

THE TRANSMUTATION OF BILLYBOB

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Tallyrand is said to have been asked his opinion of Voltaire and Robespierre, and to have replied, "When I think of one, I prefer the other."

Bill Clinton and Bob Dole met secretly in Astoria this past summer in a small private banquet room of the famous and always popular *Top of the Astor*. I discovered their meeting because I was waiting tables at that stage of my recovery from financial disaster which was less a result of the shift of wealth from the many to the few as it was a couple of unwise personal decisions that left me broke and underemployed for several months.

"Guess who's breaking bread together?" I said to my friend Rita who was working behind the bar.

"Let me guess! Oral & Hardly," she said.

I looked at her sharply. "How did you know?"

I was an impatient and surly waiter, quite surprised to be employed at Astoria's most posh drinking and dining emporium, which is eight stories above the city's downtown streets and commands a splendid view of the Columbia River and the ascending hills clustered with lovely old carpenter gothic houses. (From the top floor is visible the site of Fort Astor, the city's birthplace.) My previous experience as a waiter was in a gag and barf place called *Spike's Bisque & Burger* where the help greeted every customer with "What the fuck do you want?" Perhaps I was hired because I am becoming elderly and more conscious of grace as a result of fattening; a sort of Falstaffian flourish I seem to have developed to offset my ponderosity. (I said to Rita once that my voice got lower as I got older. She looked at the spare parachute pack overhanging my belt. "That's not all that got lower," she said.) My customers are generally rustic squires who made their money in fish and timber and whose artistic pretensions are quenched by endless community theater presentations of old Broadway musicals. (You never knew when the tables filled with after theater patrons would suddenly erupt into song, which I dreaded.)

Like almost everyone on earth who has no clue as to what must be done to maintain a grasp upon this elusive world — and in reasonable fear of the few who think they do know the answers — I collect information which sometimes I am able to synthesize and pass on through my impoverished and esoteric newspaper (a perennial cause of my subsistence below the poverty line) and very opinionated public radio program. So readers can sympathize with my reaction to seeing Clinton and Dole sitting at the same table in the same small room in the same restaurant in a small out of the way city in the northwest corner of the Lower 48 such as Astoria. Their private banquet room was dominated by a window that overlooked the Columbia River, named for the Great Navigator and known to history as the Great River of the West. Astoria's annual Regatta (its 102nd) was at full sail and throttle. Boats paraded along the waterfront festooned with banners and flags while a land parade marched past the city's skyscraper, a vintage eight story mass of white plaster that started as a popular hotel after a fire devastated Astoria's heart in 1922 and almost fell to the wrecking ball except that a few visionaries realized a fancy first-water restaurant on the top floor would bring prosperity to the city after half a century of decline because the fish were gone and the forests clearcut.

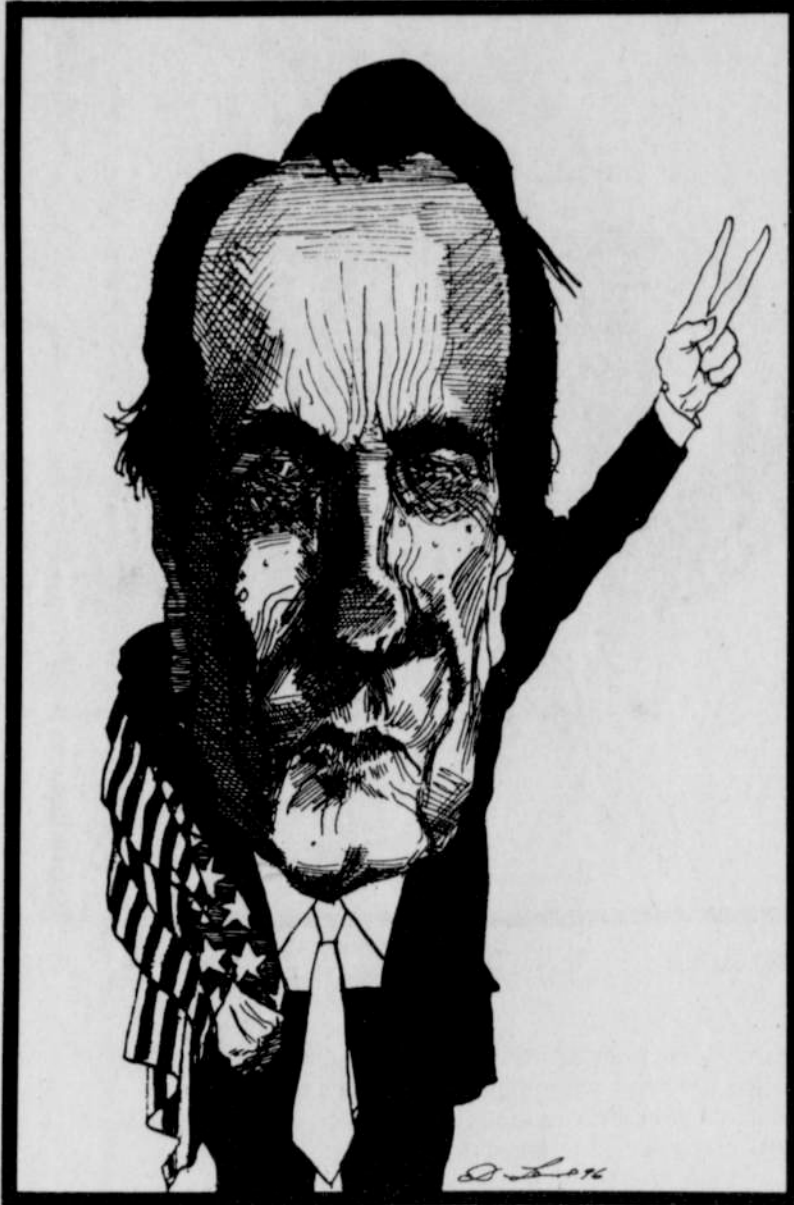
The noise of bands, horns and sirens rose in thermal waves through the open windows of the *Top of the Astor*, drowning out much of the dialogue between the two candidates vying to be the last American President of the 20th century. I admired their calculated anonymity in a backwater northwest city at a moment when it was packed with locals and tourists who would never notice them in a crowd. My newshound curiosity and suspicion were piqued by the purpose of their clandestine meeting. What I was able to hear of their intense conversation gave me the heartsick realization that the incumbent and his political poltergeist were tearing up the Constitution.

They were alone in the banquet room that was profitably developed for the use of lovers and intriguers who could afford the high price of privacy, but as I watered them and took their order I realized I had been critically inspected by several unusually alert diners at tables bunched near the room's entrance. I wondered if I had been quickly backgrounded or if the conspiring candidates accepted the rare possibility their waiter might be an assassin as an unavoidable risk. The first few times I approached their table they hushed but after half a dozen trips with water, soup, slop and bourbon they continued jabbering as though I was simply mobile furniture, a prologue to a future dependency upon servile robots. Almost as mechanically I converted my journalist's brain into a recording device, locking each word into a dialectic cocoon (and worried if I had enough cerebral capacity to store Clinton's verbiage). I heard very little of the conversation because I spent most of the time enroute between kitchen, bar and table, but I was able to hear the last several minutes when they ignored my loitering around a serving cart in which I freighted dessert and lattes.

Dole sat stiff and starchy. His face was pasty and looked like too many facelifts gone awry. Clinton smiled and stared at him with the expectant cheerfulness of a snake about to swallow a rabbit.

They talked insistently, Dole crisp and spare (his voice a hardedged whine), often accusatory and self-righteous; Clinton rambled in a folksy fog of alphabet soup that seemed to include in its broth references to most of the sciences as well as religions, economics and social peculiarities of most of the world's cultures. Dole's sights seemed clearer but lacked the "vision thing" as an equally eloquent George Bush called it. He seemed to be counting pebbles while Clinton built a shining mountain for humanity to ascend.

I felt partial to Clinton. We share the same birthdate (he was 50 the same August day I became 55) and we are both left-handed. I wrote a birthday letter his first year as President comparing his presidency with a one-year term I was serving as a company union president (after three terms company and union impeached me). He wrote back (or one of his flappers) that he



DRAWINGS BY DAVID LEVINE

was pleased our mutual natal day and softpawness inspired our shared political correctness.

But Clinton was a great disappointment. "Slick Willie" friends as well as enemies called him. He's never inhaled one of my friends said about him, disgusted that he failed to stand up for liberal policies he promised to implement and because he steals the conservative thunder from its adherents such as signing a stingy welfare law that will probably impoverish children and punish single mothers. A few of his opponents (and friends) also call him the Muhammad Ali of modern politics: *Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee*. (He and Dole were described as creatures of Oz: Clinton said to have no spine, Dole no heart.)

Clinton loves to press flesh, claims he lives in the crown jewel of the nation's penal system, the White House, always under guard with every visitor strip-searched (especially after two trespassers seemed inspired to terminate his Presidency). He pressed Dole's flesh with his voice, intimate and charming, which disarmed Dole as much it also did me. Dole either ignored or did not register my presence. Yet Clinton seemed to let me feel he was aware and pleased I was serving him. I was tempted to tell him we shared birthdays but resisted the foolish thought. I had to remain low-key and generally unnoticed, an invisibility similar to black-clad Japanese *Noh* puppeteers, if I wished to discover the real purpose of this meeting.

"I'm gonna win, Bob," I heard Clinton say. "The only real chance you got of beating me is that crazy supply-sider Kemp, but that's a longshot," Clinton smiled coyly. "That little stroke of genius raised you a couple of points in the polls, but not enough Bob. And you're stuck with him. If by some miracle you do beat me he will make your life a living hell. You might just die to be rid of him, and guess who is President then?" he asked facetiously.

That prospect seriously worried Dole. He still smarted from Kemp's remark about his library burning down, his two books burned, one of which he hadn't finished coloring. Dole's retort was that Kemp, a former pro-footballer, had played without his helmet, which was originally quipped about another Republican and former gridiron star who did become President (but not elected), and was also accused of not being able to walk and chew gum simultaneously. (A joke was that his First Lady practiced birth control by giving him a stick of gum before bedtime.)



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"Everything is political!" my friend the Dishdog shouted at the Cook, a large genial redneck he loved to argue with, as I bumped into the kitchen with a tray of dirty dishes. The Dishdog was a poet and an acute political philosopher. Encountering him anywhere was generally unsettling as well as illuminating.

"Are we really so stupid as to seriously consider two rich white guys as the only serious candidates for President in this whole polyglot country?" he growled at me, slamming trays of dishes into an automatic dishwasher that immediately wretched him in clouds of steam. "We're governed by pious hypocrites who are mostly white males in a country in which women are the majority and the great variety of other races vastly outnumber anglos — *country club apartheid!*" he spat disgustedly.

The Dishdog's theory, which he expounded as often as anyone would listen, was that the white race is historically dead and despite the virulent angst of skinheads and white supremacist militias, none will be left in the world in two centuries. Of course he was so white he was almost pink, but he loved to say to his diminishing number of Caucasian acquaintances, "I'm extinct, *you're* extinct!"

"You ought'a think about becoming a Republican," he said drolly as I was about to kick my way out the door with a load of grub for the contenders. "Because Dole or Kemp said Republicans won't tolerate despair in the cities anymore. If they win you can join me in the line of goodhearted fellows trying to get hired as officers of the Joy Police."

I was out again. Back into the conversation if only briefly and without contextual bridges. I could only guess: yet a pattern emerged. Clinton earnestly cajoled Dole to agree that the current two party system was kaput, obsolete and inefficient. Slick Willie stuff. I couldn't see his point. Where was he going? Why this secret meeting?

"Two political parties don't represent the people any more than Congress, the White House or Wall Street," the Dishdog said my next trip to the kitchen. He was clouded in steam from the dishwashing machine and not looking at me when he talked. "People talk about wanting a third party as if we have a two party system. We don't. We've got one big party with two heads. Problem is, most people get disgusted and stop voting. Especially the people most adversely affected. And that perpetuates the problems."

"The era of Big Government is over," Clinton said when I was back in the banquet room with his assorted junk food and Dole's rubber chicken. "Everything is for sale to the private sector. Except the Pentagon. Even welfare's gonna be privatized. Poverty is profitable," he chuckled.

"The commies were right," the Dishdog said blurred in hot fog. "International class war is replacing nationalism. This whole New World Order we are designing is a direct schism between rich and poor. Those are the only political parties that count — the Rich Party and the Poor Party."

(The Dishdog told me once that morality was a human response to an amoral world, in particular our own predatory nature — he divided humanity into predator and prey and each, he said, was fanatic and ruthless: "Morality's got nothing to do with God or religion. It's a tool to protect us from ourselves. The paradox is that the moral position about anything is generally fatal in the short run yet absolutely necessary for long time survival. It's real simple: What's moral helps most people, the greatest good for the greatest number sort of thing. What's immoral hurts us — which includes the greedy bastards grabbing all the money.")

Back in the banquet room I heard Clinton say to Dole while I busied about the serving cart, "Bob, some of our mutual friends are getting tired of duplicating expenses. That's why they suggested we do lunch," he said, talking with full mouthfuls of cheeseburger. "We gotta face it Bob, the Democratic and Republican parties are for all practical purposes the same party. We share the same interests and world views. We share the same sponsors who really don't care which one of us is President. It'll still be business as usual, except one of us loses. *Neither* of us has to lose, Bob. The smartest thing for both of us to do is consolidate. Target the centers of our parties and let go the radical fringes. We don't want to go chasing after the minorities, ideologues and nutcases. We gotta put up with the women, but we can let the rest go. Let Perot and Nader have 'em."

"We have to be bold and realistic," Clinton said biting lustily into a dripping slice of pizza. "We can get the really big money without it being divided between separate campaigns." "Bob Dole doesn't want the American people to think he will ever be a part of anything that destroys traditional values," Dole said.

"Cork the bullshit, Bob," Clinton said affably. "You're here because you know you can't win. You want a deal and you hope I asked you here to give you a good one. The most traditional American value is winning," Clinton drawled. "Why should either of us risk losing when we can win together?"

"Are you suggesting we betray our parties?" Dole asked starchyly.

"We will form a super party that can't be beat," Clinton said. "But the only way this deal can work is that I remain President." Dole started to protest but Clinton put his hand on his arm. "Listen Bob, Veep is the closest you're ever going to get to the White House. I'm offering you a chance that'll work for both of us and kick Kemp's ass out."

"What about Gore?" Dole asked suspiciously.

Clinton shrugged. "Al will have to find his own way to the New Age of Aquarius," he said languidly.

I was appalled. Surely Dole would treat that most cynical and corrupt proposition with the contempt it deserved. Instead his sour face broke into a childlike, almost beatific smile. He stared at Clinton with a look of bedazzled enchantment on his face and could not have expressed any better his delight and wonder, as if a door had been opened for him to enter an entirely new world of giddy new possibilities.

I thrust myself at their table. "Are you completely insane!" I shouted at their surprised faces. "You'll have a civil war and a revolution if you go through with this insane plan. Rightwing warlords will anarchize the country worse than Somalia. There'll be a racial bloodbath that will dwarf the slaughter in Rwanda. The rightwing and leftwing fanatics will start a revolution against the government at the same time they will fight a civil war against each other. And you won't be able to protect your corporate benefactors. Big business will be the primary targets of everybody — and what do you think will happen if the corporations hire mercenary armies to defend themselves? You are creating catastrophe out of chaos. You are acting as