

# POLITICAL BOOKNOTES

**Keeper of the Gate.** Selwa "Lucky" Roosevelt. *Simon & Schuster, \$21.95.* For seven hectic years, "Lucky" Roosevelt was U.S. Chief of Protocol—the Emily Post of the State Department, guardian of the nation's manners.

When she stepped down in 1989, she had served longer than any other chief; had hobnobbed and traveled with royalty; wine, dined, and yachted with the rich and celebrated; seated thousands of dinners; attended untold receptions; presided over innumerable state visits and official functions; and indulged the whims of potentates and presidents. She had also dealt with the daily problems of the diplomatic corps, supervised the multi-million dollar renovation of Blair House, and most of all, tried to please an enigmatic Nancy Reagan, whom she refers to as a "perfectionist."

All of the above, plus her own ambition and determination to rise to the top, are described in this somewhat pretentious memoir, which offers up a number of amusing anecdotes and stories but is marred by an overabundance of self-flattering tributes, letters, and comments.

There is no doubt that Lucky Roosevelt knows the nuances of the capital—how to pull strings and get things done. The daughter of Lebanese immigrants, she was raised in Tennessee, won a scholarship to Vassar, and gained entree to the highest social echelons after a whirlwind courtship and marriage to the late Archibald Roosevelt, a former CIA honcho and grandson of the legendary T.R. (Her depiction of her humble Arabic origins and her climb to the exalted world of super WASPs, with all their pride, privacy, and stinginess, is among the most compelling parts of the book.)

A stint in the fifties covering Embassy Row for *The Washington Star*, and later writing travel articles for *Town & Country*, added to her knowledge of the *haute monde* and the dos and don'ts of polite society.

It was a luncheon she gave for Nancy Reagan in the early 1980s, however, that placed her firmly on the political/social map. Shortly thereafter, Roosevelt, a die-hard Republican, wrote a column for *The Washington Post* in which she attacked the press for its criticism of the First Lady and implored the media to give Nancy Reagan a break.

"When are you going to stop expecting her to conform to certain criteria to please the fourth estate—criteria, I might add, that change as frequently as the hemline and seem just as capricious?" she wrote.

Several months later, Roosevelt was offered the protocol slot and Nancy Reagan dubbed her "my first defender."

Despite this attention, Roosevelt puzzles over Mrs. Reagan's lack of congeniality. She notes that the First Lady never complimented her on her work and says their relationship was strictly business, nothing more, always "cordial and correct."

Roosevelt is no shrinking violet, but this is not a knife job or a backstabbing tale. There is no scandal, no scuttlebutt, no startling revelation. She does not blot her copy book by lashing out, preferring instead to heap plaudits on those with whom she established a rapport and to dismiss others as obstructionist and uninformed.

White House advance men fall into the latter category and are singled out for special ire. Her problems with these macho types began the first day on the job, and she labels them "munchkins," "mice," and "little shits."

There are glowing sketches of former Secretary of State George Schultz, George and Barbara Bush, Ronald Reagan, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, Malcolm Forbes (whose yacht she frequented), and the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan.

Roosevelt reveals the secret of Margaret Thatcher's stamina—she requires only four hours of sleep a night. She also compliments her

thoughtfulness, her good manners, and commends her practicality. "Unlike most male heads of state, Mrs. Thatcher traveled light. Her entourage was the smallest we ever dealt with. She was so secure emotionally and intellectually, she did not need hordes of tom-tom beaters to impress people with her importance."

According to Roosevelt, female heads of state, like Thatcher, were often savvier and more assured than their male counterparts and, to achieve their goals, always ready to employ their feminine wiles. One is therefore baffled at the end of the book when Roosevelt suggests her successor be male. Her reason? The position was being downgraded because it was perceived as "a woman's job." A female can never be "one of the boys," she notes plaintively.

—Sandra McElwaine

**In the Time of the Tyrants: Panama, 1968-1989.** R. M. Koster, Guillermo Sánchez Borbon. *Norton, \$22.95.* Yet another book on Panama! After the appearance earlier this year of John Dinges's *Our Man in Panama* and Frederick Kempe's *Divorcing the Dictator*, there would seem little left to say about this tropical outpost of two million people. Among Panamawatchers, though, this new volume has been much anticipated. Unlike Dinges and Kempe—both American journalists—Koster and Sánchez are longtime residents of Panama who have participated in the bizarre events shaking that country.

Koster, an American novelist who moved to Panama many years ago, is best known outside the country for his cameo appearance in Graham Greene's *Getting to Know the General*. In that book, Greene, preparing to attend a party, is warned about an American "who would certainly turn up whether he was invited or not—a writer called Koster who lived in Panama City and was supposed to be a CIA agent." Hmm. Sánchez, a native Panamanian, is a popular

columnist with *La Prensa*, Panama's most important and courageous newspaper. A relentless foe of Manuel Noriega, Sánchez was forced into exile in 1985. In 1987-1988, he collaborated with Koster on two articles about Panama for *Harper's*. Vividly written and boldly argued, the pieces helped galvanize anti-Noriega sentiment in this country. *In the Time of the Tyrants* grew out of those earlier articles.

Noriega is not the chief tyrant in this account. Anyone looking for new dirt on the drug-running dictator and his ties to Washington will be disappointed. The focus instead is on Omar Torrijos, the charismatic, mercurial general who ruled Panama from 1968 until his death in a helicopter crash in 1981. It's a timely topic. Since the U.S. invasion, *Torrijismo* has been the subject of intense political debate in Panama. The government of Guillermo Endara, intent on eradicating all vestiges of the military regime, has gone after Torrijos with a vengeance, casting him as the despoiler of Panamanian democracy. Among its first acts, the government dropped Torrijos's name from the international airport in Panama City. But a small vocal group of Noriega loyalists and left-leaning politicians and intellectuals is upholding Torrijos's memory. To them, Torrijos was a nationalist hero who spoke for the Panamanian masses while standing up to the United States.

Koster and Sánchez are squarely in the anti-memorial camp. *In the Time of the Tyrants* represents a concerted—one might say obsessive—effort to demolish the Torrijos legend. The general comes off as a nasty, brutish thug, interested mostly in screwing—his own country as much as beautiful women. When the Shah of Iran, ailing and alone, seeks refuge abroad, Torrijos almost alone among world leaders agrees to take him in—then makes repeated passes at his comely wife. While professing love for the campesino, Torrijos arranges the murder of a popular priest trying to help the poor. The general holds fraudulent elections, rigidly controls the press, and jails his political opponents. Throughout it all, he drinks to excess. Jack Vaughn, the U.S. ambassador to Panama in the early 1960s,

saw Torrijos on some 50 occasions, we learn, not once finding him sober.

In the view of Koster and Sánchez, nothing Torrijos did deserves praise. Not the introduction of a new labor code—"it was destined to hurt production and swell unemployment." Not the reform of the nation's health-care system—"equality was achieved all right, but at lower standards." Not even the Panama Canal treaties. Regaining control of the canal had long been Panama's single overriding goal, and Torrijos's success in negotiating it won praise from even his fiercest critics. Not Koster and Sánchez, though. "Panama was (and still is) a country with cancer, a conquered land pillaged by vandals," the authors write in typically purple form. "Anything that might have benefited Panama had Panama been healthy, had it been free, merely fed the cancer, strengthened the barbarians." Koster and Sánchez discern only one real achievement in Torrijos's 13-year rule—turning a major thoroughfare in Panama City from a two-way into a one-way street, thereby easing traffic congestion.

This is far too grudging. Torrijos was certainly a tyrant, and the authors have performed a service in chronicling his excesses, especially now that efforts are afoot to rehabilitate him. In their zeal to tear him down, however, Koster and Sánchez have distorted the past. In spite of his misdeeds, Torrijos embodied a critical development in Panamanian history—the breaking of the white oligarchy's lock on economic and political power. Until Torrijos arrived on the scene, Panama's *mestizo* (mixed race) population—70 percent of the total—had little say in running the country. Torrijos brought many *mestizos* into his administration, and his reforms, though often stillborn, did reflect the broad aspirations of the Panamanian people. Anyone who today attempts to turn back the clock and exclude this group from power risks provoking an explosion. It remains to be seen whether the Endara government—largely white and well-heeled—grasps this. Koster and Sánchez certainly don't.

In one of their *Harper's* articles, Koster and Sánchez described in chill-

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