

"It must be painful to love the people and find the mob a whore."

— Bernard DeVoto

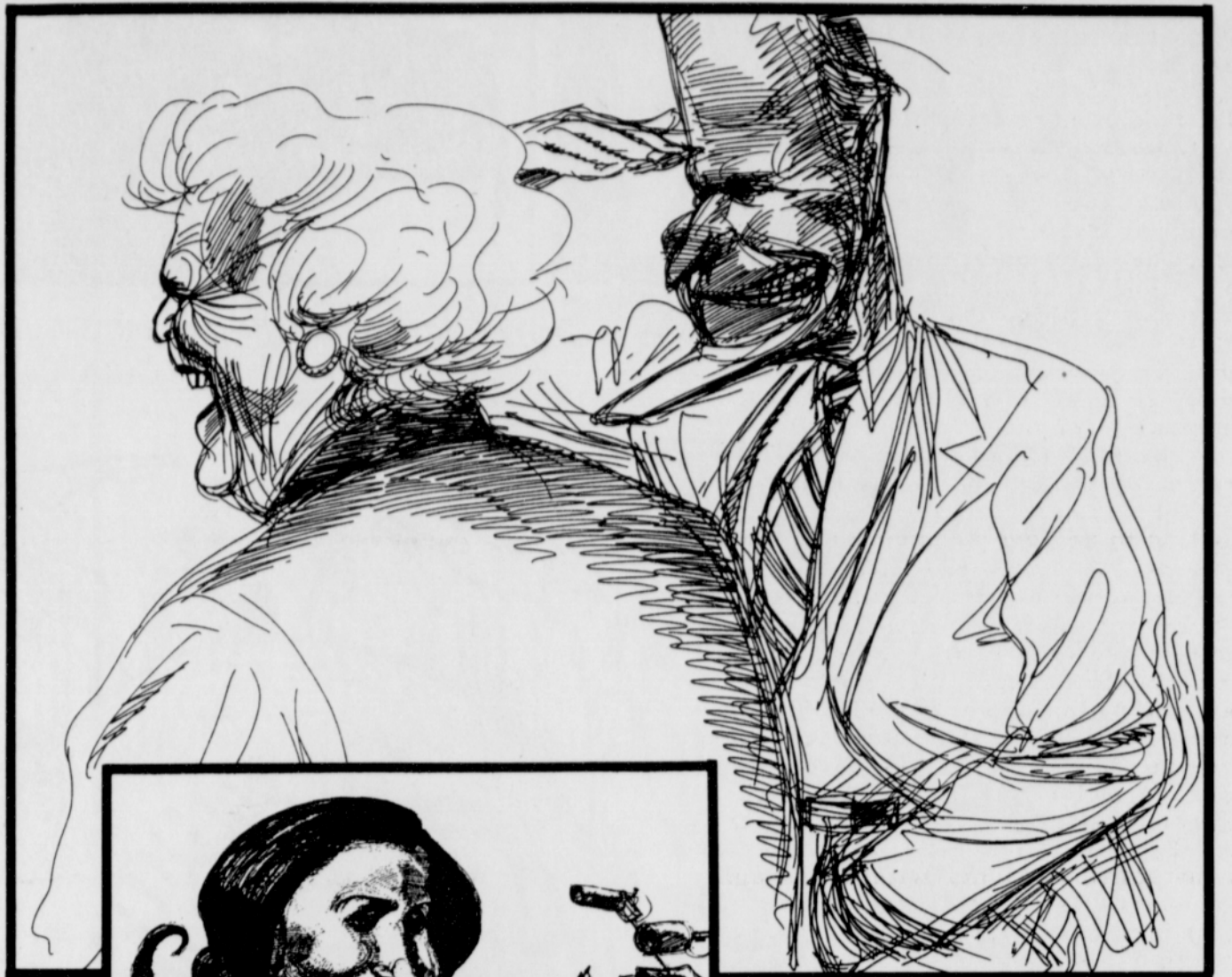
"Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem."

— Ronald Reagan
First Inaugural Address
1981

The year 1989 begins for Americans with the inauguration of a new President, the nation's forty-first. This quaterennial ritual is prescribed by the Constitution and the oath of office is administered by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

A few notable Presidents have been inaugurated (the stature of the rest seldom rises above state assemblymen) but the most notable inauguration might have been that of William Henry Harrison, "Old Tippecanoe," who ignored the advice of friends and made a long and dreary inaugural address in a cold rain and died of pneumonia a month later, his reputation as President perhaps more unsullied than most because he hardly had the opportunity to disgrace himself.

Both of Abraham Lincoln's inaugurations were apprehensive because it was feared he would be assassinated (his election ruptured the nation), and John Kennedy, the first President born in the twentieth century, thrilled the crowds with his don't ask what the country can do for you inaugural speech.* Richard Nixon's administration was already falling apart when he made his second inaugural address (it might have been the choice moment to declare he was not a crook), and Jimmy Carter and his First Lady Roselyn wowed the public by breaking tradition and walking in his inaugural parade.



VICTOR JUBASZ,
"HAIL TO THE CHIEFS"



THE INAUGURATION OF GEORGE BUSHINGTON

Our new President is the first to be elected while serving as Vice President since Martin Van Buren succeeded his former boss Andrew Jackson in 1837, and the first President named George since the original Father of Our Country, and he is making a claim of descendancy by stressing that he is being inaugurated exactly two hundred years after George I, who swore the first Presidential oath in 1789. If indeed Mr. Bush bears comparison with past Presidencies, Millard Fillmore comes easier to mind than the original George, who was, after all, a great revolutionary leader.

And although the United States is known to the world as the Land of Lincoln, George II's Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, recast itself as the embodiment of white backlash twenty-five years ago when the 1964 GOP candidate Barry Goldwater attacked the civil rights activism of the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren. Much of the white South continues to be less than reverent to Lincoln's memory and the Great Emancipator has never been forgiven for emancipating black slaves, though a century passed before open black revolt inspired the rival Democratic Party to enact civil rights laws (during the reign of Lyndon Johnson). The Democrats' belated leap to the forefront of civil rights recruited minority members but lost the party its solid white support in the South. Even earlier, in 1948, white southern Democrats broke away from the main party in support of Strom Thurman against Harry Truman in opposition to the party's much disputed civil rights plank — the dissidents called themselves "Dixiecrats." In 1980 the strong southern white vote immigrated to the GOP and Ronald Reagan, whose political perception of black Americans has never got beyond Stepin Fetchit. Northern bluecollar white Democrats also defected in enormous numbers to Reagan as a result of their perception of the Democrats as the party of minorities. The strategy of Michael Dukakis in 1988 was concentrated on winning back the defectors, which was not only unsuccessful but alienated the party's core of black supporters.

The 1988 Presidential election was mean, nasty and usually below the belt (and never above the collar), yet it was not conducted with assassinations (other than those of character), nor with terrorism, imprisonment or threats to the lives of candidates or voters.

It was vile but not villainous. Except that a President was to be elected, the campaign was conducted with the insipidity and contempt for the intelligence of voters common to city council elections. The public responded as anticipated and voted for George Bush and his Andy Hardy associate.

An old joke about the difference between optimists and pessimists might apply to Bush's claim that he is in line with the thinking of the American people. An optimist is certain that this is the best of all possible worlds: a pessimist agrees. Bush might be right. There is strong evidence that the country is indeed conservative, slow to change and in constant reaction to it. The problem is that blacks and the poor (which includes all other racial minorities in the United States) are shoved out by the rightward politicians and party hacks and they drop away, either too disillusioned or too angry to register or vote. So a conservative minority rules in its claim as a majority. Almost fifty percent of eligible voters did not vote in 1988. A primary reason the Democrats lost was that they did not have the courage or intelligence to carry through with what Jesse Jackson started, registering the unregistered voters.

The 1988 election showed the split between those who believe they have prospered during the Reagan era and those who have been impoverished by it. Bush defeated Dukakis among every income group making more than twenty thousand dollars a year. The method of Bush's victory was a coarse example of the racism that has powered American politics since the early revolutionary congress chose to maintain slavery and exterminate Native Americans for their lands. Most

voters exhibited lukewarm support for either candidate — as Talleyrand said when asked his opinion of Voltaire and Robespierre, "When I think of one, I prefer the other."

The plutocrats of both political parties claim that the economy defines the nation more than its ideology: Money is the nation's ideology. What they mean in their interpretation of the "economy" is their own personal control of the nation's wealth. Narrow monetary policies that singularly benefit the upper layers of society draw money from less well off levels which keeps them less well off and always under pressure to pay what the government demands. Releasing billions of dollars of public money (most of it pried from the middle class and bluecollar workers) to businessmen and the wealthy elite is considered good, even necessary for the economy. Feeding the poor or providing them adequate shelter, or even educating them, is considered uneconomical and a drain on the nation's treasury.

The manner in which great powers decline is wild extravagance at the top and misery at the bottom. Two Americas have developed, one rich and privileged, the other exploited and heavily taxed, with separate sets of laws governing each. The continuing disappearance of the middle class has also dried up much of the volunteer work it has provided at every level of society: hospitals, churches, works of relief such as charities and food and clothing programs, and thousands of every type of civic and social committees. The poor cannot afford the money or time to provide such community service; the wealthy are seldom concerned.

The owners of capital own the press, the congress, the armed forces and every instrument of state, in the view of V.I. Lenin, who was certain that liberation of the appeased classes was impossible without a violent revolution, without destruction of the apparatus of the state. Karl Marx spoke about the inevitability of history as if it is a primary momentum that by its own "iron necessity" progresses toward the breaking of nations and the obliteration of the rich and powerful, resulting in the triumph of the wage earner.

We think of Marx, Lenin and their communism as history's failures. The motive of perestroika in the USSR is to save a dying system, not to evolve into another, but the result might well be revolutionary and superior to the ruthless aspects of capitalism. In the 1930s the Great Depression was thought to spell the doom of capitalism. Many Americans believed that U.S. society was not merely doomed but did not deserve to survive because it had failed its people; its institutions were not just unworthy of preservation but should be eradicated. Capitalists were under attack, their values repudiated, their careless unconcerned greed held responsible for the ruin of society. Bankers and businessmen were found as guilty of crimes against the nation as the 1950s were to despise domestic communists (many of whom were party members in the 1930s and upon whom revenge fell twenty years later).

*Lincoln and Kennedy, who were both elected in the 60th year of their centuries, were the first and so far last Presidents to be assassinated. A myth started with the death of Old Tippecanoe, who was elected in 1840, that every President elected in a year that ended in zero would die in office — called the "Indian Curse" because of claims that Harrison's demise was a shamanistic vengeance for his slaughter of Native Americans while an army general — but Ronald Reagan seems to have broken the curse, although an unsuccessful attempt was made on his life two months after he took office in 1981.



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