

The Future of Tyranny

My mother, an incurable Democrat, God forgive her, adored Adlai Stevenson. To her mind, he and Richard Nixon offered the extreme and opposite poles of spiritual reality, like Saint Michael and Lucifer.

Among today's politicians, Sen. Barack Obama inspires the same rare kind of devotion. I am not suggesting that this passion is warranted; on the contrary, I think it is, *sub specie aeternitatis*, ridiculous. Obama is a reflexive liberal who was reduced to absurdity last summer by a simple question. He had just delivered a tirade against dogfighting when a member of his audience asked why, if he is a professing Christian, he finds dogfighting more outrageous than legal abortion.

Obama, of course, had no answer to this. Rather desperately, without his typical aplomb, he muttered the usual formulae of his party about women, "choice," and so forth, but he had nothing even slightly illuminating to say about the actual subject: the deliberate killing of innocent human beings before birth.

His duel with Hillary Clinton and her husband came to a head during the annual obsequies for Martin Luther King, Jr., an exercise in vacuous piety I have never been able to understand. King's courage commands my respect, but his words, now quoted like Scripture, are offensive to reason, quite apart from their hypocrisy. I found them irritating long before the sordid sides of his character were revealed. I felt disappointed in Obama when he seemed to assent to King's apotheosis without reservation. It seemed an abdication of his intelligence and a surrender to social pressure.

Still, Obama undeniably has that magical appeal to millions. Why? Much of it is because of his fine racial ambiguity. He is technically "black," in the sense that he has from his Kenyan father an African genetic endow-

ment, but he was reared by his Caucasian mother, and his style and bearing are utterly "white." He has no family history of slavery, segregation, sharecropping, the ghetto, adverse discrimination, and all that. Racial resentment seems entirely alien to him. He attended Harvard Law, for Pete's sake! He seems as reassuring to whites as a "black" man can possibly be.

Obama has become a symbol of the old liberal dream of integration and the color-blind society. He looks black, but sounds white. He dresses immaculately, looks "clean" (as Joe Biden so explosively observed), and has the manners of an Ivy League prof. His skin color is as superficial as liberals have always wanted to insist that race is. If he were your neighbor, you would have no impulse to burn a cross on his lawn, even if you were the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan.


Not since Colin Powell has a man of African lineage exerted such a powerful tug on the hearts of white Americans. And Powell, too, had no ancestors owned by white masters. That was a key part of his appeal: He was a free man and the son of free men, rather than a victim to whom whites felt they owed groveling apologies.

In the silly squabbles politely mis-called "debates," the Democrats have inanely called for some unspecified "change," never mind from what, or into what, though one assumes that they mean at least relief from George W. Bush, a prospect even most Republicans surely hunger for. We have seen plenty of change since 1861: The original constitutional order of 1789 has been turned into exactly the kind of polity it was supposed to prevent forever, a single "consolidated" state capable of usurping any powers it chose to grab. None of the presidential contenders realizes this, except for the magnificent Ron Paul, whom the others agree is quite irrelevant to the great issues we are said to face in 2008.



Against this background, Bill Clinton chose to assist his wife's presidential campaign by attacking Obama. This appeared a disastrous miscalculation—first, because it seemed an act of weakness (did she need her husband to do her fighting for her?); second, because it confirms the Clintons' reputation as a pair of unscrupulous old political cynics (ganging up on the younger man is unseemly); and third, because it will leave lasting hard feelings among two classes of Democrats (the blacks who have adopted Obama as "one of us" and the romantics who see him as an angel, an Adlai; and after all, it is ill advised to kick Adlai in the groin). On top of all that, the tag-team approach served to elevate the quick-witted Obama, who proved more than capable of taking care of himself.

Besides, the Clintons have become tiresome; and who wants to be hectored by her raucous voice for the next four years? Like so many American women, Hillary is very attentive to her looks, but quite unaware of how grating she sounds. Her election would be punishing to our ears.

But would she be any worse than any of the other hacks who are now begging for our votes? They all agree on the great legacy of centralized power that has supplanted the original plan since the days of Lincoln. It would be as hard to get rid of entitlements now as to restore constitutional government, though it would amount to the same thing. For the foreseeable future, we are to be burdened with what our forebears would know to be tyranny; what difference does it make who administers it? 

The Loss of American Identity

California, Today—Your State, Tomorrow

by Roger D. McGrath

I have never been able to get it through my thick skull that one's identity, culture, and national sovereignty should not stand in the way of making money. For whatever reasons, I have always had a real attachment to my name, my family, my people, my place, my way of life. I have never felt particularly malleable and certainly was never willing to compromise what I am for a dollar. I wish I could say that this comes from a noble choice that I have made—that I would always choose principle over material gain. It is far more elemental than that. I am impelled by atavistic instincts to protect and defend what I am. Because these feelings are so powerful and come from so deep within, I simply marvel at those who, with the carrot of money before them, transform themselves with the facility of a chameleon or accept change with alacrity. I suppose I am destined to live out my days as an unreconstructed American, resisting globalism until I am graveyard dead.

California history offers compelling portraits of Americans who were willing to Hispanicize themselves for profit and those who were unwilling to do anything but fight to remain American. The former were businessmen who came by sea from New England; the latter were frontiersmen who came overland from the Mississippi Valley. I always identified with the latter; so, too, did my friends. We could not help it. Each morning in grammar school, we raised the symbol of those homespun and buckskin-clad frontiersmen who came to California—the Bear Flag. Big Griz on a background of white with a single star and the caption "California Republic" said a lot more to me than profits from shipping hides and tallow to Boston.

The hide-and-tallow traders found it advantageous to become part of Mexican California. They learned and used Spanish, Hispanicized their names, donned California dress, and, to gain citizenship, converted to Roman Catholicism. That last action is especially significant since, at the time, Protestant New England was reacting violently to Catholic immigration. Religious conflict was evidently inconsequential to the hide-and-tallow traders. On the voyage to California, as a saying of the era had it, "they left their conscience at Cape Horn." They also married daughters of the *rancheros*. Some of the daughters were pretty; others were homely. It mattered little. By

marrying into the families, the Yankee businessmen guaranteed themselves portions of *ranchos*.

Typical was Abel Stearns, a descendant of Puritan settlers who had arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Born in 1798, Stearns shipped before the mast when only a boy. He sailed the world before settling in California in 1829. In 1831, he opened a store in Los Angeles and established himself as an importer and exporter. By that time, he had converted to Roman Catholicism and become a Mexican citizen. His business flourished, and, now known as Don Abel, he was elected to the *ayuntamiento* (town council) of Los Angeles. In 1841, he married into the wealthy Bandini family of San Diego. His bride was Arcadia. She was 14; he was 43. Stearns subsequently became one of the largest landowners and cattle ranchers in Southern California, partly because of his business acumen and partly because of his family connections.

Americans of a different nature were settling during the 1840's in the Sacramento and other interior valleys of California. They arrived not by sea but by overland treks. They were interested in hunting, trapping, and farming rather than commerce. They avoided Mexican Californians and constituted a group apart. Clad in buckskin with Bowie knives stuck in their belts, and carrying Kentucky and Hawken rifles, they had come to extend the American frontier into California. Red-haired, Kentucky-born Ben Kelsey was representative of these frontiersmen. He and his 18-year-old Kentucky-born wife, Nancy, had arrived in California with the Bidwell Party in 1841 after 2,000 miles on the trail from Missouri. Nancy and her 18-month-old daughter were the only females who made the final leg of the journey from southern Idaho through northern Nevada and across the Sierra. By then, Nancy's shoes had worn away, and she crossed California's great granite range barefoot, while carrying her daughter. She was also five-months pregnant. Both husband and wife were rugged frontiersmen who never thought of turning back. "Where my husband goes," said Nancy, "I go. I can better endure the hardships of the journey than the anxieties of an absent husband."

Once in California, Kelsey made a living hunting and trapping. By 1845, Kelsey had built a log cabin and staked a homestead at the upper end of the Napa Valley. When American settlers revolted against Mexican rule, Ben Kelsey and his brothers were among the first participants. On June 14, 1846, Kelsey and other American frontiers-

Corresponding editor Roger D. McGrath is the author of *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, and Vigilantes*.