

NEW BEDFELLOWS

VIRGINIA I. POSTREL

Back when the nation's political attentions were focused more on Louisiana than on New Hampshire, a TV reporter interviewed a woman who said she was a fervent David Duke supporter. The reason, she said, was all those blacks on welfare—they were ruining the state. But, responded the bewildered reporter, you yourself are on welfare. How can you say that?

"They get more," the woman replied.

"*They get more.*" It is a slogan for the new political age.

"They" are sometimes blacks, and sometimes whites. Sometimes women, and sometimes men. Sometimes the rich, and sometimes the poor. And, this season, "they" are especially foreigners—from maids and migrant workers to Honda and Hitachi. "They" are the ones who are getting what "we" want, or need, or have.

The politics of resentment are abroad in the land—and this time they aren't the monopoly of egalitarian Democrats buying votes with envy. The recession is an obvious reason for the surge of resentment. But it is, despite the pain, too fleeting to explain the whole phenomenon.

Nor is quadrennial Democratic opportunism all there is to it. They may love economic nationalism and hate "the rich," but the Democrats can hardly be held responsible for the rise of David Duke (much as they might benefit from that rise).

No, the politics of resentment spring from something less transient and more systemic. Ours has become a pie-splitting society, more concerned with dividing the wealth than with increasing it. The transformation is neither total nor irreversible, but it is dangerously advanced.

The reason for this transformation lies not in any particular platform but in a

basic lack of understanding. Although few Americans would say they prefer redistribution to growth, even fewer understand where wealth comes from. And among those few, fewer still appreciate the tolerance necessary to stave off a future of resentful pie splitting.

Consider this year's populists, Tom Harkin and Pat Buchanan. For supporters of free markets, Buchanan's supply-side sermons are invigorating, Harkin's laborite gospel chilling. But though they cite different prophets, the two candidates offer the same homily.

Harkin says we should stop "sending our money and our jobs overseas." Buchanan denounces George Bush for having put the economic boom "on a fast track to Mexico." Buchanan is a more colorful phrase-maker than Harkin. But the message is the same: We must build walls—to keep our companies in and theirs out, our jobs in and their workers out, our money in...and theirs out.

Harkin does not worry about justifying his message. His labor-union supporters have always feared the international marketplace, with its checks on their demands for higher wages and more regulations. His world view assumes a limited pie and an ongoing struggle between management and labor, evil and good, "the rich" and everyone else.

But Pat Buchanan should know better. And one suspects he does.

While he can articulate a cogent and serious case for cutting foreign aid or reducing overseas entanglements, Buchanan gets blurry and defensive when asked about trade. He opposes a free trade agreement with Mexico, supports higher textile quotas, and hints that big tariffs might be wise. But he never really

explains why these are good ideas.

When George Will asked how a conservative could be such a protectionist, Buchanan answered all too literally. Rather than respond to the underlying question—how to square a call for more regulation, bigger government, and higher taxes with his putative free-market leanings—he appealed to conservative icons. Barry Goldwater opposed free trade, he said; so did Strom Thurmond and Prescott Bush, father of George. Buchanan could cite role models but no principles.

In place of ideas, he countered with the legitimate anguish of American business, overtaxed and overregulated. It isn't fair, he said, to let plants in countries without minimum-wage laws or environmental regulations compete for business with factories in the United States. We have to protect our jobs from our politicians.

Unfortunately, Buchanan's policy would trap us in Harkin's world. The threat of international competition is the one true weapon overregulated enterprise has against overweening government. When jobs go abroad—or even leave California for Nevada—regulatory enthusiasts tend to back down.

To create the walled-in America Buchanan envisions would require more than simple tariffs and a lower living standard. It would mean clipping the cables that connect the world's financial markets, imprisoning American capital. It would mean plant-closing laws to the *n*th degree, lifetime contracts at any cost. It would turn American employers into government employees, subject to the whims of Tom Harkin and his allies—and unable to ever escape.

It is the vision of a desperate man. And perhaps Buchanan does simply despair of

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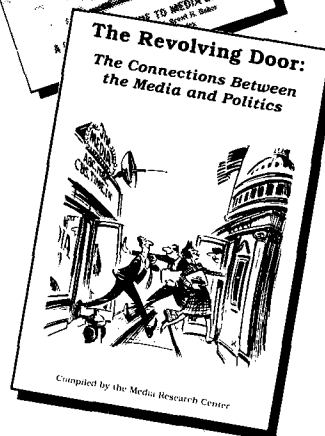
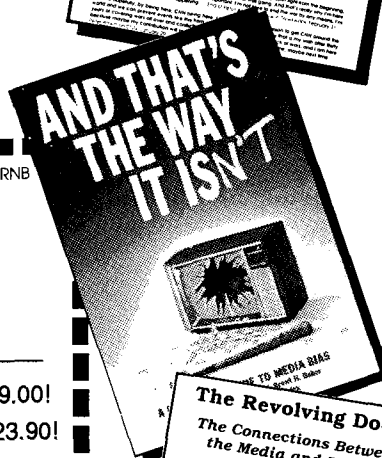
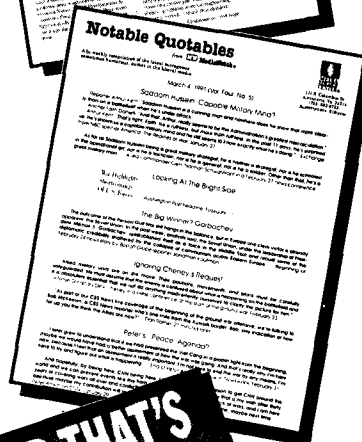
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political change. But one sees in his vision, and in Harkin's, a more general fear of change. And that is where the contradiction arises.

Harkin, and his less-populist fellow Democrats, would like a larger pie, if only to give them more to redistribute. They talk much of getting America moving again. But they dislike the sources of wealth—the uncontrolled and uncontrollable search for new ways of doing things, the contracts between consenting adults, the risk taking, and, yes, the quest for profit. They dislike the unpredictable and the undirected. The Democratic impulse is to plan, to regulate, to divvy up the subsidies and bring in the lawyers.

Buchanan, by contrast, professes

seemingly real ardor for free markets and economic growth. But their results make him nervous, especially when they lure brown people into his neighborhood, his America. He, too, is tempted to meddle. Supporting growth but fearing change, he can't muster the tolerance that permits the very freedoms of which he is so fond.

In that, he is a true populist. We are all tempted to meddle. Other people's choices so often seem so wrong, so foolish, so risky. It is hard to say hands off.

But one exception leads to another and another and another. With a thousand cuts, one may slice a pie. But one may also kill the goose that lays golden eggs. And having done so, one will soon have nothing but the cry, "They get more." ■

GEORGE BUSH, MEANIE

RICK HENDERSON

When Pat Buchanan launched his presidential campaign, he called George Bush "a man of graciousness, honor, and integrity...." Perhaps without realizing it, Buchanan identified the reason the Bush administration is in trouble.

Pundits see Bush lurch from one position to another and say the man has no principles. Actually, a deeply felt set of beliefs guides his presidency. To put it simply, George Bush is driven and motivated by niceness. He believes federal policies should be guided by the same rules that govern personal conduct.

It's easy to see Bush making the personal political in foreign policy. He led us into the Gulf War because you stand up to bullies. He stuck by Mikhail Gorbachev because you don't abandon your friends. He has given a cold shoulder to Israel—leaving aside any merits of the Arab demands—because Yitzhak Shamir is a rude, unpleasant fellow.

This highly personal foreign policy sometimes works. But nice domestic policies often cause unintended results that are downright mean.

Consider wetlands regulations. During the 1988 campaign, Bush made a nice

pledge: "no net loss" of the nation's wetlands base. An avid hunter and fisherman, Bush recognized how nice it was to have plenty of duck ponds and cattail marshes.

But federal regulators considered "wetlands" any property that was under water for seven consecutive days a year. The government banned development on millions of acres—80 percent of them private property. Farmers, truck mechanics, and average homeowners saw the government seize their land without providing any compensation. They complained to Washington because taking away somebody's farm is very mean.

So Dan Quayle and other policy makers sympathetic to property owners tried to redefine wetlands so that they were indeed wet. Then outraged environmentalists took up the cause of swamp critters and cried "meanie." To placate environmentalists, the administration may revert to a wetlands definition that's nearly as expansive as the one that angered property owners in the first place. Whoever screams loudest—and last—seems to win the policy prize.

Similarly, the president zigzagged on

civil rights because he couldn't decide which was nicer: redressing past discrimination with affirmative action or relieving current discrimination by ending quotas. He was torn between his sense of noblesse oblige and his gut feeling that everybody ought to play fair.

Likewise, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires lots of nice things—making apartments and offices more accessible to handicapped persons, for example. But suppose you operate an office in a townhouse, and federal law says you must spend \$100,000 to add an elevator just in case a client or employee is wheelchair-bound. If you can't afford the elevator, you have to shut down your business. It's nice to have an elevator. But it's very mean when the feds force you to close your doors and put your employees on the street.

Or if you want to build apartments, it costs about \$4,000 more per unit to make a building handicapped accessible. These costs force up the rent you charge. Very mean indeed.

Unless the president alters his principles—or abandons them completely—we'll see more niceness in a second Bush term. Because the Clarence Thomas nomination offended so many people, Bush won't appoint other thoughtful conservatives to the Supreme Court; only pleasant moderates need apply. No substantive education reforms, because they require nasty fights with teachers' unions. No tax relief or spending cuts, because either would hurt the feelings of George Mitchell and Dick Darman.

The president should realize he can't be nice to everybody. Leaders have to make tough choices. And when you consider throwing government power around, often the nicest thing to do is nothing at all. ■

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