

JERE REAL

Gore Vidal, Roman senator

As usual, I am ambivalent. On the one hand, I am intellectually devoted to the idea of the old America. I believe in justice, I want redress for all wrongs done, I want the good life—if such a thing exists—accessible to all. Yet, emotionally, I would be only too happy to become world dictator, if only to fulfill my mission: the destruction of the last vestigial traces of traditional manhood in the race in order to realign the sexes, thus reducing population while increasing human happiness and preparing humanity for its next stage.

—Myra Breckinridge

LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA, might seem an odd place to give a campaign speech for a U.S. Senate seat from California. But then, Gore Vidal's candidacy is anything but conventional. His qualifications for the job include the fact that he has lived most of the last two decades in Italy rather than California; that he authored a wild, polysexual novel of which the main point, the *Times Literary Supplement* said, was "the reductio ad absurdum of the genitalia"; and that William F. Buckley once called him "you queer" on network television and threatened to "sock you in the goddamn face." Vidal himself would seem to have little taste for electoral politics. "Most Americans," he once explained, "are liars or crooks if they can get away with it, in exactly the same niggling way that Nixon was. So I think he reflected in many ways a majority of the electorate."

Nevertheless, there he was: Gore

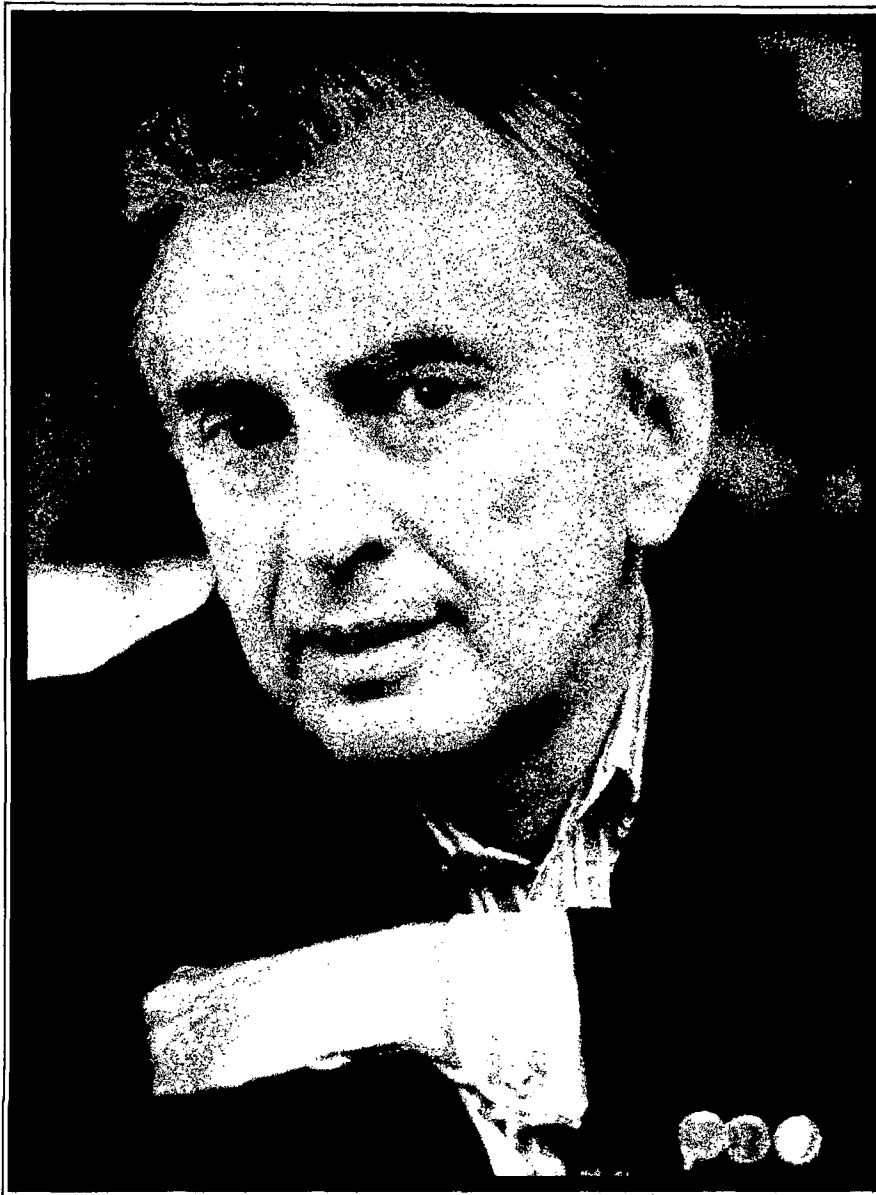
Vidal, novelist, playwright, critic, and now quixotic challenger to Jerry Brown for the Democratic nomination for a Senate seat soon to be vacated by S. I. Hayakawa. As the applause swelled and broke, he strode energetically to the podium at tiny Lynchburg College to rattle the bars of the city's nearby evangelical zoo, the national headquarters of the Moral Majority.

Perhaps the idea of a campaign appearance 2500 miles from the nearest eligible voter wasn't so strange. There is a certain theatrical quality, these days, to visiting Lynchburg, and Vidal is hardly the first politician to have grasped the possibilities. George McGovern, Jerry Ford, Sam Brown, they all come: some to praise Jerry Falwell, some to bury him. Either way, it makes good copy. The highest drama, or lowest comedy, was provided by Elizabeth Taylor a

short time ago, when the occasional Mrs. John Warner sat in the pews where Falwell has so often preached about the ideal marriage: "One man for one woman for one lifetime." It was a scene that would have delighted Vidal's film cultress, Myra Breckinridge. "Cleopatra meets Elmer Gantry," she would have called it.

But none of them could quite match Vidal, who after all has done so many television talk shows that he says most Americans think of him as "a piece of furniture in their homes." And from his opening line it was clear Vidal was in top form. "I usually like to start with a prayer," he said with a sardonic flicker of a smile tugging at the sides of his mouth. "But instead, I'll start with the very latest Nancy Reagan joke.

"When she heard that a compassionate government had decided to give all that cheese to the poor, she



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thought a moment, and she said: 'Good. Let them eat quiche.'

Having taken on God and Nancy Reagan in the first thirty seconds of his speech, Vidal quickly gave short shrift to what he waspishly referred to as the local "monotheists." Reverend Falwell "was out of style" for Virginia, said Vidal, possibly even "ungentlemanly"; Falwell should simply be seen as "banker for Our Lord." After a dramatist's two-beat pause, Vidal added the kicker: "... which is honorable service, I'm sure." Mark Antony, an earlier Roman, did not deliver better.

That ironical detachment about nearly every aspect of American political life is, of course, vintage Vidal. It has been honed, like an old-fashioned straight razor, for the past sixteen years as Vidal viewed his native land from his cliffside villa in Italy. It is confusing. Why would a man who hasn't even voted in a presidential election since 1964 (when he voted for LBJ over Goldwater), suddenly feel a clarion call to the Senate? His answer is blunt: "The country is in a bad way." In his speech, he expounds further. "Schools are being shut down. Something like 50,000 businesses went bust last year. The city streets are a battleground. We have 10 million unemployed. The professional politician has no answer to any of these problems because he is part of the problem."

That leads Vidal to his great notion—that the United States is run by a single party with two factions, Democrats and Republicans. "This division," he explains, "is supposed to give us a sense of choice at election time, like Painkiller X and Painkiller Y... when we know that both are aspirin." The one-party system is the creation of "those great financial interests" that have been governing the country "off and on, mostly on," since 1786.

The idea is not original with Vidal. The single-party idea has been periodically put forth from both far left and far right. In fact, Vidal's words seem a more elegant echo of Governor George Wallace's oft-repeated statement that "there's not a dime's worth of difference between the Democrats and the Republicans." It is a comparison from which Vidal does not shy. "Wallace was on to something with that statement of his," Vidal confided over late-night drinks. Vidal, perhaps, sees the results of such one-party government a bit differently than Wal-

lace. He believes it will bring ever more massive military expenditures ("the budget of the Pentagon will continue to expand because of whatever enemy the enemy-of-the-month club has selected for us") and a bankrupt economy ("taxes and inflation will continue to increase while real income decreases... the poor will get poorer, the rich will get richer, and the middle class—which is the country—will continue to carry the great burden of taxation").

The proposal by President Reagan ("in the great springtime of his senility") of a \$1.6 trillion defense budget over the next five years can only lead us to nuclear war or national bankruptcy, Vidal argues. He says the seeds of this destruction were sown during a national hubris that began after World War II, "when, if ever a nation were on top of the world, it was us." The decision to play the world's policeman—and supply ourselves and our allies with armaments—was, Vidal believes, our tragic flaw. As one who has spent a literary lifetime studying the growth of the American empire (in *Burr* and 1876) and the decline of past empires (in *Julian*), the writer puts his case succinctly: "We have neither the intelligence nor the wealth to govern the world." His vision of America's destiny if such militaristic aims were abandoned? "We could repair and

commitment to NATO. That is a burden that should be undertaken by our allies "who are now much richer and more populous than we are."

It is at these times, when Vidal speaks of the dangers of militarism and the horrors of war, that he is at his most eloquent. It is probably no exaggeration to say that he is the most sensibly pacifist candidate on the ballot anywhere in the June primaries. "Reagan and the Bel-Air Crusaders have decided there must be a war somewhere," Vidal told a college crowd in San Francisco last month. "The administration knows war is good for the economy; it doesn't matter where it takes place to them as long as Boeing and Lockheed stay in business.... If we really knew our history we would not have allowed ourselves to become so misgoverned and exploited. Like empires of the past, we have divided and conquered, humiliated and alienated countries all over the world." Reagan's foreign policy, he added, continues to maintain a "parity of murder" with the Soviets: "I sometimes get the strange sensation that I'm living in an occupied country." Unlike so many leftists, however, Vidal does not keep two sets of books when it comes to anti-interventionist sentiment. "What do you think about our policy toward South Africa?" asked a black woman

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perfect our own country and be what we were intended to be, a great commercial power in the world." In effect, Gore Vidal seems to be suggesting that the United States could be a giant Switzerland. Better that than to become involved, as he thinks we soon will be, in a war in Angola, Nicaragua, or El Salvador. He mocks Reagan's modern-day domino theory: "I myself sit up at night worrying about hordes of El Salvadorans in Greyhound buses crossing the border, getting lost on the freeways. I can't sleep for fear they'll be on the march." He proposes an immediate 25 percent cut in the Pentagon budget and further suggests that the United States seriously consider ending its annual \$83 billion a year

sitting in the front row during his San Francisco speech. "There does not seem to be much we can do about it," he answered gently (although a tinge of limousine liberalism did seem to creep in when he added that "I've made sure none of my plays appears there").

VIDAL IS SCARCELY LESS passionate when discussing government intervention at home—in our sex lives. He gets a standing ovation at every stop when he tells the audience: "I know this is a brand new thought in a free country, but let's think about it anyway: The time has come for us to get government off our fronts!" As the roars fade,

he continues. "Fifty percent of all police work is concerned with victimless crimes—everything from gambling to suicide. Suppose we directed all the police work centered on solving victimless crimes to solving crimes with victims—our crime rate would be greatly reduced and our lives and deaths would once again be up to us to control."

Much of Vidal's life's work has been spent examining—and often attempting to erase—the thin lines between sexual identities. He was one of the first American writers sympathetically to explore homosexual themes; and in *Myra Breckinridge* he took sexual ambiguity to its outermost limits in a story about a homosexual man who becomes a woman, falls in love with another woman, and then becomes a man again. Yet, curiously, he has attracted little support in California's burgeoning gay community. The *Advocate*, the premiere gay newspaper, has even endorsed Jerry Brown. The problem is apparently Vidal's insistence that he is bisexual and his ridicule of the notion of a "gay sensibility." But Vidal won't budge. At a meeting of gay movers-and-shakers in Los Angeles, he flatly insisted that "it is fact, not theory, that everyone is bisexual, just as everyone has two lobes in the brain. To have an interest in both sexes is *normal* . . . I am all for resistance to the heterosexual dictatorship, overthrow of the heterosexual dictatorship. That appeals to my sense of justice and my warrior spirit. But to pretend that the fact that a number of men and women who prefer same-sex to other-sex have anything in common beyond that preference goes against all the evidence."

That argument didn't win him any friends. And despite the way he can drive crowds crazy, despite the huge outpouring of volunteers his announcement of candidacy prompted (one Democratic party official said "it was like a repetition of the day that Ted Kennedy announced his candidacy for president"), Vidal's campaign has serious problems. One is money. Another is the candidate himself, whose wry wit gets him into trouble. Last month, for instance, he floored reporters when—in answer to a question about Mexican immigration—a deadpan Vidal said it was inevitable that the United States would invade Mexico and take its oil. Later he had to explain to newsmen that it had all been a joke.

Perhaps the most serious drawback to Vidal's candidacy is that his knowledge of economics is about what one might expect from a man who thinks that John Kenneth Galbraith is "the greatest living economist." At first it sounds as though he might have some surprises; he says that the IRS "is an extortion racket that could have taught the Gestapo a trick or two,"

of four, the fact is that he trails Brown by 57 percent to 10 percent.

Vidal is probably not surprised. He once said that "the average American voter is forty-seven, blue collar, white, intensely racist, perfectly ignorant of politics . . . and what little he knows of the Bill of Rights he doesn't like." (And of the word "normal," he wrote, it "conjures up vigorous Minutemen

Much of Vidal's lifework has been spent examining—and often trying to erase—the thin line that he says separates sexual identities.

and that the graduated income tax is "tyrannous." But he wants to expand social programs and doesn't seem to understand that high taxes and government regulation have created many of the problems that the programs try—and fail—to alleviate. He proposes to fund an expanded welfare state with a flat 10 to 12 percent tax on the adjusted gross incomes of all corporations and a flat 5 percent tax on most individual incomes. With a lack of evidence and a sweet certainty that would make any supply-side economist proud, Vidal insists that these taxes would generate more than enough income to cover the federal budget at its current level.

That projection appears to have been conjured out of thin air, in much the same fashion as Vidal's recent claim on National Public Radio that "the corporations, since Reagan is in, now pay no tax at all, no tax at all, no tax at all. The top 400 in *Fortune* magazine pay no tax at all. This is astonishing." What's *really* astonishing, as veteran conservative hitman John D. Lofton recently noted, is that Vidal could so casually say something that is so completely untrue. Corporations paid \$61 billion in federal taxes last year, and the Office of Management and Budget estimates they'll pay another \$284 billion between 1982 and 1985.

WHETHER IT IS VIDAL'S lack of money, or lack of economic expertise, or simply Jerry Brown's incumbency and superior organization, Vidal trails badly in the polls. Although his aides make much of the fact that an April survey showed him running second in a field

with rifles shooting commies, while their wives and little ones stay home stitching hoods.") With such a view of the electorate, you wonder why he's running.

On another occasion, in 1961, he offered a less hysterical view of American politics:

An American politician in the mid-twentieth century must conform to certain conventions. He must be gregarious (or seem to be), candid (but never give the game away), curious about people (otherwise, he would find his work unendurable). An American politician must not seem too brainy. He must put on no airs. He must smile often but at the same time appear serious. . . . Above all, a politician must not sound clever or wise or proud.

Obviously, Vidal meets his first three challenges, but one can only wonder if he can cope with the rest of his own list of qualifications. In the 1952 campaign between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, Eisenhower said, in a somewhat incredulous tone (which Vidal can imitate to perfection), that "if elected, I shall go to Korea." Stevenson retorted to the press with considerable wit, "If elected I shall go to Washington." It was a good line, but it did not go down well with the public. Adlai, for all his wit, was perceived by many as frivolous.

Perhaps the voting public has changed greatly since 1961. Or perhaps Gore Vidal can himself change and not sound brainy, clever, wise, or proud. His theme of the risk of nuclear war could be a potent appeal, particularly if recent antinuclear proclamations, rallies, and demonstrations around the country are an accurate gauge of popular opinion. In 1961, Vidal's futuristic novel *Messiah* gave a terrifying vision of the United States

(and eventually all of Western civilization) caught up in a religious-political movement based on the acceptance of death. The movement was small at first, but later gained both its national following and its political clout through the use of television. The protagonist—named Eugene Luther (as was Vidal before he took the name of his grandfather, Senator Thomas Gore)—was pursued to Egypt by death squads of the new regime. In the book's key scene, Luther broke with the new cult he helped found because of its emphasis of death *over* life. Having initially rid man of his fear of dying, the group had moved to institutionalize death as a new religion. Luther argued that "life is to be lived until the flesh no longer supports the life within. The meaning of life . . . is more life, not death." Darkly hinting at a nuclear holocaust, Vidal's stump speech quotes Bertrand Russell in a similar key: "We have to stand out against this hysteria and realize, and make others realize, that life, not death—no matter how heroic—is the source of all good."

While covering the 1968 Republican convention, Vidal explained Ronald Reagan's political appeal and success as the result of television imagery. He sees himself, with some justice, as equally telegenic. At fifty-seven, his hair turning senatorially gray, Vidal looks every inch a political father figure. He has said his profile is that of a late Roman emperor, one of the "minor" ones. Myra Breckinridge would place him somewhere between Louis Calhern in MGM's *Julius Caesar* and Spencer Tracy in *Judgment at Nuremberg*. His profile does have that graven-image quality, the sort one expects to find on a coin, or, these days, a postage stamp. The imperial style is there—even for one who decries empire. And with Vidal, one may get about as much substance, perhaps a bit more, as voters reasonably may expect from any politician today.

Like Vidal's Myra, one begins to think, too, in movie images. Back in 1964, Vidal played the part of a U.S. senator in the film version of his own play about a presidential convention, *The Best Man*. He once wrote that "the politician must have that instinctive sense for occasion which is also the actor's art." Having played that part on the screen, he now seeks to act it in reality, vindicating Oscar Wilde once and for all by proving that life *can* imitate art. □

CORPORATE STATE

RON PAUL

Hide and seek at the Energy Department

THE EXTRAORDINARY MEDIA coverage of recent events in Poland has helped to remind us, by contrast, of the blessings of personal liberty and the abundance made possible by the free market. In Poland, people stand in line for bread, for meat, and for all the necessities of life—when they are available; millions of Poles are seriously malnourished. Perhaps the most vivid and telling image we have of Poland is that of the people in those endless lines, crushed in spirit and meekly accepting an oppressive, hopelessly inefficient, and demoralizing way of life.

The "command economy," developed in Stalin's Russia, is the system in force in Poland today. It is a system which outlaws free exchanges between individuals in the marketplace, and instead allocates scarce resources and distributes scarce goods through the decisions of bureaucrats. Of course, for those with political or military status, there are no lines and no shortages—special stores of the choicest goods are set aside for these elites. While the common man waits in line, party officials enjoy splendid dachas on the Black Sea, and Communist Party Chairman Brezhnev even has a collection of Western luxury cars.

Aren't we lucky not to live in such a place! Certainly, Americans would never accept the sort of regimentation and abuse of personal liberty practiced in these Eastern despotisms—or would they?

In the United States we profess de-

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votion to the rights of individuals, and we pride ourselves on the productivity of our market system. But there are parts of our economy that often seem disturbingly like Poland's, where bureaucrats can and do order the rest of us around like so many drones. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of energy. Government controls on natural gas and energy prices have produced shortages. In response to the shortages, the federal government did not lift the harmful controls for years, but rather, it added coercive allocation schemes that would have been comical were it not for their dire consequences.

Just as in Poland, energy price controls have led to shortages, and the shortages have led to coercive government controls, in 1974 and again in 1979. Just as in Eastern Europe, government controls meant that the people without special political status were forced to wait in lines. Minimum gas purchases, odd-even days, maximum hours, and weekend closings—all of these were added to price controls and bureaucratic misallocation, and all of these served only to maximize inconvenience. Shortages in cities coexisted with surpluses in rural areas, but to reallocate the supplies would have broken the law.

While the plebeians suffered, however, the politically powerful took care of themselves. Congress set aside special gasoline supplies for its fleet of VIP limousines. No matter how long an ordinary citizen might spend in line, at least he would never be stuck behind Tip O'Neill.

Had the price mechanism been allowed to operate freely, there would have been no energy shortages in 1974 and 1979; supply and demand would have adjusted, distribution would have been efficient, and there would have been no need for the coercion and manipulation of individuals by the state. The terrible lesson of the energy "crises" of the 1970s is that emergencies caused by state controls can be used as a pretext for even more oppressive controls. We would do well to remember the Boston gas-station owner who was arrested for staying open twenty-four hours a day in a crime-ridden area and charging more than the government-allowed price. He was arrested for doing exactly what individuals are supposed to do in a free market. But under Jimmy Carter, that was not so surprising. Carter's idea of an energy policy was to muster all the