time ago, when, as a result of one of those complex misunderstandings that cast long shadows over the course of my life, I was getting married in a small town in Connecticut, my father showed up at the church stuffed with promotional literature. This consisted of leaflets describing his new organization, donation forms, photocopies of articles in the press—in short, everything that anyone who has ever come near political activism in the United States would find painfully familiar. It was meant to be what they call a big wedding, and my father did not want to miss the chance to work over a large audience of potential supporters. Moments before the ceremony, my best man stood him against a wall, frisked him, and confiscated all his literature, a procedure to which he submitted peaceably, though with a yellowish glint in his eyes. Hidden in the trunk of my mother's car was a fresh load.

Next scene, London. Whenever we used to run into each other at parties, the writer Taki would always call out to me across a crowded room: "Navrozov, but are you a serious person?" This was in memory of an afternoon he once spent in conversation with my father, some 30 years ago in New York, not long after we had arrived from Moscow. Taki was moonlighting for the CIA, and that day's assignment was to debrief my father. They strolled back and forth in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, talking Brezhnev, Solzhenitsyn, and whatever else clever people talked about in those balmy days, when suddenly my father followed his interlocutor's gaze and realized that the intrepid agent of Western intelligence was staring at the legs of a distinctly female passerby, utterly oblivious to what he was telling him. "Taki," my father said, "but are you a serious person?"

Not long ago, Taki—who has since become a multimillionaire, in the only way there has ever been of becoming one without losing one's individuality, to say nothing of one's sense of smell—found me drinking in the company of a mutual friend, Natasha G—, at a watering hole run down the road from Harry's Bar. "He's in a horrible mood," she had whis-

pered to me. "He's been in Aspinalls two nights running, and he's down £250,000." "Ah, Navrozov!" exclaimed Taki as he joined us, perhaps just a shade more melancholy than usual. "But are you a serious person?" A short time later, the Russian photographer Gusov, my distinguished collaborator on *Italian Carousel* and now the third incorrigible gambler at the table, sat down with us and received the same whispered confidence from Natasha.

That very second, with the tact endemic to our race and his social circle, Gusov slapped Taki on the shoulder and bellowed: "Come on, Taki! Don't worry about so little thing!" Then, to Taki's visible puzzlement, "OK, you lose £250,000, but you rich man. I lose £250,000, too, but I'm poor photographer! They take my house now. My wife, she left me. My credit cards, they say they'll call a police. But I play. Any way, I play! I play if I have to take pictures at children birthdays! I play if I still have last pound in my pocket! In Napoleon Casino, Leicester Square, I give you address, people can play with just pound, you know. You still have pound, right, or Natasha is buying dinner? And you upset! Come on, Taki. You writer, not some kind of business world machine animal worm!" He went on and on with these syntactically imperfect admonishments, always in the same autobiographical vein.

"Now *that*," Taki said to me as the party was breaking up, "is a serious person."

The other night, drinking at Annabel's until closing, we again recall Gusov and his impassioned tirade. I tell Taki that my friend has since gone bankrupt, having lost every penny to the roulette tables of London's seediest gaming clubs, noting that his attitude to the destiny of the gambler has not become any the less messianic. And he has fallen in love with an Italian woman, who has left her husband, Prince T—, a member of one of the world's most prominent banking families, for a glimpse of that destiny. He lives from one day to the next, gambling whenever some cash, all too often of the hard-earned kind but preferably not, finds its way into the frayed pockets of his corduroy trousers. He lives, in short, as an

artist ought to live, on love and illusions.

And something else has happened. After some 20 years of inconsolable longing for motherhood, the faery princess in the mad Russian's life is now pregnant with his child. Is this not a suitable reason for more autobiographical bellowing of the pauper-to-prince, or Gusov-to-Taki, kind? But, more to the point, is this not the supreme vindication of the animating principle of roulette, where prayers are always answered, though not in your own words, and miracles do happen, provided you dare not expect them? The term *genetic roulette* has long been established, after all, in the vocabulary of popular science. We are all of us the offspring of those who have gambled with love.

"When I was poor," Taki muses, "my playing made much more sense. Aspinalls made more sense. Now it's pure ego. No, I agree with you, roulette is not a game for rich people. It's a game for desperate people." For *serious* people, to use that favorite phrase of his, for people like Gusov and my father. For it is hard not to see a fundamental kinship in the obsessive worldviews of these two men, one a bankrupt gambler and the other an emigré writer who believes that his only son's wedding in a bucolic corner of northeastern Connecticut is a suitable opportunity for launching a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with the stated purpose of saving Western culture from totalitarian peril.

The longer I live, the more occasions I find to ask myself whether I have inherited my father's obsessive gene in its pure form: "Am I a serious person?" It is not a facetious question, nor one that is easily answered in the ordinary circumstances of urban existence. Sometimes one can get lucky and obtain a definitive answer while taking a headlong plunge into politics, or religion, or some other obsession long on the stamina and short on the money. Sometimes one needs to spend a few years in the armed forces or at the gaming tables, where one's mettle is tested to the breaking point.

Sometimes one just has to fall in love.

