

Albert Agonistes

What Gore's winning storyline tells us about politicians

By Nick Gillespie

As I write this, Al Gore, after being down by as many as 15 percentage points, is running neck and neck with George W. Bush in most national polls. More important, perhaps, he is being treated with newfound deference by the press. Over the past few months, he has metamorphosed from an overbearing, barely animated beta-male into a dedicated, savvy pol who even exudes a glamorous whiff of tragedy. However long- or short-lived Gore's successful makeover turns out to be, it is worth puzzling over, as it suggests just how expert politicians are at adapting their personal storylines to changing circumstances—and just how critically the public must read such narratives.

In 1998, I went to a workshop attended by a number of editors, writers, and publishers of high-profile national publications. Though the workshop had nothing to do with politics—it was a nuts-and-bolts look at how to launch new and to im-

prove existing publications—I had a number of conversations there that led me to conclude that the Washington press corps would attack Gore relentlessly as he tried to make his move into the White House. The reason for the hostility? The vice president has a terrible reputation for being extremely ham-handed when it comes to managing his press coverage.

In a session on “ethical dilemmas” in publishing, the editor of a major women's magazine related an incident in which the magazine was interviewing the wife of a “big-shot politician” prior to a much-ballyhooed conference on raising children. In the question-and-answer period that followed, the editor allowed that the figures under discussion were Tipper and Al Gore. During the interview, Tipper Gore voluntarily brought up some difficult, highly publicized problems she'd had with her own children, most memorably the time one of her underage daughters was accused of drinking in public and mouthing off to

the cops. Shortly after conducting the interview, but before it ran, the magazine got a furious call from one of the vice president's people, screaming that if any of the sensitive material saw print, the magazine would not only be disinvited to the kids conference, but would never again have access to any White House or administration figures.

Curiously, the ethical quandary the editor offered up for discussion was essentially, How quickly do you fold under such pressure while maintaining the smallest shred of professional integrity? (Such are the concerns of access journalism.) In the discussion that followed, I brought up widely circulated—and in England, published—stories about the vice president's son being caught using drugs in 1996 and suspended from school as a result. (Tipper had somehow failed to mention that difficulty during her interview.) As James Adams put it in an October 13, 1996, London *Times* story, “Reporters all knew... that Albert Gore III, the 13-year-old son of the vice-president, had been suspended from school earlier this year for smoking marijuana. A tearful phone call by Gore to senior editors [at *The Washington Post*] ensured the story was never published.”

Forget about the on-the-record responses of the Second Lady, I suggested. Didn't journalists have a duty to report on such actions, especially when the politicians involved are hypocritically prosecuting a drug war that arrests less-well-connected kids for similar behavior? Most of the people in the room scoffed at the idea on the grounds that Albert III was not a public figure (though his father regularly uses him as a campaign prop) and that such stories would surely “ruin” the boy's future (a laughable suggestion, and one that ignores kids whose lives actually have been ruined by policies supported by Gore). Once the session was over, however, two writers for a large newspaper with a national readership (not *The Washington Post*) told me separately that their publication's gossip columnist was set to run a piece on the story until their pub-



lisher got a call from the vice president as well.

Given such tactics, I assumed there'd be a backlash once Gore actually hit the campaign trail in earnest (displaced contempt for Clinton wouldn't help him either). Even though many (perhaps most) journalists covering Gore share his politics, they don't like being bullied, and their resentment would out itself in one form or another. Sure enough, much of the early campaign coverage toward Gore was sharply critical, if not blatantly hostile, especially when discussing the vice president's attempts to manage his image. Last fall's revelation that author-cum-political-operative Naomi Wolf was being paid \$15,000 a month to coach Gore in the ways of the alpha male (wear earth tones, show your teeth more) might have been the low point to date of the vice president's campaign, but it was simply one of many such embarrassments. (Remember the phony photo-op on the Connecticut river?) While everyone expects politicians to employ image consultants, the idea that the vice president would need (much less heed) that particular sort of advice was bathetic at best.

To be sure, Gore had experienced problems with self-fashioning before, perhaps most spectacularly at the 1996 Democratic National Convention, when he teared up while recounting how his sister Nancy had started smoking as a teenager and died from lung cancer in 1984. In a speech memorable only for its shamelessness, Gore swore to "pour [his] heart and soul into the cause of protecting our children from the dangers of smoking." The speech was a hit, earning raves in *Time's* "Winners and Losers" column ("tears, not smoke, in their eyes as he tells delegates of his sister's battle with lung cancer") and *Newsweek's* "Conventional Wisdom Watch" ("VP kicks butts in speech"). Soon after, however, Gore admitted to receiving campaign donations from tobacco companies through 1990 and that his family continued to lease land for tobacco crops for years after his sister's death. His infamous boast during his failed 1988 presidential run—"Throughout most of my life, I raised tobacco...sprayed it...chopped it...shredded it...spiked it...and sold it"—came back to haunt him as well.

These days, however, it's mostly

smooth sailing for Gore as far as the press goes, even as various Buddhist Temple confederates of his get indicted and convicted. What's different? Emerging from the primary season, Gore has managed to humanize himself in ways that play especially well with reporters. Where George W. Bush has done little to counter the perception that he's simply a middle-aged Richie Rich, Gore, though possibly even more privileged, has hinted at the psychic

ingly sympathetic tones, desperate to "maintain his political viability" à la Bill Clinton.) Gore has called his situation a "real conundrum" but in the end, he enlisted, even turning down a National Guard post a relative had secured for him. Alas, Gore Sr. lost his race and Gore Jr. went off to "fight" in Vietnam, having offered himself up for naught. The tragic structure, if not its actual content, of such a story packs an emotional wallop.

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depth and brooding intensity of a dramatic protagonist.

Consider, for instance, his Vietnam narrative, a wonderful bit of self-serving storytelling masquerading as a profile in courage. Although the election of Bill Clinton seemingly made a candidate's military past completely irrelevant, John McCain's presence in this year's primaries changed that. In the face of a genuine war "hero," the other three major candidates' wartime status took on new life. Bill Bradley and George W. Bush had both slipped free of active service in Southeast Asia. Gore, however, like McCain, actually went to Vietnam, albeit as a journalist who only served five months (less than half the normal hitch) and who never saw direct action with the enemy (at various times during his political career, Gore's tendency to embellish his experience has caused him embarrassment). While the matter has not been settled definitively, there is good reason to believe that Gore was protected from anything approaching actual danger while in Vietnam.

Nowadays, Gore is casting his decision to enlist as a great moral sacrifice that sets him apart from other politicians. In 1970, Albert Gore Sr., the senator from Tennessee, was facing a difficult reelection campaign. Al Jr., by his own account, was strongly opposed to the war but also wanted to help his father. (He was also, as *The Washington Post's* David Maraniss and Ellen Nakashima have suggested in cloy-

Indeed, it allows Gore—a privileged "senator's son" of the sort decried in Creedence Clearwater Revival's bitter protest song "Fortunate Son"—to be both a soldier and an anti-war protester, a man of principle who risked absolutely nothing. Indeed, no one has even asked him how a high-profile war protest from someone in his position might have affected U.S. policy.

Of course, if elections hinged simply on such narratives, then John McCain would be the Republican nominee and Bob Dole would be the incumbent. But the candidates who know how to tell good personal tales—Ronald Reagan, the Midwesterner who became a movie star; Bill Clinton, the man from Hope; even Jimmy Carter, the peanut farmer from Plains—have a habit of getting elected. Al Gore's newfound storytelling skills are impressive, allowing him even to turn his mediocre academic record and collegiate pot smoking into a plus (as the *Post* put it, such revelations "subvert" the notion that he was always an ass-kissing grind).

It is, of course, far too early in the electoral process to predict anything about November. But especially given George W. Bush's manifest inability or unwillingness to craft his own autobiography in attractive terms, Gore, at least early in the campaign season, has emerged as the candidate with character. In an age where the politics of personality have been getting a lot of attention, that's no small advantage.



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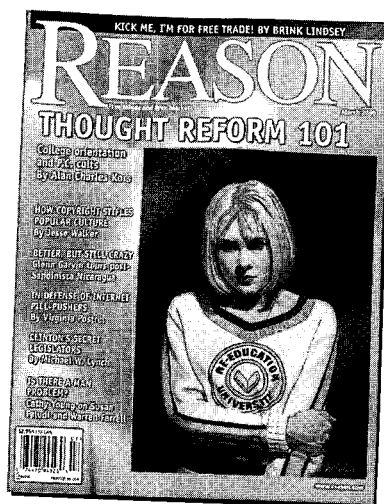
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Letters



Controlling Student Bodies

As somebody who's recently been on the front lines in the conflict over multiculturalism and indoctrination on college campuses, it pleased me to see Alan Charles Kors' "Thought Reform 101" (March 2000).

One of my first assignments on the student newspaper at Tulane this fall was to cover an "Undoing Racism" session by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. When I arrived I was told that I would have to be an active participant in the training if I wanted to be present at all. It seemed clear, by that point, that an objective story was not what they had in mind.

Journalistic integrity prevents me from giving my opinion, but I can share a few things that went on. Racism was defined as a concept separate from race prejudice, one in which whites supposedly oppressed everyone else whether or not their attitudes were actually racist. Race prejudice, and the concept of race itself, was defined as a specious and ignorant belief. A lecture on axiology, however, followed this.

When the discussion turned to solutions, I proposed making the goal of anti-racism to discard the concept of race altogether and recognize everybody as an individual. I was told by the facilitator that the goal should be, basically, to have an

aesthetically pleasing color balance and "appreciate others' struggles," and that recognizing individuals is "crap" and something only whites want.

Bennett Kalafut
New Orleans, LA

Dr. Kors' article on this subject omitted one important piece of information: How loudly do those who conduct these courses speak? If it's so loud that the students can't sleep, then it may indeed be Orwellian. If not, well, is it all that big a deal?

I remember required courses of similar ilk when I was a freshman—different subjects, of course, but the same exploitation of a captive audience. Freshmen are the eternal captives. But unless they've changed from my day, their ear for arrant nonsense hasn't expired.

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Colleges and universities would be better off spending the money now being used to hire the thought police to hold pizza parties or rock concerts or just about any free and open gathering where impressionable freshmen could meet each other, one on one, and explore for themselves the delight of diversity.

Robert J. Sheddler
Navarre, OH

Although I understand and can appreciate Professor Alan Charles Kors' position, I disagree with his premise that working with students on diversity issues amounts to an invasion of liberty. Professor Kors named me as one of the "most celebrated facilitators at the moment" on what he calls "diversity education," and although he recognizes my intentions as good, he maintains that the effect of my work is "frightening, atavistic, and irrational," by means that are "deeply intrusive."

I have to say that Professor Kors has greatly misunderstood not only the purpose of "diversity education" but also the