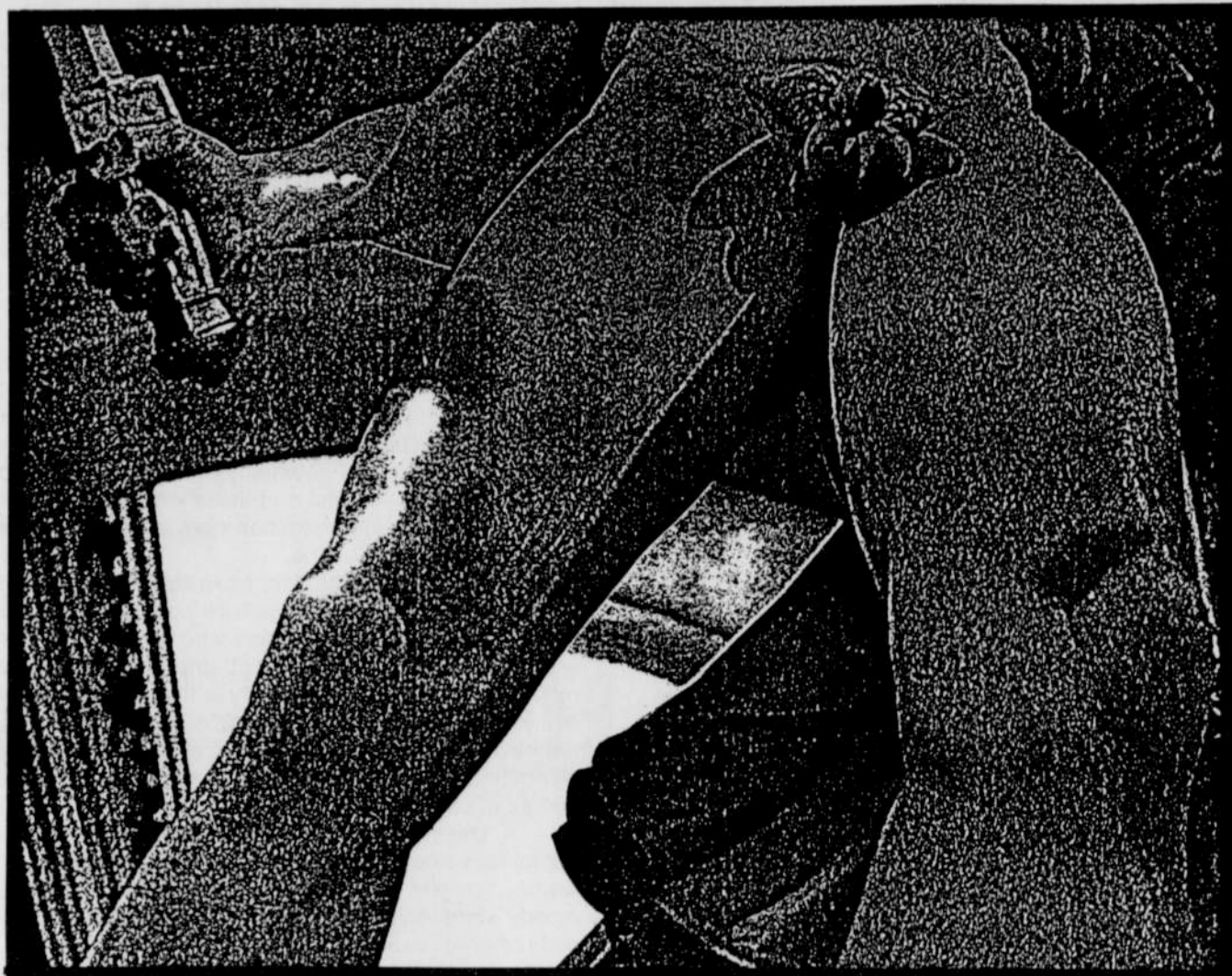


BUSH'S BASKET

WHY THE PRESIDENT HAD TO SHOW HIS BALLS



PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER WARBURG

BY RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

In the annals of infotainment, few moments match the sight of George Bush leaping from the cockpit of a fighter jet and striding across the deck of a carrier at sea. *Top Gun: The Pseudo Event* enchanted the public, horrified liberals, and galvanized the press. Suddenly media mavens noticed that Bush's handlers have elevated the photo-op to pure cinema. So what else is new?

Actually there was something novel about this occasion, but it passed utterly below the radar. Discretion prevented anyone from mentioning that Bush's outfit gave him a very vivid basket. This was the first time a President literally showed his balls. Check it out — your subconscious already has.

This manly exhibition was no accident. The media team that timed Bush's appearance to catch just the right tone of sunlight must have chosen that uniform and had him try it on. I can't prove they gave him a sock job, but clearly they thought long and hard about the crotch shot. As students of the cinematic, they would know the trick is to make the bulge seem natural, so it registers without raising an issue. Tight jeans (a staple of Bush's dress-down attire) can achieve this look, but nothing works like fighter-pilot drag, with its straps that frame and shape the groin. Most people presume this effect is merely functional. That frees the imagination to work, and work it does, in men and women alike.

Say what you will about the male body being objectified. We may expect a dude to display himself like an Ambercrombie & Fitch model — but the President? Clearly Bush's handlers want to leave the impression that he's not just courageous and competent but hung. Why is this message important to send? That's a very salient question, if only because it's unlikely to be addressed.

Among modern Presidents, John F. Kennedy projected the sturdiest aura (though the sexual evidence was closely held

at the time). Yet, in an era of body-hugging menswear, JFK wore loose-fitting suits. Bill Clinton was perhaps the ultimate rogue in chief, but he shrank from showing his body — he wouldn't have dared. Cartoonists alluded to Clinton's libido by giving him a large bulbous nose, which became his emblem. Look at the face cartoonists have given Bush: The ears are outsized while the nose is modest. Big ears are not exactly phallic signifiers; if anything, they connote a state of permanent childhood, à la Mickey Mouse. In caricature Bush looks like a perplexed piker. There's a reason he once drew the ultimate Texas dis: "All hat and no beef." This sissifying contempt still lingers under the hoopla about Bush's prowess.

9/11 scared America into solidarity, but if people perceive the Republican agenda as an equal threat, their doubts about Dubya's manhood will resurface. They will notice his reliance on strong-willed advisers, his association with a patriarchal father, and even his diminutive size. Karl Rove's rangers must be aware of this possibility since they've crafted an image to counter Bush's macho problem. His public affect — the narrowed eyes, the locked-and-loaded look — is calculated to annul his liabilities, present and past. Imagine what the Republicans would make of a Democrat who was a cheerleader in prep school, who wrangled his way into Yale on family connections, and who weaseled out of active duty. Clinton was butch-baited for less.

Bush could easily have lived up to his homestate nickname, 'Shrub' — and in the early hours of 9/11, he did. But rehabilitation is the master narrative of Bush's presidency. This

party animal turned commander-in-chief is Prince Hal to his own Falstaff.

Overcoming is a powerful American theme: hence the proliferation of log cabins and front porches in the iconography of Presidents, even some who grew up in splendor. Bush may be a master of populist pretense, but he can't claim to be self-made. His saga rests on his quest to be a man. The real triumph of Bush's media team is not a matter of lighting and positioning but of creating a Presidential persona that radiates steadfastness, plainspokenness, sexual continence, and righteous religiosity. These are the hallmarks of conservative macho.

But something about Bush's image seems as artificially enhanced as his crotch. His need to flaunt it can be read as a response to anxiety. If you have to show your balls, maybe it's because you can't take them for granted. That isn't just Bush's problem. If macho seems so tragically x-treme these days, it's because many men think masculinity could actually disappear.

All men must cope with the complications of feminism. I would argue that the demand for sexual equality is a major reason for the global rise of fundamentalism. Bush owes his fortune to this movement in America, but his appeal goes far beyond the Christian right. He represents a model that invites female initiative and counsel but not control. This is the Dred Scott compromise of our time, and it's evident in Bush's administration as well as in his marriage to an intelligent woman who knows how to stay three steps behind her husband. But Bush also embodies the primal uncertainty many men feel in the face of sexual change. This angst, which threatens to pop up like a sour belch, solidifies his bond with threatened men. They identify with his struggle to carry off the feat of macho and many women empathize with that effort. A lot of people root for Bush to make it as a man, and they're happy to see his big basket (even if it does suggest a male version of the push-up bra).

If America remains preoccupied with terrorism, the sexual politics I'm describing will affect the 2004 election only obliquely. But if voters focus on other things, the macho issue could be as crucial as it was in 2000, when Al Gore was wussified. Rove's rangers have already begun bashing the Democratic candidate most likely to make Bush look like all cake and no beef: John Kerry.

First they questioned his patriotism, then they accused him of looking French, and now they're landing on his wife, casting her as a hyper-Hillary. Teresa Heinz Kerry's outspokenness, her devotion to her dead former husband, her current prenup, and her vow to maim any man who steps out on her are all being used to portray her as a ball-breaking bitch and John Kerry as her emasculated victim. So powerful is this haridan image that it actually allows the Bushies to bash Teresa for her wealth. If she doesn't finance Kerry's campaign, she's dissing him; if she does, he's a kept man.

Kerry isn't the front-runner, yet the White House has singled him out for sexual calumny. To understand this fixation, you have to consider Kerry's stature (he towers over Bush), his war record (he received a Silver Star in Vietnam), and his sloe-eyed Kennedy aura (his initials are JFK). In another era, these would be clear signals of masculinity. Today, you have to flash your stash, and Kerry's patrician style doesn't lend itself to that. But he does have those tales from 'Nam, and in a one-on-one he could expose the angst under Bush's aggression. If the economy tanks while Iraq seethes, we just might have a real contest.

Fasten your crotch straps. With luck, we're in for a bumpy ride.

Richard Goldstein wrote this article for *The Village Voice*.

GOD'S CHOSEN MAN

BY REV. DR. C. WELTON GADDY

"Under the cloak of the church the state decays."

—MIGUEL de CERVANTES

President Bush often reminds me of a first year seminary student who, after one course in theology, thinks his particular view of faith answers all of life's most complex questions. As a Baptist minister for over 40 years, I hold sacred the beliefs inherent in my faith, yet as a Christian I can tell you the President does not always speak for me, nor can he claim to speak for all Christians in America. Christians like all other people of faith are incredibly diverse in their thoughts and political ideas.

Just as religious leaders must refrain from trying to dictate the political beliefs of their congregates, political leaders must disdain the misguided illusion that they speak as prophets of God's will. It is not remotely within the realm of the President's executive duties to voice and advance particular sectarian priorities.

Yet at the National Religious Broadcasters convention (in early March), the President sat by and listened approvingly to himself being described as God's chosen man for this hour in our nation. He then made one statement that I find deeply disturbing: he linked an imminent American attack on Iraq to his understanding of Christian morality, saying that this attack would be, "in the highest moral traditions of our country." How can he say that when for four centuries Christians refused to serve in the military?

The President of the United States is the political leader of the nation, not the religious leader. Just as religion should not be a test for any political candidate for public office, religion should not be a tool of any political leader in a public office. In no way should the President of the United States politicize religion, or by the use of religious language from one particular

religious tradition, alienate citizens from other traditions or no tradition.

The distinction that I see between the language in President Bush's statements and the kind of historic civil religion that had previously existed in America, is that President Bush is drawing from a very particular faith tradition — Evangelical Christianity — and is using that language to advance policies and to make arguments for the support of his various initiatives (as quoted in the *Associated Press*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Boston Globe*).

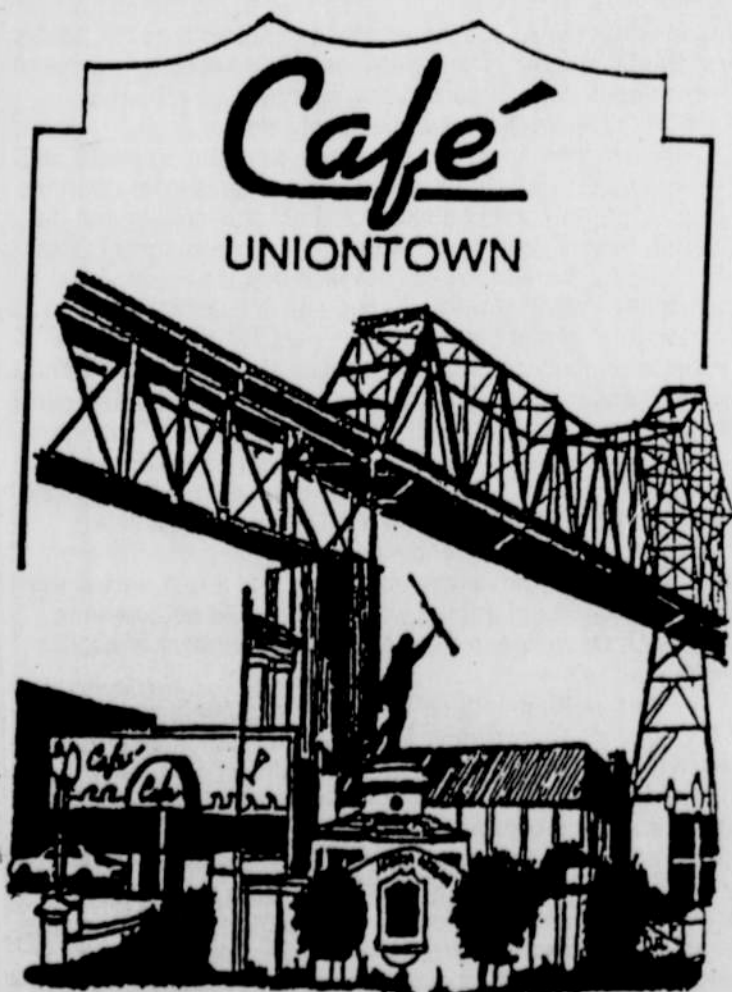
That language, whether used in statements to comfort, challenge, or guide the nation, leaves out whole segments of Americans who don't understand its meaning and don't identify with, or in many instances even agree with its substance.

Using this language, the President has escalated every issue to a kind of transcendent religiously/morally substantive subject. Through this language, the President is telling people who disagree with or question his public policies that these are not just political issues, these are moral issues. That's akin to playing the Christian trump card.

Democracy has been crippled. No longer can Americans practice healthy debate. By employing this language, the President has succeeded in framing every American who questions his policies as opposing good — good that ought to triumph over evil. When everything is absolutized in this way, debate stops: the moment there is a difference of opinion it's not just another idea, it's an expression of evil.

How dare any politician, including the President, even implicitly suggest that God is a kind of mascot for the nation. Affirmation of a particular faith tradition must never be made a litmus test for measuring patriotism.

This article is distributed by the Interfaith Alliance.



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