



At Large with Joe Wilkins

Essays and posts from 2002 to 2004



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The National Desk.com publisher, Joe Wilkins, author of the richly comic novel "The Skin Game and other Atlantic City Capers," is a lawyer who has practiced law in the Atlantic City, N.J., area for over 30 years. He draws his material from a remarkably varied career in which he has represented the very poor and the very wealthy. At one extreme he has served as Chief Attorney for a legal services program for the poor; he has also served as corporate counsel for multimillion-dollar corporations and as Founding Chairman of the New Jersey State Bar Association's prestigious Committee on Casino Law.

He has been the chief lawyer for the City of Atlantic City, and has served as a municipal judge. He has argued cases at every judicial level in New Jersey, from informal local hearings up to the New Jersey Supreme Court. Along the way he has enjoyed representing cops and hookers, ministers and burglars, businessmen and ex-drug addicts — the respectable, the dubious, and the downright scruffy -- and mixed them together in a book that reveals a rare blend of compassion and laughter at the foibles of the Law and of those who get caught up in it.

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Joseph's latest work is available from Amazon.com for the Kindle. Please visit Amazon.com for more details

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Chapter One

The Lance Corporal and the Lieutenant ...

9/12/2004 - The other day, the Pentagon released the names of 13 more American troops killed in Iraq. Five were Marine Corps lance corporals. That struck a chord because long ago I served as a lance corporal in the Marine Corps Reserve.

My buddies and I joined what was then the 39th Special Infantry, USMC Reserve, stationed in Atlantic City, mostly because we were 18-year old high school seniors and all of us knew the Marines drilled on Tuesday night. A girls' sorority also met on Tuesday nights and had pizza afterward. We'd finish our drills in time to show up at those pizza parties in the dashing uniform of the United States Marine Corps.

Our six-year enlistment called for two years of active duty and four more of weekend drills and summer camp training. This was serious business. Our officers – lieutenants, mostly, and the odd captain or major during parade reviews at summer camp – were a tough bunch. Their mission was to mold us into fighting men capable of winning mortal combat at any cost. That meant rigorous training, with a strong emphasis on developing personal courage, and learning to follow an order in an instant, especially under fire.

After spending several years of weekends and summers crawling under barbed wire and shooting rifles with decent results, I reported for my two years of active service. The Marines, however, had other plans and assigned me to two additional years of reserve duty with VMF 218, a Marine fighter squadron stationed at Willow Grove. I arrived at the naval air station as a newly minted lance corporal, a check crew leader, in charge of a squad that kept the FJ-3 jet fighters out on the flight line in flying shape.

It was a new world for me, that world of weekend pilots. The officers who flew the planes didn't give a *** whether you saluted or spat tobacco, so long as you tightened the bolts when you put the engines back in. They'd practice law or sell insurance all week, then show up on the weekend to get in their flight time. On hot summer weekends they'd fly to Brunswick, Maine and in the cold winter they'd zip down to warm places like Jacksonville or New Orleans. They would spend Saturday night at the officer's club or the local pickup lounge and come back Sunday afternoon with the ammo cans filled with fresh lobsters or oranges, regaling us with tales of the easy women in J-ville or Cherry Point or New Orleans while we carried the loot to their cars.

There was a big difference in those days between the Marine Reserve pilots and those in the Air National Guard. Both were weekend jet jockeys, but the National Guard pilots were essentially untouchable while the Marines could be called up on short notice, and we ground crews with them. In April 1961, with eight months left on my tour, I showed up for a weekend drill at the height of the Bay of Pigs

crisis in Cuba and stood at parade rest with the rest of my unit for a long hour waiting for word that we'd been activated. An older sergeant next to me kept muttering, "Oh, man, please don't *** me again!" He'd been in the squadron when the Korean War started. VMF 218 had been the first Marine Reserve fighter squadron activated. "I didn't get home for four goddamn years!" he said.

We dodged the bullet that day, but we were ordered to be ready to report for active duty within 24 hours of a phone call. There was no nonsense about choosing to ignore such orders, or skipping links in the chain of command to find somebody upstairs willing to let you off the hook, no matter how many kids I had to feed or what college education I was trying to finish.

So it is with the cynicism of experienced enlisted men everywhere that I read again of President Bush's experiences in the Air National Guard a few years later. The training pattern hadn't changed; I'd bet a dollar against the hole in a doughnut that Lieutenant Bush logged a fair number of flights to New Orleans and Florida or wherever pleasant weather beckoned. But what did change in those few years was the fighting in Vietnam, by then a mindless horror from where hundreds of body bags were shipped home every month. It was no place to be a fighter pilot. Surface-to-air missiles that rocketed out of the jungle knocked many a good pilot out of the sky.

Pilots like George W. Bush, however, were safely tucked away in the Air National Guard. The closest Lieutenant Bush ever came to combat was the Officer's Club on whichever juicy weekend spot he jaunted off to so he could log his flight time. They're not called "Champagne Units" for nothing.

The hellish irony of it is that President Bush is now sticking it to the National Guard with unbelievable hypocrisy. In the runup to the Iraq war, he and his Republican colleagues ignored the best professional military warnings that he would need 400,000 troops to do the job right. They ignored that advice because a force of 400,000 troops would almost inevitably require a draft – the involuntary conscription of young men and perhaps women to be sent to serve as slow-moving targets in Baghdad and Falluja, in Sadr City and Najef. And to admit the need for a draft to make up for bungled planning would be political suicide.

So in the dark mirror that is our war policy today, the National Guard and the Reserves have been called up, unit by unit, and sent to Iraq with no clear mission and inadequate equipment. And they are being kept there beyond their scheduled tours of duty by a commander in chief who exploited every loophole to keep himself out of combat and now prances around waving the flag and boasting of himself as "a war president."

When I read today of Lieutenant Bush ignoring the orders to take his physical and pulling strings to get out early so he could party at Harvard while thousands of his contemporaries were dying in Vietnam, I salute those five Marine Lance

Corporals and all the thousands of other fallen troops then and now who had no such option, nor were cowards enough to want one.



Chapter Two

Ecclesiastes and the Soccer Moms ...

8/24/2004 - A whimsical detour on the way home from dinner with friends takes me along the Atlantic City boardwalk. My path goes by the old Convention Hall, site of the 1964 Democratic Convention where I watched a party still grieving for the slain President Kennedy wrestle with itself about recognizing the black Democrats of Mississippi as the true delegates in place of the white racists who not long after found a new spiritual home in the Mississippi Republican Party. Across from the Hall is a bust of Kennedy, looking with cool gaze at the passing parade, a touch of amusement in his face.

A hundred yards further on (but forty years and a zillion miles from those days) is one of the new beach bars recently permitted by the city in hopes of making the long-depressing Boardwalk something more than a sleazy walkway between gambling joints. The change has worked wonders. Bemused, I wander down and find a corner stool under a thatched roof in a bar open to the music and the ocean breeze.

JFK would have felt right at home here. He loved life, laughter and women. Here are dozens of good-looking young women in white pants and tank-tops dancing with happy abandon, their bodies responding to the music as to a lover's touch. There are 4 bars, 16 bartenders on duty, 40 or so tables, and a bitchin' band so purely New Jersey they urge the crowd to come see them tomorrow night at the Pennsauken Diner. The dance floor is a matter of boards laid over the beach sand and graced with dozens of palm trees swaying in the ocean breeze ... the perfect setting for a lively night in a lovely place filled with girls letting it all out. It is a happy, if unexpected, moment. The bar will close in two weeks with the end of the summer season.

But for now, a great moment of youth, energy and beauty.

And how these young women dance! I say young because they are exactly that in spirit, although in truth their ages seem to range from early 20's to late forties and up. I suspect the average age will drop considerably as the evening rolls on and the younger crowd gets off work and replaces the soccer moms dancing out there right now.

They are dancing to a song called "Heat Wave." It's the happiest crowd I've seen since watching kids dance to "YMCA" in a little dance bar on the Rue Donou in Paris a year or two ago. Do they have any idea how beautiful they are? They

may have difficult husbands, rambunctious kids and growly bosses, but by God when they hit the dance floor it's all happiness. Hips swaying, hair tossing, smiles and incredible sensuality.

There are a few guys out there trying gamely to keep up, but it's no contest. The heart and soul of these women is out there dancing tonight, and it's impossible to be unmoved. Now the band is into "Twist again, like we did last summer!" – a song from before some of these girls were born. But it speaks to them and they respond.

I am sitting near a group of seven women; a random collection of tall and short, slender and plump. They are friends who work together and came down here from Queens on a "just us girls" weekend free of husbands, boyfriends, kids and jobs, rising to the intoxication of the music as the band gets into "Ain't no stoppin' us now!"

They dance as if they've been holding it in for a year and intend to let it all out tonight. Now it's "Dancing Queen," and all seven get out there with wonderful smiles. Several of them have a trick with their hips that reminds me of the hula dancers of Hawaii. Pure joy.

They are wonderfully sensuous without a hint of sexual overture. What is coming from their dance is an expression of a spirit beyond my humble powers of description; it is the sheer exultation of being alive and free and healthy and filled with life. It lifts me in ways reminiscent of the Hallelujah Chorus, or Ode to Joy, and makes me grin with pleasure. How the Puritans could have seen dancing as the devil's work escapes me. This is as joyful as life can be, a gift the angels must envy.

I was a lifeguard on a beach not far from here, and know that the band will eventually move on, the breeze grow cooler, the summer end, and the whirl of life spin the dancers back to homes and families. But for now, the moment is free of such cares. Ecclesiastes might have had the soccer moms in mind when he said that "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance..."

It is a summer night in August at the shore, and a time, at least for the soccer moms, to laugh and to dance.



Chapter Three

When it's Summertime in Oceanville...

8/17/2004 - Much as I love the life and swirl of Washington and world affairs, the

life of a country lawyer in a small town along the South Jersey coast has a seductive rhythm and easy pace no marbled halls or stately avenues can match.

The cleaning lady, one of those cheerful and indefatigably energetic people who can't sit still after sunrise or stay awake after dark, has me first on her rounds. So I roust myself out of bed early into an August morning that moves gently from a dawn of grey mist to a brilliant summer day.

Coffee and breakfast is a matter of driving down a leafy country road, past the white-steepled and mist-shrouded Methodist church and 200 year-old graveyard. Unable to resist its appeal, I stop to snap a photograph for the website. They intrigue me, those churchyard headstones. The names repeat. There are the Leeds, for whom Leeds Point and Jimmie Leeds Road is named, a family so deeply rooted in the area they once owned the island on which Atlantic City's casinos now sit, a few miles across the salt meadows from here. Harry Leeds is a friend of mine, a grizzled ex-marine and gun-proud Piney who spent years on the Town Council keeping a shrewd eye on developers coming in with rolled up plans and high-priced lawyers. He made sure the small and scattered post offices of the sprawling Township stayed open. There is a local legend that the Jersey Devil was a member of the Leeds family. Harry does not go out of his way to discourage the legend; in fact, at Halloween he's been known to tell small children it's a fact.

If you go along Leeds Point Road, you will come to the Leeds Point Post Office; a little bungalow nestled in the woods and surrounded by the huge wildlife preserve that runs from Smithville and its neighboring Oceanville across the marshes to the ocean at the Brigantine Inlet just north of Atlantic City. The Leeds Point Post Office is the oldest in the Township, having been established in December of 1827 with Japhet Leeds as postmaster. Japhet is long gone, and his Post Office, while still officially open, does not see much business.

The real action is at the Oceanville Post Office, about three miles from Leeds Point. Oceanville is celebrating its 130th birthday today, having been founded on August 17, 1874 with George W. Allen as its first postmaster.

The Postmaster today is Jeannette Davis, a woman who rose through the ranks, shifting from one Post Office to another as she gained experience and enough seniority to bid for Oceanville when it became available. She is good at what she does, and proud of it. With herself full time and her assistant Pam part time, she runs a tight ship. Shortly after becoming Postmaster she moved her Post Office into the Leeds Point Shopping Center, a small new 12-store mall. It's a clean, cheerful place of rental boxes, copy machine, weighing scales, envelopes for sale, posters of stamp collections, pick-up and delivery times noted on the door and always honored. On the counter sit a large bowl of Tootsie-Rolls and another of lollipops, paid for out of her own pocket and available to one and all — except for the occasional numbskull like myself who had the poor judgment to talk about

e-mail with an unfortunate reference to “snail mail”. This got her so mad at me I was not allowed my daily Tootsie-Roll for two weeks, until her good nature got the better of her and she forgave me.

When I picked up my mail today, there were signs proudly announcing the 130th birthday, and a few balloons floating about, and a table laden with birthday cake, cupcakes, cookies, and nearby cold drinks.

It’s a good thing to know that in this small corner of the world we can still celebrate the birthday of our local post office with neighbors and fellow patrons enjoying cake and cookies as we stop by to pick up the incoming bills and post the outgoing payments. E-mail has it’s uses, but its cookies aren’t the same. I doubt anyone will ever celebrate its birthday.

A few doors up from the Oceanville Post Office in the little strip mall is the Bagel Gourmet; a breakfast and lunch affair run by Pat, but more so by his wife Olga. It offers bagels of every description, the best lunchmeats, more flavors of coffee than Starbucks, luscious sandwiches, and has moved into the latest fad with a selection of lo-carb menu items. You can buy the New York Times there, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Atlantic City Press, the Wall Street Journal, and two or three others. Then you can take your coffee, bagel and newspaper outside to one of the four outdoor tables and watch the world go by ... or as much of the world as goes by this country road. It is one of those as-yet undiscovered local places where the occasional New Yorker finds himself happily surprised when he stops on an impulse while angling up the coast to the Parkway entrance ten miles north.

The Post Office and the Bagel Gourmet are what the big-league mall owners would call “anchor tenants,” like Sears or Macy’s or JC Penney’s on a smaller scale. The traffic they bring encourages the other tenants, including (although some come and go as small businesses either fade away or outgrow their space) the ever-present Karate school, a hair stylist, a tanning salon, a day care center, a dance school, a sports doctor and a pizza place.

Cars, and the ubiquitous SUV’s bearing tots to and from the day care center or the dancing school, come and go with easy timing. Nobody rushes today. It’s summertime in Oceanville, and the birthday of our Post Office.



Chapter Four

A Personal Memoir: My lunch at the White House the day Nixon quit...

(Republished to mark the 30th anniversary of that historic August day in 1974.)

It is 11:25 A.M. as we arrive in Washington, and the car radio reports that President Nixon has summoned Vice-President Ford to the Oval Office. No one doubts the reason for the summons. We park at the corner of New York and Pennsylvania Avenues, and walk hurriedly to our destination. At 11:30 on this incredible day, by a fluke of time and circumstance, we are scheduled to have lunch at the White House. But we are worried that as events unfold, our invitation will inevitably be canceled.

I am bemused at the irony that I, an avid Kennedy Democrat and Nixon critic, should be here on this day of all days. In an entirely unrelated matter, a client of mine is on the White House staff. So this is my third visit to Nixon's White House. On an earlier visit the FBI was there seizing Haldeman's and Erlichman's files; on another the subpoena was served for the infamous Watergate tapes. Now the House Judiciary Committee has voted to impeach him, and the world is gripped by the drama as the pressure on him to become the first President to resign the office increases hour by hour. I do not seem to bring Nixon much luck.

We pass through the "Nixon Watch", an eerie collection of demonstrators, supporters, police and photographers who have, since Monday, maintained their vigils in hope or anguish. A bearded young man pickets, his sign vowing "No Amnesty for Nixon". Around him stroll a small group bearing prayer books, their signs calling for prayers for the President. Along the White House fence reporters and photographers from dozens of countries are perched. They eye us idly for possible interest.

We pass the gates of the White House, and go on to its neighbor, the gray French Renaissance Executive Office Building, once the home of the combined Departments of State and War; now the central location of the hundreds of presidential staffers and technicians for whom room in the White House itself cannot be found. It is in this building that President Nixon has established his own hideaway office, finding the Oval Office itself lacking in privacy. The security check is thorough, but not oppressive. Our names have been cleared days in advance, and our identities are quickly confirmed. We pass through the metal detector and are within the Executive labyrinth.

The air is one of quiet...controlled, even solemn. As different in its silence from the sidewalks around the White House as a cathedral differs from the Boardwalk.

Our host greets us, and after assurances that our presence will not be a burden to him, we walk to the White House. The route is along a corridor passing by the hideaway office. There is no guard at its door. The President at this time is in the Oval Office, where he will meet with the Vice President. We go down a floor, then out into the day, which is warm but free, for the time, of the usual Washington summer heat. We cross a street which has been closed off at either end by permanent fencing, and immediately we are struck by the sense of familiarity with the scene. It is perhaps the most photographed passageway in the world. The

New York Times of that very day bears on the front page a picture of Press Secretary Ron Ziegler crossing to the building we have just left.

Before us is the West Wing. It is here that the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room, and the Press Room are located, and to this Wing that visiting dignitaries are welcomed. At the door stand a few young and quiet men, dressed in unremarkable suits, but clearly Secret Service agents. Their eyes review us quickly, professionally. One of them nods at our host as we pass through the door. On the step is a piece of bright green carpet; accentuated against the white of the building.

We are now in the White House itself. The walls are hung with the spectacular photographs of Nixon's foreign triumphs...of China, and Russia, the Middle East, all backdrops for the Presidency in all its color and glory. For the briefest of moments it is possible to forget the sordid deeds of other meetings which are forcing the President, inexorably in these very seconds, to pass from power.

The moment goes quickly, the photographs blocked by the passing of a squad of Secret Service agents. Led by the Chief of the White house detail, they disappear into a nearby room, where new orders will be quickly given. As they pass, White House staffers stand silently, their quick glances to one another acknowledging the significance of this fast and unscheduled meeting. One thinks of elections in bygone years, when the new President-elect would find Secret Service agents materializing around him, sometimes hours before the election returns themselves were known.

It is a few minutes before noon. We enter the Navy Mess...the plush, mahogany-walled, brass-fitted dining room for top White House staff and Cabinet members that is operated by the U.S. Navy. An arm's reach away as we enter is the Situation Room...the one point of total contact between the President and the world...the Room from which John F. Kennedy sweated out the Cuban Missile crisis, Johnson the Tet Offensive, and Nixon the bombing of Cambodia.

In the Navy Mess are twelve or fifteen tables, their white tablecloths and spotless silver gleaming, a fresh rose on each table, red napkins neatly folded next to buff colored china on which is traced in gold the seal of the President of the United States. A Navy steward in spotless whites shows us to our table. The room is, we learn, directly beneath the Oval Office, and our table is located directly beneath the President's desk.

It is noon as we are seated. Perhaps fifteen feet above us, no more, the President of the United States is informing the Vice-President that he will resign. It is the irrevocable step in the drama; all that has gone before is anticipation; all that will follow is implementation. The room fills, slowly, with diners. At the next table is Nixon's son-in-law, David Eisenhower. At another Bebe Rebozo; at still another Henry Kissinger. Few words are uttered about what is taking place so

close by; none can be heard beyond the tables at which they are spoken. The mood is neither grim nor relaxed. It is the professional readiness of those who deal with great power and who train themselves to move and talk quietly in crises. Alarmists, my host notes wryly, do not last long in the White House.

As we order, one man is called away; a telephone is brought to another's table. Several will absent themselves from the room for brief intervals during the meal. The stewards do not show surprise; as one man leaves his half-completed cup of coffee, a steward removes it. It will be at his place, filled and steaming, when the man returns to the table.

Shortly after twelve, my host, sitting next to me at the round table, is brought a telephone by a steward. The room, in which are dining the true insiders of the Nixon Administration, falls silent as he takes the call. They understand that a call made to this man at this time can have only one meaning.

In a quiet voice that carries only a table away he answers:

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Yes, sir"

"Yes, sir".

He hangs up the phone, and immediately but with the same quiet competence places an outgoing call. The call is to the network whose turn it is to handle Presidential broadcasts for the pool of all three networks.

"The President will require air time, tonight."

"Nine o'clock."

"No, no estimate of length yet."

The call itself takes perhaps half a minute. As the phone is returned to its cradle, and taken by the steward back to its resting place, the network itself is broadcasting the news. In perhaps two minutes the world is given the simple fact; the President will address the nation tonight.

So the die has been cast. There is little doubt among commentators and analysts throughout the world that the scheduled speech will be one of resignation. In the Navy Mess, there is no doubt whatever.

I raise an inquiring eyebrow to my host. He understands I am asking whether Nixon is quitting, and almost imperceptibly nods his head. No one in that select group, however, misses the unspoken question and its silent answer.

Subtly but perceptibly the mood of the room changes. The men at the various tables seem to relax, ever so slightly, as from an unconscious strain. Body postures change; one man leans back a few more inches against his chair. Another signals the steward for more coffee. But the relaxation is deceptive. As suddenly as it is noticed it is replaced by a stirring, an inclination to action. One is reminded of athletes, their nervous tension transformed by long training into direction-filled energy.

Courtesy and simple decency prevent me from letting my own feelings about Nixon's fall show, here in the midst of people who cared deeply for him as a friend, a world leader, and a gifted public servant. But I have been hoping for this very day too many years to let the moment pass without at least a private ceremony. For lack of a permissible substitute, I celebrate by ordering a hot fudge sundae.

Within a few minutes the meals seem to be finished. The diners exchange a few words with each other and depart. As we leave, the door to the Situation Room swings open briefly. A middle-aged man of military bearing steps out and goes down the hall.

Outside again, the scene appears at first unchanged. But in a moment the eye detects a different pace. There are more press. Perhaps twice the number of photographers and reporters, and more are walking quickly through the gates. The networks have flashed the news of the requested air time, and reporters who have covered Watergate in ever increasing numbers are arriving to report its climax.

As we exit from the Western door of the White House we are passed by Kenneth Rush, top Presidential Economic Advisor, who is preoccupied as he passes into the building. A few feet north of us, Ron Ziegler walks by, his stride half walk and half jog as he crosses the street, then runs up the stone stairs to the hideaway office. His face is an angry scowl, his bearing one of frustration and pent-up emotion. He is alone.

Within seconds, as Ziegler disappears into the Executive Office Building, Alexander Haig comes out of the White House, following the same route as Ziegler. Haig, too, is alone. His face is impassive, his bearing stiffly military. He too jogs swiftly up the long staircase and disappears into the hideaway office.

A few minutes later, we are within the Executive Office Building itself, and pass by the door of the President's hideaway office. This time there are two Secret Service men at the door. The President, as we walk by, is meeting with Haig, Ziegler, and speech writer Ray Price, who will draft the resignation speech.

For an hour we must wait, discussing in quiet tones the history which is occurring

around us. In the halls and offices there are tears, and quiet voices of consolation. For many, a man in whom they have believed and trusted for years is falling from power. For others, the future of their own careers is suddenly uncertain. For one young girl serving a summer internship the excitement proves unbearable. She sits on a couch, weeping softly, and in a few minutes is offered a ride home and a drink by a co-worker.

By two o'clock we are able to return to the White House. The President, still closeted with his speech writers and later with Henry Kissinger, will not return to the Oval Office until the broadcast.

We enter through the press room, a large and lovely room on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the White House which at one time housed the Presidential swimming pool. Today it is cluttered with cameras and tape recorders, television lights and cables, coffee cups and newspapers.

Scattered among the debris are perhaps two dozen reporters, some sitting on the floor talking among themselves to pass the time. But the alertness of their eyes belies their casual air. At each rustle of paper or step through the door, they come to point like hounds on a hunt. For the most, they are young and dressed informally, with a collection of beards. Four or five among them are young women, some in slacks and others in summer dresses.

Once again, as with the Secret Service, we are quickly scanned for news interest. Our presence is puzzling. We are not recognized and by that very fact their curiosity is alerted. Before questions are asked we pass through the room in which, in a few hours, the President will cause the press to be literally locked up while he takes a final stroll around the White House.

It is perhaps two-thirty, and we are in the Oval Office.

Although the President is gone, we are not alone. Five workmen, dressed in blue uniforms, have moved most of the furniture out of the room in preparation for the broadcast. They are taping down large white tarpaulins, which will protect the rug bearing the Great Seal of the United States from being marked by the wheels of the heavy television cameras which will televise the speech.

The desk has been cleared and, as we watch, one workman reaches behind us and begins to remove the collection of porcelain birds President Nixon has assembled.

Another workman, near the desk, hesitates and looks to his foreman.

"What about the chair?" he asks.

"That goes. Ford wants his own."

In a few steps we are outside the Oval Office in the Rose Garden, a private place of beauty and elegance. It is here that the Presidents of the United States have strolled with Kings, Prime Ministers, Premiers, Presidents and world leaders in almost every area of human effort. Today it is empty except for us. If the weather is clear on Friday, it will be used for the inauguration of Gerald Ford. If the weather is chancy, the great East Room will be used.

We return through the Oval Office and enter a hallway. A nearby elevator door opens and George Bush emerges, en route to a hurried conference. Already, in a town thriving on political speculation his name is reported as a leading contender to be the next Vice-President. I had enjoyed drinks with him at a chance meeting in a Connecticut Avenue restaurant a few years before and without thinking I reach out to shake his hand and say hello. With a politician's reaction he pumps my hand, says "How ya doin', fella! Good to see ya!" pats me on the shoulder and hurries down the hallway. Several Secret Service, CIA and FBI types glance at me as they follow him down the hall, obviously wondering who I could be.

Around us the pace quickens. The ultimate decision has been made. Its implementation is already underway. In widening ripples from this center hundreds and then thousands of men and women are already setting in motion the changes, great and small, intricate and simple, that mark the transfer of the power of the Presidency of the United States of America.

On Pennsylvania Avenue, as we walk out of the gates of the White House the crowd has swelled to perhaps three times the size of that we had seen in the morning. Its size is growing rapidly, but not its makeup. Its mood is one of anticipation; of a sure, somehow grim, knowledge that their Nixon watch is coming to its inexorable end.

Later...

After watching the President broadcast his resignation speech this evening, I found myself restless to return to the scene. About half-past ten I walked to the Southwest Gate, the working entrance for most of the staff, journalists, and those having business at the White House, and stood there musing on the events of the day, and of other days.

It was the second time I have witnessed in person the sudden transfer of power at the White House. The two events play against each other like fire and shadow. When President Kennedy was killed in Dallas in November of 1963 I was studying law and working in Washington. When the news broke, I joined a crowd in front of the ABC News window on Connecticut Avenue..then spent the afternoon wandering around town in a daze. Up on the Hill, then down to Lafayette Park, finally ending up just after dark standing at the Southwest Gate to

the White House, watching the intense activity.

I remember the trauma of it all...not only the enormous tragedy of Kennedy's assassination, but the sheer naked savagery of the incredible power of the nation, ripped open to see and watch its pulse in the lights and sirens and black limousines and the snakelike ganglia of television cables and night helicopter landings, a jumble of powerful officials scrambling to guard against other assassinations, military aggressiveness from enemies abroad, all their grief and anguish caught in the glare of the hastily set-up television lights.

Nearly eleven years have passed since that night. I got my chance to see some history, and meet and talk with Senators and a few Cabinet members, and to travel all over the country in the first years of the poverty program, seeing the poor where they lived and watching first the efforts of the Democrats to end poverty, then the determination of the Republicans to exploit the inevitable abuses of those efforts. I saw the migrant camps, and the ghettos, and the Indian reservations and Appalachia and the back roads of the South.

When the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was passed, I was in the Senate Gallery watching Senators Morse and Gruening being hooted down when they tried to stop it, foreseeing the disaster it would nourish. Years later when the Vietnam war it authorized was protested I was there taking notes and counting the lighted candles put on the Treasury Building fence by long-haired young men and girls determined to bring the war to an end. In '68, in the days after Martin Luther King was murdered and the riots broke out in all the cities, I found on the same day traffic into both Trenton and Washington blocked by guards with bayonets. So I ran for Congress. Before I even knew by how much I'd lost the primary the news came of Bobby Kennedy's being shot.

To my eyes most of our history since that night in '63 has been a god awful nightmare; the kind of slow and terrible thing that gets worse and worse, with one insanity heaped on another until it seemed the whole nation was just being caught in a whirlpool leading to its dissolution. Whenever something would come along with a note of hope in it, it would end in an assassin's bullet or a police riot, or some other painful event.

The Nixon years have been particularly painful. To see needed policies go ignored and foolish policies followed is nothing new in politics. Half of us endure that feeling at any time. But to witness those events piled upon a corrupting undermining of the democratic process became a deeper level in a bad dream. Nixon's Vice President Spiro Agnew accepting bribes in the White House itself; Nixon having his campaign funded with bags of cash solicited by his closest associates from any and all industries wanting special favors, and all this covered over with the cynical claim of national security while more and more of the nation's energies were consumed in a wasting war and his determination to hold onto office at any cost.

Eleven years passed. By an irony of fate I was on the scene when Nixon came to the end of the road. After the day and the broadcast, I could no more resist going to that Southwest gate than iron could resist the magnet.

The transfer this time was smooth. It was done by appointment, with briefings and speeches and time to see it coming. The difference showed. That is quite a place, the White House. When it comes to handling power it is in its natural element, given half a chance. The staff managed to shift it all with no more visible disruption than the ripple of muscles in an oarsman's back. No trauma this time, no mad cable lines or sirens.

The high, dark, elegant facade of the Executive Office Building was gray and somber against a sky made red by the lights on Pennsylvania Avenue. There were one or two offices lit, high up, the lights burning like some artist's garret on the Left Bank.

The magnolias were in bloom...great white blossoms on a hot August night a long way from the cold of November of '63.

Looking north from the gate, the White House was lit all in bright light. There were cars coming in and out, but the tension was gone. One got the feeling the drivers wanted to get home in time for the last inning. A camper bus went by, with some kids playing a guitar and standing up through the sun roof.

Tangibly, the nightmare of that night in 1963, after lasting so many years, was ending. Like men waking, people walked softly at first, feeling their ground...then more surely, breathing deeply and looking around, savoring the smells and sounds of the summer night, slowly coming to life, wondering and dazed, but whole.

On Seventeenth Street a young couple walked by, the man in shirt sleeves and whistling in an off-key, relaxed way "By the light of the silvery moon"... a touch even Hollywood would reject as too hokey.

So it came to be an American summer evening stroll. The crowds on Pennsylvania Avenue shot fireworks into the air. The police were there, in riot helmets looking like the police who so beat up the war protesters at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in '68, yet now somehow limp. The tension was out of them. One of them was a pretty brunette, who seemed competent but herself a comment of the changes over the years.

On Pennsylvania Avenue, sitting in the middle where a thousand years ago Kennedy's inaugural parade had gone by with PT 109 and all the rest, were the anti-Nixon demonstrators...confused and, like the police, with no tension left in them.

They had nothing left to demonstrate about.

When Ford spoke those words that “the long national nightmare is over”, I felt that it was the first honest voice I had heard in that office in eleven years. I admit I had tears on my face when he finished.



Chapter Five

And the horse you rode in on! ...

6/28/2004 - According to the New York Times, the Beijing Laundromat News and other reputable papers, our bipartisan leaders gathered on the floor of the Senate recently for their class picture. There were tall senators, short senators, skinny and fat senators, and at least three senators not presently under indictment. I have it on the best authority there was even one senator who wasn't scheming to run for President, although they all look so virtuous it's hard to tell which of the scoundrels was so callously ignoring the needs of the country for his leadership. The idea behind the picture was to show the schoolchildren of America that you can put 101 politicians in the same picture and not have one of them wearing horizontal stripes. There's only 100 Senators, as everybody knows, but the constitution says the Vice President has to preside over the Senate, so Dick Cheney was invited to get his mug in the picture.

It was a good idea, although the language in the Senate gets so high-falutin' it's almost impossible to figure out what they're saying to each other. Poor John Kerry, who's been in the Senate twenty years, has been driving his speechwriters to drink trying to get him to speak plain English instead of Senatespeak. They write something short and sweet about “let's beat that snotty, smirky, miserable failure from Crawford, Texas” and Kerry ignores it and spends twenty minutes droning on about “the pressing need to replace the incumbent unilateralist.”

You have to love that old time courtliness. It's wonderful to hear the soothing charm of it all when the gentleman from Oklahoma asks unanimous consent to extend and revise his remarks about the unfortunate failure of the Senator from Enron's parents to get married, or to hear the congratulations offered by the Senator from Tel Aviv to the Senator from Saudi Arabia at his good luck in ducking the FBI subpoena and Michael Moore's camera.

The taking of the Senate's picture was a happy event. The spirit of bipartisanship was everywhere. Senator Friss was seen smiling at Senator Daschle, each making sure they didn't turn their back and give the other a chance to slip the knife in. Senator Lott of Mississippi was in the corner smiling graciously at Senator Hillary, who was smiling back at him with her jaws on triple lock.

Having their picture taken together without weapons in their hands is the latest political fad, brought about by the senators mutual respect and a sincere desire to get past the metal detectors in time to get to their fund raising dinners. It's a grand thing to take a photograph of bipartisanship in action. I hope they used a camera with fast lenses.

Senator Pat Leahy of Vermont spotted Vice President Cheney in the crowd and tried to have a friendly word with him about whether his old chums at Halliburton would please give us back the Treasury. "Go *** yourself," growled Cheney. The Senate Parliamentarian is still looking it up in the dictionary to find out what Cheney meant.

It reminded me of the days when Finley Peter Dunne wrote his wonderful columns with the dialogue between Mr. Dooley the Irish bartender and his favorite customer, Mr. Hennessy.

"An' what does the Vice-Presydunt do?" asked Mr. Hennessy.

"He presides over the Senate," said Mr. Dooley. "An' administhers the rules."

"Sound's aisy enough," said Hennessy.

"An' so it is," declared Dooley. "Baycause the Senate has no rules. 'Tis governed by courtesy ... like the Teamster's Union."

He's right for the job, is Dick Cheney. There's not a man alive who understands the rules of the Senate better.



Chapter Six

The Broken Weapon: America's Moral Authority...

5/17/2004 - Military people speak of "breaking your weapon," a description of the sort of tactical stupidity that led the Nazis to continue bombing England when they could no longer provide fighter support for their bombers. They lost so large a percentage of their planes on every raid they eventually had little effective force left. "They have broken their air weapon," Winston Churchill proclaimed when the Battle of Britain ended. Thus do great conflicts often turn upon effectively using, or foolishly wasting, the strongest weapon in your arsenal.

If our objective is, as President Bush insists, to plant and nourish democracy in Iraq, weapons meant for killing are of limited use. Our strongest weapon has little to do with Predator drones or armored Humvees on the streets of Falluja. What is needed is clear title to the high moral ground, indisputable championship of the claim that all men are created equal, with certain inalienable rights to life, liberty

and the pursuit of happiness, and that those rights cannot be taken away from anyone without due process of law.

But they were taken away from naked Arab prisoners circled by snarling dogs and armed troops, in Abu Ghraib, by American forces and under the American flag, in ways that have shocked the country and the world.

These abuses did not spring from barren soil. Their seed germinated in the remarkably ignorant religious rectitude of President Bush, and was fertilized by the arrogant insistence that democracy can be imposed on an unprepared people by corrupt puppets installed and kept in power at gunpoint. Abu Ghraib is, root, branch and poisoned fruit, the shameful harvest of President Bush's contemptuous rejection of what Thomas Jefferson termed "a decent respect for the opinion of mankind."

There is no apparent way out of the mess that the Bush Administration has created; not while he is in the White House. But if Senator Kerry has the sense to use it, he has been handed a golden opportunity, should he be elected, to take office free of any obligation to remain in Iraq.

The prisoner abuse scandal is so stunning in its impact on the Arab perception of Americans, and exposes our troops to such enraged hostility, that it changes the entire context of debate over the war. John Kerry, as with every other political leader who wrestled with the dilemma of patriotic support of a dubious war, is suddenly freed of having to explain why he voted for the war and now opposes it. He is freed of having to pledge more troops in order to appear a responsible and strong leader. He is freed of any duty except to get our troops out as safely and with as much dignity as possible, and to persuade the United Nations at all costs to fill the void.

He is freed because, whatever plans for bringing democracy and freedom to the oppressed people of Iraq were credible before those awful photographs got about, no responsible observer in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib can pretend that we Americans will persuade the Arab world of the virtues of democracy. Not by June 30, nor in six months, nor in a year, nor possibly in a generation.

Of course, we can win firefights in the sense that we can kill more of the Arabs than they can kill of our troops. We certainly can build bases and encampments with heavy fortifications and keep our troops and materiel safely behind the walls. But to what purpose? Without the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the tens of thousands of inhabitants of the cities and villages we propose to rebuild, every effort we make to reconstruct Iraq can be frustrated by people who appear out of the crowd, kill our troops and civilian allies, and disappear. And if we cannot make good on our promises to rebuild their shattered civilization, then of what value are we to them? Shall we broadcast speeches about the benefits of democracy from behind our fortress walls? How much value will such speeches

have among people fed a steady diet of the damning photographs by those who desire to fan the flames of anti-Americanism?

Whose hand in a crowd will stay the young man carrying the rocket-propelled grenade launcher? Who in those crowds will urge his neighbors to forgive and forget? Would you or I or anyone we know forget such pictures if it were our sons and daughters being abused? Never. Never, never, never. And neither will the Iraqis.

President Bush cannot and will not change his policy. He believes in it with a fervent energy inspired by what he perceives as the will of God. His circle of supporters, however less religious they may be in their personal faith, are equally zealous in their conviction that they are right and the rest of the world is wrong. They are so implicated in the unfolding mess wrought by their misguided efforts that they cannot extricate themselves without betraying their own dreams of holding on to their offices, their power and their prospects.

This has happened before. In Vietnam two successive Presidents became so committed to obviously failed policies that tens of thousands of American troops had to die before the will of the country brought that war to its end. It is not a foregone conclusion that President Bush will be defeated as the result of the melt-down in Iraq. Americans tend to support their Presidents, especially when they are beleaguered. But however the election goes, he has lost control ... and in the process he has broken America's best weapon.



Chapter Seven

Baghdad Follies: Lessons from the Deep South...

4/28/2004 - To understand what we are up against in Iraq today, it's worth examining what happened in this country in the aftermath of the Civil War.

The North had fought the South to free an oppressed people, victims of a society that raped their women, murdered their men and sold their children into slavery, a society in which the one-third who were white held down the two-thirds who were black.

The Union army won a resounding victory. Every Confederate stronghold was destroyed. Richmond was in ashes, Atlanta a smoldering ruin. Their railroads were so much twisted iron wreckage, their armies defeated, dispirited and dispersed in a devastated land.

Now came the Reconstruction. The war-torn Southern economy would be rebuilt and a democracy that protected the rights of all its citizens would take root and flourish. Once those two goals were met, the Union troops could be withdrawn.

These were far easier goals than what we now attempt in Baghdad. The people of the occupied South, after all, spoke our language. They understood how democratic governments functioned. They knew how to hold elections, how to police themselves, how to regulate their own affairs.

But Southern Reconstruction was a miserable failure. It failed because we used Union bayonets to install and protect as rulers in the South an endless stream of opportunists and thieves. Like Iraq today, the South was governed by people who ruled the day but were afraid to go out at night among those they pretended to represent.

Then, as now, soldiers who had fought against us – all too often barefoot veterans who had no more choice about joining Jeff Davis's army than Abdul the brickmaker had about joining Saddam's – were barred from a role in the rebuilding of their shattered communities. We denied public life to leaders like Robert E. Lee, a man so large in stature he could surrender and yet have his troops leave the field with honor and esteem. By doing so we insured that no men could come to power except those collaborators most hated and reviled by their neighbors.

This failure of intelligent vision contributed heavily to the years of murderous night-riding and lynchings that marked the South's relentless drive to cast out the military governors, the occupying troops, and the carpetbaggers we forced upon a shattered civilization at gunpoint.

Every analogy has its limit. Baghdad had no Lee during the war, nor has it in the aftermath a Nelson Mandela, gifted with enough spirit to take power unencumbered by thoughts of bitterness and revenge. Instead, it has reviled exiles supported by our guns and bitter mullahs happy to gain power by redirecting tribal and religious hatreds against the United States in a guerilla war as vicious as any waged by the Ku Klux Klan of the old South.

President Bush and his advisors are trying hard to hold on to a mistaken belief that an occupying army can govern a people through scoundrels foisted upon them at gunpoint. Even as the Iraqi insurgents swarm around our burning vehicles, the President and his coterie continue to spend our soldier's lives in support of these modern day carpetbaggers.

An Administration so boastful of its Southern roots ought to know better.



Chapter Eight

Canvasback Jackson on fighting the yap-yaps...

12/2/2002 - The liberals are fighting back. Tom Daschle and Al Gore have accused the yap-yappers of being boom boxes for the Republican National Committee, who take whatever talking points the RNC wants stuffed down our throats and, well, stuffs them down our throats.

Being a trusting guy and believing in Fox News when they say they're the home of the "No Spin Zone," I called my old friend "Canvasback" Jackson to find out what's going on.

Canvasback paid his way through college by throwing fights on the prelim cards in the Bronx and Brooklyn. The man was an artist. He could bob and weave and duck so the other guys never laid a glove on him, but still hit the canvas in whatever round the bookies wanted. He could make a 10-rounder look like something out of Rocky XXII, and go home without a scratch on him. When he got out of college he went into TV news management and was an instant success.

It was no surprise to hear that Tom Daschle and Al Gore had sought his advice on how to fight the yap-yaps.

"Look," Canvasback told them, "you guys are doing it all wrong. You walk into a setup every time. First thing, ya gotta understand the rules the yap-yaps are playin' by."

"Rule One: You gotta own the mike. Never, never go on a show where you don't own the mike. Get one of them billionaire liberals to buy a network if you have to, and stuff it full of mean and nasty liberals. No nice guy stuff. Just like the conservatives, you have to cut throats and bust kneecaps."

"Next thing is, always pick your own opponent," Canvasback said. "Don't go looking for the best spokesman for the other side, 'cause he'll make a monkey out of you. Did you ever see a liberal on a yap-yap show that looked good? Hell, no! They pick goggle-eyed geeks with thick glasses and squeaky voices, or women that favor castration for male jaywalking. You wanna make the conservatives look bad, dig up some whacko that wears swastikas on his necktie and insists that Hitler was misunderstood and put him on your show."

"And when you get him, do your homework. Get every clip where he said something stupid, and if he never said anything stupid, find somebody willing to lie about what he actually said. Get him on the defensive. Run TV clips of your target smiling at pictures of starving kids."

"But," Tom Daschle asked nervously, "what if your conservative guest never

smiled at pictures like that?”

“Then get a picture of him smiling and put it next to a picture of a starving kid. It'll work, trust me,” Canvasback replied. “And keep him on the defensive. Never let him finish a sentence. If he starts scoring points, interrupt him. If that doesn't work, cut to a commercial. Have a camera do a closeup of him sweating.”

“And sneer a lot. Your guy should be cool and aggressive. Have him practice looking like a tiger whose dinner's late.”

“But what about the arguments? Shouldn't our man be ready with solid liberal arguments?” Tom Daschle asked. Al Gore began to look at him sideways.

“Arguments?” Canvasback was incredulous. “You think people want arguments? What they want is blood sport. And that's how you get 'em on your side.”

“That's why you been losing. You think you're in politics. But the other guy knows he's in show business. People ain't lookin' for what's good for the country. They're lookin' for reality programming, and nothin's more real than wipin' up the floor with the other guy – whatever it takes.”

Tom Daschle shook his head. “It's a shame politics has come to this,” he said. “It's no good for the country. And it isn't fair.”

“Fair?” said Canvasback, his words dripping with contempt. “You want fair? Or you wanna win?”

The liberals glanced at each other. Then Al Gore cleared his throat and leaned forward. “Listen,” he said, “tell me that part about the tiger again.”



Chapter Nine

An Avalanche of Dreams...

11/18/2002 - I'm having a tremendous time these days. It's great fun, this business of selling a book I've written: “The Skin Game,” a fun-filled, light-hearted account of practicing law in Atlantic City just before the casinos came in. My sales drive is all local, of course. I won't be knocking Tom Clancy or John Grisham out of first place on the nation's bookshelves anytime soon. But still, it's a round of radio and TV, of newspaper interviews and book-signings, of getting calls from local bookstores that they're out of copies and need more, and having readers send me e-mails thanking me for the laughs and asking where can they get two more copies for their friends.

I have a whole new appreciation for writers and artists and musicians and

playwrights and all the rest of my new colleagues who create something out of long-nourished dreams and set it out before the great public to see how it goes.

An appreciation, also, of the enormous number of folks who confess, shyly – almost like revealing a long pent-up secret, and with a glimmer of determination newly awakened – to having a book inside them they plan someday to write, or an adventure that will surely make a great movie, once they get it down on paper.

In all the books and magazine articles I've read over the years, and TV interviews of writers telling how they got started and what their books are about and how it feels to spend your time torn between selling the book you've written and getting started on the next one, no one ever mentioned the effect what you do has on others with the same dream.

Since word got out that I've published "The Skin Game." I find myself in coffee shops and luncheonettes and law libraries and sidewalk conversations with people whose eyes light up with pleasure as they look around to make sure they can't be overheard, and tell me with lowered voice how they envy me for doing it, and how, someday, when they can find the time, they're going to take it out of the drawer where it's been gathering dust and see if they can finish it.

In thirty years I've had the privilege of reading two books in manuscript form before they were published — one of which won a Pulitzer and another which became a best seller for a week or two. But in the few months since "The Skin Game" came out, I've had a half dozen manuscripts, short stories, early chapters and uncompleted scripts pressed into my hand with a wistful "no hurry, but read it when you get the chance."

I suppose professional writers and established authors hide when they see the waitress approach with a thick brown envelope and a hopeful gleam in her eye, or their lawyer or doctor reaching behind him while casually mentioning "this little thing I've been fooling around with that you might find interesting." But for me it's still so fresh I am amazed at the extent of irrepressibly creative hope among us.

I read the first seven chapters of a novel set in the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and an account of a trip a man and his lifelong buddy finally took across the country on the old Route 66 in a classic Chevy Corvette and couldn't get out of small towns until everybody on Main Street had the chance to purr over the car and reminisce about their own youth. A woman gave me her short story to look over, an intriguing weaving of story and fantasy so well written you couldn't tell where the one left off and the other began. One dear soul called me for advice about a book she planned to write. She's in her 80's, has a box full of material, but isn't sure where to begin and wants to know if perhaps she should take a course in typing.

Can you imagine the strength of a creative dream that lets us shrug off the aches

and pains of old age and look for ways to express ourselves?

She may not do it, of course. Most of us will never do it. Life has its mortgages to pay and kids to raise and time that must be given to family affairs and church and synagogue and community and the busy-work of daily life. All too soon we run out of time. It took me thirty years before I could gather up the sporadic research of a lifetime to write my first novel, another five to write it, and two spent thus far in searching for an agent, and still I haven't been able to get that book, a serious historical novel, published. So when a busy lawyer colleague told me how envious he was that I'd been able to get it written at all, I understood both his dream and his longing to get to the day he could do it.

But "The Skin Game" needed no research. It came flowing from my pen in happy hours at the café tables of New Orleans and at every local restaurant here at home that would let me tie up a table sipping iced tea by the hour as I scribbled. So it's now in print, and I get calls on my cell-phone from readers who tell me they're laughing so hard they had to call and thank me.

"The biggest problem I have," one lady chuckled, "is that I read it before I gave it to my husband. He spent the next two nights poking me in the ribs and saying 'Listen to this one!' "

I think that's why people wish me well with a shy grin of fellowship. We all know there's good stuff inside us, and when one of us takes a shot at it, we all feel better. What I hadn't expected was how good it would make me feel to learn how much company we dreamers have.



Chapter Ten

The Congress of Cold Hearted Saints ...

11/12/2002 - Congress reconvened this week with the Religious Right eager to find out if it can hold a nation of 280 million people in a hammerlock with a majority of only 2 in a Senate of 100 and only 12 or so in a House of 435 members. You'd think they'd learn that when you have a hairline majority it's time to refrain from extremism, but that's not the way the Religious Right sees things. They're on the march with God on their side and a 2 vote margin in case He changes His mind.

For the first time since the United States was born, the driving agenda of the President, both houses of Congress and the Supreme Court is to impose the values of what they perceive as white Christianity upon our laws and our culture. It is a righteous government run by people who came to power on the premise that the government should be less entangled in our lives, but who now propose to give taxpayer's money to churches of their choosing and to interpose the government's policy between a woman and her womb.

The spectacle has me nostalgic for the late 1960's and a friend of mine named Joe Hancock

Hancock was a Cumberland County man, living his life along the southeastern shore of the Delaware Bay. That's on the New Jersey side, down river from Philadelphia and Wilmington, where the river widens into the great bay that opens onto the Atlantic Ocean between Cape May in New Jersey and Lewes, Delaware. It's a region that flourished in colonial times, provided abolitionists in the Civil War, and went straight down hill when the oyster beds gave out.

Joe was a Quaker, if I remember correctly, and an elected Democrat in what was, in the late 1960's, a staunchly Republican county. As with many Quakers his roots went back years before the Revolution. The word was that he was descended from a branch of the family that produced John Hancock, the man who signed the Declaration of Independence with such a flourish. If so, the showmanship didn't run in the family. Joe was a plain man with a friendly spirit, and there was no flash in him.

He owned a small marina on Hancock's Creek that boasted a coffee counter about 4 stools long. On the counter he kept the latest copy of the Wall Street Journal, which then as now had as conservative an editorial outlook as you could want. Above it a hand-lettered sign announced: "We keep this paper for our Republican friends. Democrats may only peek!"

You can't help loving a man with that kind of gentle humor. It explained how he'd been elected time and again.

I think about Joe Hancock these days, and about the Quakers, who believe in the peaceful life. The Quakers don't operate by majority vote. They prefer to reason with the stubbornest holdouts 'til the cows come home, on the theory that until the common sense of a proposition is clear to just about everybody, there's nothing to be gained by jamming the opinion of the majority down the throats of the minority.

You don't see that approach in Washington these days. It's whole hog or nothing, and if you disagree with me I'll trash you and drag your name through the mud and if that doesn't work I'll go on television Sunday morning and challenge your patriotism and tell lies about you.

We are in for a time of power sought and power applied, by people whose politics are grim and unforgiving. The cycle of fund-raising, arm-twisting and negative posturing that will carry us through a coming war and tumble us into the meat-grinder of a Presidential campaign less than 24 months from now has already begun.

It will be a congress of many smiles and no laughter; of prayer meetings and no fellowship; of a cold Christianity with no compassion and no forgiveness. I suspect the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount, with his love of the poor, the sick and the sinful would find Himself uncomfortable in the coming government of Pharisees and money-changers.

Which is why I wish Congress and the White House and the Supreme Court had a few Joe Hancocks right now. A little patient reasoning and gentle humor would go a long way.



Chapter Eleven

Misquote Jones and the White House cookie tray...

10/21/2002 - "Misquote! Is that you?"

My old friend was slouched over the bar at the National Press Club in Washington, lifting his drink with trembling hands. He eyed me nervously, ashamed to be seen in such poor condition. As a young man he'd been the most hard-nosed reporter in the White House press corps. He'd earned his nickname when, at a press conference called by a government official who claimed he was misquoted, he stood up and shouted, "Which lie did I misquote?"

It's been years since I last attended a White House press conference — not since President Nixon fired half the government. What a day that was! Misquote and the other reporters went at him like starving wolves after a wounded elk.

Now I eyed this shipwreck at the bar and thought of the evils of drink. "Misquote," I asked sympathetically, "have you tried A.A.?"

"It ain't booze," he moaned. "It's the job! I can't take it anymore!"

"But, Misquote," I said. "You're the best White House reporter in history! You love that stuff! The thrill of the chase, the scent of blood when you get that backstabbing leak from the insiders fighting for the corner offices!"

He looked at me sorrowfully. "You've been out of town too long," he said. "Everything's changed. The only scent of blood nowadays is when they serve the steak rare, and even that don't happen much. All these kid reporters are vegetarian joggers. They don't drink, smoke or cuss."

"It's that bad?"

"Worse!" A bit of the old spark flashed in his eyes. "Nobody even remembers how to get a story! You know what I asked this morning?" He lowered his eyes in

shame. "I asked what the President thought about his wife's book fair!"

"No!" I was stunned. "We're gonna bomb Baghdad and you're asking about a book fair?"

"I had to! It was on the cookie tray."

"What's the cookie tray?"

"Just before the Press Secretary steps up to the podium they pass a plate around with questions printed on little cards. Everybody's allowed one card and has to ask that question."

Misquote rose to his feet. "I gotta go," he said. He patted his pockets and a look of alarm came over his face. "My SmartCookie card! I can't find it!"

"I thought they gave them to you on a tray or something."

"No, no, I mean the one with the magnetic stripe. After you ask the cookie question you swipe it through a machine. If you asked the question in a nice tone of voice and didn't try any tricks, the computer puts points on your SmartCookie card. Enough points, and they give you extra questions to ask. And the guy with the highest point score for the year gets to have the President mention his name and poke fun at him at the Gridiron Dinner."

"Misquote," I said, "I'm ashamed to see you've sunk so low."

"What else can I do?" he said, hanging his head. "If I don't play the game, my editor starts looking for another reporter."

"Still," I said, "it might be worth it just to ask the President some tough questions."

"The President?" he wailed. "You gotta be kidding! When's the last time you heard anybody ask the President anything? We never get within shouting distance of him. The top guy we get to ask questions is the Press Secretary, and he's the guy who writes the cookie questions in the first place!"

I shouldn't have been surprised. You can't cookie-feed a pet and then turn it loose and expect it to feed itself in the wild. So why expect today's White House reporters to suddenly go out and hunt red meat for dinner? After all, it happened on television, right before our eyes. But it took years and nobody realized what we were seeing.

After Woodward and Bernstein nailed Nixon, every journalist wanted a president's hide. Ford pardoned Nixon and the press corps went ape looking for the secret deal. Carter tried to make nice, so the press went after his friend Bert

Lance for the banking scandal and bagged his sister Ruth for being, so help me, a Christian evangelist!

Reagan figured it out. He invented the helicopter wave. There he'd go, marching off to Marine One on the South Lawn, right past Sam Donaldson shouting questions about Ollie North. Reagan would cup his hand to his ear like he couldn't hear and give everybody a big smile and a wave, which is all that made it to the evening news.

The first President Bush got away with that until he ran for re-election and made the mistake of letting the audience ask questions during a debate. Some woman asked him how much a quart of milk cost and that was the end of George the First. The Republicans wised up again – no more unscripted questions.

But a lot of what happened to the White House press corps was Bill Clinton's fault. He made things so easy they just plain forgot how to dig for a story. All they had to do was sit back and wait for the right-wing nuts to hand them their stories on a platter. During Bill's eight years there were kids who made it from rookie to cable news anchor without ever getting a story on their own.

You can see what it's come to. The White House press corps is about as competent to chase down hard news as a new-born rabbit, and here's President Bush the Second starting his own private war. No wonder Misquote's a wreck!



Chapter Twelve

Don Corleone on Invading Baghdad...

12/30/2002 - The Godfather sat in his study. His son Michael came in, carrying the notice that the Marine Corps had recalled him to active duty for the invasion of Baghdad. The old man read the letter with contempt.

"This war is not for the Corleone Family," he rasped with disgust, "It's not for any of the Five Families. This war is for the Bush family. Why should we help them?"

"Pop, it's against the Saddam Hussein family," Michael said. "If we don't put them down now, they'll hit New York again."

The old man shook his head. "Saddam didn't hit New York. He's not that smart, and his people have no loyalty to him. He sends his soldiers out, even his capos won't fight unless he holds their children hostage. The hit on New York — that was the Bin Laden Family. I can understand that." He took a sip of water.

"It's not our way to get mixed up with people who don't come from Sicily. And anyway, these men are different. The Bin Laden Family and the Bush Family.

Arabs, Texans, it's all oil. None of our business.

“But Saddam tried to kill the Bush father.”

The Don nodded. “And the son wants revenge because he's a hothead, like Sonny used to be. He wants to run out and start shooting. But the son has no brains. The threat to him is the Bin Laden family. Osama probably put Saddam up to that in the first place, to divert attention. Bush the father, he was like you. He fought in the war. The son, he does not respect himself because he was drinking and being a college boy and now he feels he has to prove himself to his father by taking out Saddam. He's not taking care of business. If he was smart, he'd see all this about Saddam – ” the Don waved his hand dismissively – “is taking the heat off Bin Laden. You can't let it be personal. It's just business.”

“I understand, Pop,” Michael said. “But I have to go.”

Don Corleone reached out and patted his son's cheek. Tears came to his eyes.

“I never wanted this for you, Michael. I worked my whole life, and I don't apologize, to take care of my family. And I refused to be a fool, dancing on a string held by all those big shots. That's my life. But I thought that when it was your time, that you would be the one to hold the strings. Senator Corleone. Governor Corleone. Something.”

Suddenly, a glint came to his eyes. He turned to his consigliere Tom Hagen. “Tom,” he said, “I want you to talk to our friends in Washington. Take over some companies that make bombs and airplanes and tanks.”

The consigliere nodded his head, grasping the idea immediately.

“And Tom,” the old man rasped. “Start buying up oil companies – the drill makers, the tankers, the ones that make pipelines.”

Michael's eyes lit up with understanding. “You mean for after we hit Baghdad?”

“Let the fools destroy it all,” Don Corleone said. “When they get done, all the works they need to reach the oil will be gone. But underneath, the oil will still be there. And in three or four years, all of the big shots, the Arabs and the Texans, will be back together again, with all that oil.”

“Maybe it's time we changed our old ways. Why should we fight for the big shots, the ones who take it upon themselves to decide what we shall do with our lives, who declare wars they wish us to fight to protect what they own?”

“If we fight, we should be the ones who own.”



Chapter Thirteen

This land is your beach, this land is ...

9/23/2002 - Don't know why I was surprised to hear that the overwhelming majority of Americans live within 50 miles of a coast. It's pretty obvious when you tote up the populations of Maine and Massachusetts, New York, Florida, Texas and California, not to mention Hawaii and Alaska.

I was raised on the island over there across the salt meadows. Taking off my shoes and walking along the warm sand and shallow ripples has always seemed to me a birthright to which every human being who can get there is entitled, free of charge — a gift of creation like air and sunshine and all things natural.

Except, of course, that the rich don't want us there, and the politicians have gotten in the habit of selling beach tags, which is a way of charging you money to walk the earth wearing a dog license. When they passed the law requiring beach tags in summer, I quit the beach entirely and now go there only in winter. Be damned if I'll pay for what I already own.

Bad as the beach tags imposed by politicians are, though, an even worse evil is the arrogance of those who can afford the million dollar mansions that crowd beach fronts everywhere. Where they can get away with it — as in parts of New Jersey and California and elsewhere, the wealthy owners of beachfront houses insist that they own not only the land on which their house stands, but the rights down the beach and out to the water line, so you can't walk, surf, or fish unless you're an invited guest of theirs.

You've all seen the TV news about California movie stars fighting beach lovers over who owns the sand between their private palaces and the breaking surf. “No privacy” say the stars. “We won't be able to bathe nude in our hot tubs if you let the photographers on our beaches.”

“So get shades! That beach belongs to the public!” shout the surfers, who don't give a *** for either the movie stars or the paparazzi.

In New Jersey, the beach town of Longport tried building a public walkway to the beach. “Litter!” cried the big house folks; “all those day-trippers with their kids and picnic lunches and trash and bottles and frisbees and umbrellas ruin our view!”

“Baloney!” answer the picnickers. “We work all week and with amusement parks and movies costing an arm and a leg why shouldn't we be able to bring our kids to the beach? You didn't make the ocean or the beach anymore than you made the sky! You've got no right to keep us away.”

I had a client, years ago, who owned a beachfront motel and had what's known as a Riparian Grant – a lovely document from the State of New Jersey that said he could control the beach in front of his property and even build a fence running a thousand feet out into the ocean. How he screamed when I told him that grant wasn't worth the paper it was written on, and that if he put a fence out there I'd lead the parade to tear it down. "You can't do it," I told him. "Not since King John signed on the dotted line."

"King John?" he asked. "Who the hell's King John and what's he got to do with my property?"

He didn't recognize King John until I reminded him of the story of Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham. King John was the scalawag brother of King Richard the Lion Hearted, who ran the kingdom while Richard was off making friends for Christianity in the Middle-East by chasing the Arabs out of Jerusalem and murdering the Jews while he was at it. The story of Robin Hood may be made up, but King John was serious business. He stole the Kingdom blind, and came up with ways to squeeze money out of people that tax collectors still envy.

When a woman was widowed in those days, the King had the right to marry her off to the man of his choice, on the theory that she was his ward and he had to look after her and her property. King John had a supply of hungry friends eager to snatch up the odd castle and fiefdom and willing to take the widow down the aisle, whether she liked it or not. He arrested people without charges, held them without bail, and when his courts found them guilty confiscated their property and evicted their families from their homes. He grabbed up forests all over England, which meant that the wild deer on which plain folk fed were now the King's deer, and you could get hung for killing them.

Fishing in the streams and rivers was how you fed your family and could make a living in those days, and had always been free to whoever could catch the fish – until King John hit on the idea of fencing off the rivers and renting fishing rights, hanging poachers right and left.

Well, it takes the English a long time to get their Irish up, so to speak, but the time came when folks had had enough of King John. So in the year 1215 the Barons, local lords who had the muscle and troops to put a stop to his thievery, arranged a friendly chat between themselves and their thousands of armed troops on the one hand, and King John and his secretary on the other.

They met in a friendly little field called Runnemede, and persuaded King John that he should stop being a greedy pig. Those widows he was putting on the block were their own sisters, mothers and daughters and they wanted it stopped. And holding people without charging them wasn't the way things used to be so let's get back to the good old ways and bring them before a jury of their peers.

And about those rivers. “The fact is, Johnny,” said the well-armed Barons, “we all grew up with the understanding that the water runs free, and that the land under the water belongs to everybody. We want those fences down, and no more nonsense about you having the right to keep anybody from using the water or the land under it.”

King John, being a reasonable man and knowing that the pen is not mightier than the sword when your clerk has only the one pen while each of the ten thousand or so mean-tempered guys standing round you in a circle has his own sword and extra lances and maces if needed, did the smart thing and promised to make some changes.

The Barons also did the smart thing and got it in writing. They called it “The Magna Carta” and by signing it John admitted that neither he nor any King was above the law, that Englishmen had the right to a jury trial, and widows were not saleable goods, and that the forests he'd grabbed were national parks, not his private property.

And he agreed to take down the fences from the rivers because the waters, and the land under where the water flowed or ever had flowed, belonged to the people and couldn't be sold or closed off. They'd be held by the King not as his own property, but as a public trust for everybody, including generations yet to come.

Five hundred years later when the boys in Philadelphia wrote our Constitution they took the Magna Carta as their guide and built from there. Aside from the Bill of Rights and jury trials and other good stuff, we kept the English Common Law as the basis of our legal system – including the Public Trust doctrine, which keeps the Sovereign — who nowadays is the State, from selling off or allowing the fencing off of lands under flowing waters.

So if you're out walking the beach some day and find yourself blocked by a fence put up by a guy who says he owns it all, pull the damned thing out and leave a note telling him to take it up with King John.



Chapter Fourteen

The Writer and the Thunderstorm ...

7/29/2002 - I came to New Orleans to work on the book, and by golly nothing's going to keep me from it.

In fact I am hard at work at it right now, at a table in the men's grille of a lovely country club, sipping an iced tea and watching the incredible beauty of a thunderstorm swelling up out of the Gulf; black clouds tumbling across a hot blue

sky; golfers out on the course trying to decide whether to chance an extra hole or save themselves from the lightning coming ever closer.

It is a scene of drama and beauty. But don't think for a second that I'm allowing the spectacle to distract me from the serious business of writing the book. Nonsense! Nothing of the sort! I am a man of stern discipline, above such amateur mistakes as stalling when I should be writing.

This is, after all, the very same place where I wrote my first book, an historical novel. It was the dream of thirty years, written when at last I could enjoy the luxury of months at a time to come here to New Orleans to write it, where the supply of outdoor café tables and tolerant waitresses is endless.

Not until it was finished did I learn that the great agents and publishers of olden days have vanished into history, replaced by empty-headed charlatans who obviously know nothing about the written word.

Even their rejection slips are pathetic:

"Exceptional writing, but not right for our list." What cowards! Why should exceptional writing not be right for anybody's list?

"An interesting book, but the historical period you write about is too obscure for the reading public." Nitwits! There's nothing the reading public loves more than to get its teeth into some murky period of history. Who wants to read the zillionth book about the Civil War?

"A talent for writing, but I could not identify with the characters." Now there's the statement of a jaded agent! He's read so many weak manuscripts he wouldn't know a live character if it kicked his dog and ran off with his wife. The only characters he identifies with are the kind of thumb sucking deep thinkers who take 30 pages to decide whether to get out of bed in the morning.

It's certainly not my fault that today's agents are such a sorry lot, unable to sell anything more challenging than a celebrity cookbook, preferably with pictures.

After all, to write a book is to live out a dream, and dreams should be encouraged. I will admit that the number of dreamers who dream of writing is somewhat daunting. It seems like behind every bush there lurks an unpublished author with the wild eyes of a fanatic ready to pounce, manuscript in hand, on any agent or publisher who wanders by. It is damnably hard to find an unoccupied bush these days. Take it from me. I've been looking.

But one must persevere. Writing is no sport for the faint of heart. So I wrote a second book, a lighthearted comic novel. But I wasted no time chasing agents on this one. It's at the printers now, supposedly available for sale by early

September, under a new system called “Print on Demand” where they print and leave it to the author to stir up the demand. It will undoubtedly sell so many copies that agents everywhere will gnash their teeth and tear their garments for passing up such an author.

Until that arrives, I am now on the third book – another historical novel, on which I have spent two more years delving into the nooks and crannies of history, finding stories that have lain hidden like sparkling treasure in a smuggler's cave. It is the first page of Chapter One that lies before me on the table this very minute, impatiently awaiting my first words – although I sense a certain air of quiet accusation coming from it, which is certainly unjustified. I've only been here a week or two.

Sooner or later I'll find the secret. Tom Clancy went from one book to 50 or 60 best sellers; John Grisham grinds them out faster than raindrops in a thunderstorm, and Sue Grafton has times when she turns out “D is for Done”, “S is for Send” and “M is for Money” all in the same day.

So it can be done. But first, there's the little matter of the iced tea and the gathering storm.



Chapter Fifteen

The Geezer in Summer: Memoirs of a Girlhood Trip...

7/15/2002 - It's vacation time, whether I've earned one or not. For the next few weeks you can find me in New Orleans, sipping *café au lait* in the French Quarter, or iced tea at Riverbend, or red wine on St. Charles Avenue, all the while pretending to write while the streetcars glide by under the oak trees and saxophone licks from street musicians slide into my heart.

In a tradition now in its fourth repetition, I drive down, taking one of the grandchildren along to keep me company on the three-day journey. You can spend a lot of time with grandchildren yet never get to talk to them for more than a few minutes here and there. The trips to New Orleans are my chance to get to know them while they're still teenagers, before their lives grow crowded with schools and sports and dances and summer jobs and falling in love and all the sunburst of life that comes when you turn the corner from childhood to young adult.

This will be my first such trip with a granddaughter. She's 15-going-on-16 in that magic summer between freshman and sophomore year. I confess I am intimidated by the prospect of three days with a 15-year-old girl. Taking a trip with a grandson is full of guy stuff. You can talk about cars, sports, civil war battles, space stations and things like that.

Going with a granddaughter is bound to be different – like ice-skating with roughhouse hockey players, then suddenly trying to keep up with a graceful figure skater swooping and gliding and curling and turning to music only she can hear. I have no idea what will capture the interest of a 15-year-old girl for three whole days. Quite possibly it's cars, sports, civil war battles and space stations, and I'm a politically incorrect moron to assume girls won't be interested in that stuff every bit as much as the boys are. She is, after all, a basketball player, member of the rowing crew, and a voracious reader.

There is, of course, golf. Along the way there are lovely courses that curve around the hills and valleys and let you tee off from places where you can see for miles. She hasn't played much, but has spent a few sessions at the driving range to learn the grip and the swing and a little about how to get out of sand traps, at which I have more experience than I care to admit. Like her brother and cousins, though, it's the prospect of driving the golf cart that makes her eyes light up. You can't do that in the North, but in the South they assume that by the age of 15 you're fairly grown up unless you act otherwise.

Even with a golf game or two thrown in, I'm worried that by the time we reach New Orleans she may give up hope on me altogether and write pitying comments in the diaries every teenage girl keeps under lock and key. In her case that's no trivial worry. She's been keeping that diary and writing short stories since third grade. I fully expect to open my *New York Times* one Sunday morning a few years from now and find a review of her latest best seller — “The Geezer in Summer — Memoirs of a Girlhood Trip.”

Still, it's a trip worth that risk. The drive south is an adventure that winds through the incredible beauty of the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia, through the plain-spoken towns of eastern Tennessee, across a lovely bit of hilly Georgia, across Alabama and through miles upon flat miles of pine-forested Mississippi, until you emerge in the fireworks-selling, gas-stationed, razzle-dazzle approaches to Lake Pontchartrain. A brief dash along the causeway, past the palm trees, the oil refineries and the Elysian Fields cemetery and the Super Dome, and you reach the mighty Mississippi River and a way of life where folks smile easy and ask “How y'all doin'?”

That's the real excitement — not only getting to know the granddaughter, but seeing it all again through the eyes of a 15-year-old girl whose vistas until now have been dominated by an ocean. Surely in all that we'll find something to talk about.



Chapter Sixteen

Harkin Energy -- The Question not asked...

7/8/2002 - Like a scene from a horror flick, the corpse of President George W. Bush's 1990 insider trading scandal keeps resurfacing. A hand pops up here, a knee there. Nobody knows what's next.

The facts, according to the New York Times, are simple. On June 22, 1990 the President's father was in the White House and George W. was in private life, a business failure. He was CEO of Spectrum 7, a small oil and gas company that had gotten \$3 million in debt and was losing \$400,000 a year before Harken Energy, a bigger oil and gas company, bailed him out, in 1989, by paying \$2 million in stock for Spectrum 7. Harkin made the President a member of its Board of Directors and ultimately put him on the audit committee.

Why did Harken buy "W's" loser? Because, Harken's founder wryly noted, "His name was George Bush."

By the Spring of 1990, Harken Energy was quietly losing heavy money. For the quarter ending June 30th they lost \$23.2 million – eight times what they'd lost in the same quarter a year earlier.

As a board member the President was entitled to inside information about those losses to help him carry out his fiduciary duty to the widows and orphans and ordinary folk like you and me who invest our savings and retirement plans in such companies, so we don't get ripped off by corporate greed or executive incompetence. But insiders are not allowed to trade their stocks based on such information. That's a federal crime.

But the President needed \$500,000 to repay money he'd borrowed to buy a share in the Texas Rangers baseball team. So on June 22nd, he sold most of his Harken stock for \$848,560, at \$4 a share. Then he sold his piece of the baseball team for \$14 million. To convert a money-losing small oil company into \$14 million is a neat trick. I wish I could do it. But we can't all call the President "Dad," can we?

When its whopping losses were finally announced two months later, Harken shares fell to \$2.37. But the President, privy to inside information about those secret losses, had long since dumped his stock at \$4. By selling before his fellow shareholders heard the bad news, he put an extra \$345,789 in his pocket.

It's a bit like the captain of the Titanic spotting the iceberg and tiptoeing off to the nearest lifeboat. Not quite the sporting thing, is it?

The President claims he never knew Harken was losing its shirt. However, when the Securities and Exchange Commission got wind of the timing of the sale, it

began an investigation.

Since all the members of the SEC had either been appointed by President Bush the elder or were hoping to be re-appointed by President Bush the elder you can imagine just how eager they were to tell the President that his son President Bush the younger might, just might, be guilty of a federal crime. Especially after the problems his other son, Neil Bush, had when he looted a bank in the great Savings and Loan scandal.

So it was easy for President Bush the younger's lawyer to convince the SEC lapdogs that he really didn't know about Harken's huge losses when he sold his stock. They swallowed it, although they did choke on it a bit: They said that because of insufficient evidence "at this time no enforcement is contemplated," but that decision should not be interpreted in any way to "exonerate" the parties. Then the SEC quickly scooped out a grave and buried their report.

These days, a bristling George W. claims the matter was thoroughly gone into by the SEC.

"Any further questions?" he snaps.

Well, yes, Mr. President. I have a question. If a member of the Board of Directors is supposed to know what's going on, then how is it possible that on June 22nd, only 8 days from the end of a quarter when the company was losing \$23 million, you didn't know about it? You were a member of the audit committee. Of all the people in that corporation whose job it was to know about that huge loss, you were at the top of the list.

Mr. President, leaving aside the Texas cowboy hokum, the fact is you have a Yale degree, an MBA from Harvard and enough business smarts to end up a multi-millionaire. Were you too negligent to spot the loss? Or did you know, but looked after yourself instead of the widows and orphans, and hid behind Dad?

Were you incompetent, or were you dishonest?

You say you're outraged at Enron and WorldCom insiders for making gazillions while leaving the suckers holding the bag. But didn't you do the same thing and get away with it?



Chapter Seventeen

The Great New Orleans Hooker Hunt...

7/10/2002 - Flash: FBI finds hookers in New Orleans!

If you're bothered by the news coming out of Washington about how the FBI smothered reports, bumbled coordination between its field offices, and is about as efficient as the Keystone Cops, cheer up. There is good news from New Orleans.

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft and the ever-vigilant FBI that operates under his wing has discovered that New Orleans was home to a — how can I put this delicately — a brothel!

It came as a tremendous surprise for folks in New Orleans to read that a lovely white Victorian house on Canal Street was actually a house of ill-repute. The shock waves of the discovery are still rolling down St. Charles Avenue and through the French Quarter and the Garden District. Newspapers from California to Boston have expressed amazement at the news that a cathouse has been found there. This in the town so pure of thought its pro football players are called "The Saints!"

The case was handled with true FBI professionalism. Based, quite probably, on some vigilant tipster reporting a constant stream of what the Boston Globe described as "New Orleans blue-blood bankers, white-shoe lawyers, business executives and a former pro-football player," a warrant was obtained to allow the FBI to wiretap the conversations between madams and clients.

From then on it took a mere 13 months, the employment of 2 full-time agents and 8 or 10 others along the way, the wiretapping and tape recording of more than 5,000 conversations, and the co-operation of several madams, to establish that it was, in fact, a cathouse.

According to reports, the resulting 200 pages of transcripts contain the names of hundreds of the men who patronized the establishment. They will not be prosecuted. Jim Letten, the acting U.S. Attorney in New Orleans admitted with some embarrassment that there is, actually, no federal law against paying somebody for sex. There are local laws, of course, as almost everywhere, which are enforced by local cops and vice squads.

He offered to turn the list of johns over to the locals for prosecution, but Harry Connick, the long-serving New Orleans District Attorney and father of the famous singer Harry Connick, Jr., won't take it. The feds started the case, he feels, and can *** well finish it.

Harry's attitude is understandable. New Orleans is touchy about such things. It is

in the Deep South, where a distrust of the federal government is considered good government.

In addition there is the essentially forgiving nature that sets New Orleans apart from other cities. Its citizens, while individually upright and virtuous, are filled with the spirit of compassion for the fallen woman and the man who is unable to withstand the temptations of the flesh. In fact, if you are likely to succumb to the temptations of the flesh, you will find few places in the world more understanding and welcoming than New Orleans.

I have spent happy months writing books on the tables of outdoor cafes in New Orleans and appreciate some of its makeup. The Big Easy's a town that sneers at Florida as a place people go to die, and prides itself on being the city where people go to live. Its motto is "Laissez les bon temps roule!", which means "Let the good times roll!" It's the home of the legendary Storyville red-light district, where Louis Armstrong developed his style playing in local cathouses.

Those lacking any familiarity with New Orleans at all should consult those loosely censored late-night TV commercials hustling a video tape called "Girls Gone Wild," showing enthusiastic young lovelies displaying their charms and joy of life in the streets of the French Quarter. This will help you understand why knowledgeable locals have expressed the opinion that the FBI could have rounded up 20 or 30 hookers by standing in the middle of Bourbon Street waving a \$100 bill.

The problem may reflect the state of the FBI's computers. Last week we learned they are so obsolete that the FBI cannot run a database search combining the two words "aviation" and "schools." It would blow their motherboards to run a search on "hookers" and "New Orleans."

The Justice Department is prosecuting the hookers and the madam; not for prostitution, but for money laundering. The johns, including at least one judge, a telecommunications mogul, and a former pro-football player will get off, unless their wives get wind of it. According to the Washington Post those on the list include a former head of "Rex", the prestigious Mardi Gras Krewe, and a member of one of New Orleans's most prominent restaurant families.

Outsiders think the madam will either publish her little black book or blackmail those listed in it. But they don't understand. I suspect that in New Orleans there is a silent auction going on right now in which men of impeccable virtue are offering good money to get their names listed. "We are all sinners," is the compassionate view of the men of New Orleans, anxious lest the whole town laugh at them for being sanctimonious prudes. Being left off that list would be as humiliating for a true New Orleanian as being a Washington journalist left off Nixon's enemies list.

Inevitably, the Democrats in Washington have decided to politicize the matter.

Senator Tom Daschle used the affair to bolster his argument that we need a special commission to investigate why the intelligence agencies missed all the signals about the terrorist attacks.

“If the FBI can spend resources investigating whether there is prostitution in New Orleans, they ought to be able to find the resources to investigate what happened in this country prior to 9/11,” he told the Boston Globe. Daschle's a good man, but he's from South Dakota, where folks think “the evils of the flesh” refers to mad cow disease.

Other experts joined in the criticism. “This case is not Ma Barker. This is not major criminal activity,” the Globe quoted Harry Rosenberg, a former federal prosecutor. “I think the public normally expects the federal government to be interested in bigger things.”

Even the staid Wall Street Journal piled on. The FBI was only following what it thought were Attorney General John Ashcroft's priorities, it reported. “His underlings,” charged the WSJ, “clearly knew that proving sin and sex were pervasive wouldn't displease the boss.” So they used what scarce manpower they had to watch hookers, even as Ashcroft rejected the FBI's pre-September 11th plea for another \$57.8 million to boost its counter terrorist resources.

Such comments have a tinge of unfairness to them. After Ken Starr's bloodhounds got their jollies investigating Monica thonging Bill, it's only human of the FBI agents to indulge themselves in a titillating year listening to hookers and johns. Pouring over lists of flight-school students looking for strange-sounding names is dull stuff compared to that.

The FBI has some things to say in its own defense. The entire operation, it claimed in applying for its warrant, would produce proof of mob dealings, drug transactions and money laundering. This is serious stuff. Or it could have been. Thirteen months later the haul produced no mobsters, had brought in 12 hookers, and the major drug transaction charged was that one of the hookers sold a marijuana joint to a customer. But they scored big-time on the money laundering when the madam pleaded guilty to using \$675 from the brothel's revenues to pay her rent.

Ken Kaiser, special agent in charge of the New Orleans office, denies the FBI neglected other duties. He asserted, according to CNN, that “after September 11, the two agents assigned full time to the brothel case also worked an additional eight-hour shift on counterterrorism.”

These are difficult days for the FBI. It is an organization that believes in family values. Yet here it has closed down a bordello run by a 42 year old woman with the help of her daughter and her 62 year old mother. It's hard to imagine a more politically correct business than one that is run by a team of three generations of

women.

And a successful business it was. The madam got 50% of the women's \$300-charge-per-customer. The FBI has documented that they were expected to entertain seven to ten customers per day. Naturally, the operators added value to the transaction. The brothel was beautifully furnished. "Everything in there was from the Pottery Barn," one neighbor was quoted as saying.

They were smart, tough businesswomen, too. "No," the madam reportedly said on one of the FBI's wiretaps. "If they're calling from Ramada or Holiday Inns, blow 'em off. We don't want them." Men calling from payphones or refusing to give their last names were also rejected.

"Get the house clean because the judge will probably be coming," was one statement recorded by the FBI. In New Orleans, it's either first class or no class. We expect no less from a city that can still boast of white-shoe lawyers.

"The \$300 sometimes scares the customers because they can get it for \$100 in some places — but they come to us," the madam was quoted as saying. "That's why we have a good clientele. We have chosen our profession and we're good at it." New Orleans has high standards, even for sin. Or it did, until the FBI saints came marching in.



Chapter Eighteen

About 9-11: Give light and the people will find their own way...

5/20/2002 - That long-standing motto of the Scripps-Howard newspapers is good advice for President Bush right now.

For months the President has soared above the fray in a burst of patriotic bipartisanship following the attack of September 11th. It seemed like he had the most red, white and blue, hardest working, buttoned-up, on-time, efficient administration in the history of the country.

But then the press found out that undisclosed reports written long before September 11th pointed the way to that awful day; reports that sat unsynthesized while he stumped for campaign funds in Texas, in California, in Pennsylvania, in Florida.

The media got excited. "What did he know about the terrorist attacks, and when did he know it?" shouted the Yapping Heads on television. "Why did he keep the warnings secret?"

The suddenly-besieged Bush White House maintained that the warnings were too general to be useful. September 11th was, they insisted heatedly, a terrible

surprise. After all, as President Bush himself said right after the attacks: "Never did we realize that the enemy was so well organized. They struck in a way that was unimaginable."

Nobody, or so the President's men loudly insisted, could possibly have imagined what Osama bin Laden would do: A man whose malice and organization and intent to harm the U.S. were so blatant that the President had ordered a special report detailing how to "take him out," which was on his desk that fateful day. Yet none of the President's team were able to "connect the dots," as everybody put it.

This is political spin, and it is a line that won't take.

"Unimaginable?" asked the media. "What, he never read Tom Clancy? You mean nobody in the White House read Clancy's book about the pilot who slammed a commercial airliner into the U.S. Capitol? What about the FBI reports of bin Laden's men at flight schools around the country? Who read those? What about that Library of Congress report that bin Laden's men might hijack planes and fly them into the White House, or the CIA, or the Pentagon? Whaddya mean they couldn't imagine such a thing? Whadda we pay these guys for?"

More cynical critics wondered how long those reports would have gone unnoticed if they had been about a possible million-dollar campaign contribution. The Bush team can hear the rustle of soft money from a thousand miles away, and spot a sentence about it from outer space..

Nor were the warnings all that general. One was specific enough to recommend that Attorney General John Ashcroft avoid flying on commercial airliners. Why was the public not given the same advice? If it was good advice for Ashcroft, why wasn't it good advice for the men and women who died at the World Trade Center, on the Pentagon plane, and on Flight 91?

The President has decided to wrap himself in the flag until after the midterm elections. That may be his best course, although he's overdoing it. He's dropping strong hints that any Democrat who asks questions about his policies is a scurrilous partisan and probably a personal friend of Osama bin Laden. He does that even while he's hawking souvenirs of 9-11 to Republicans for money to use in his bipartisan campaign to eradicate Democrats.

But at last count, there are more Democrats under that flag than Republicans, and for President Bush to wear the flag and *** the Democrats clangs on the ear.

He's said from the beginning that we're in for a long war. To win it will take not only weapons and courage, but common sense and mutual trust.

We all know we can't completely stop the terrorists. None of us who ever inched our way through the traffic in New York's tunnels, or Boston's hub or Chicago's

Loop deludes himself about that. Hundreds of thousands of us can die from explosives carried in trucks and car trunks – explosives ranging from diesel fuel and fertilizer to rogue nukes. You can stop them here and there, but sooner or later we're going to take another hit.

But what the President can do is give us the dots and let us connect them ourselves. The passengers on Flight 91 over Pennsylvania heard about the dots called the World Trade Center on their cell phones. In no time at all they connected them to the hijacking of their own flight and did something about it, long before the military could respond.

I watched Tim Russert ask Vice President Cheney why the Bush Administration didn't simply let the public know what was going on when they had even fragmentary reports. Why didn't they issue warnings?

“How would you word that warning?” Cheney challenged. It was a political response, honed and sharpened in some spin room by political strategists anticipating the question. But there are good answers.

For example: On September 11th many flights were in the air when the news broke. Those on Flight 91 were at risk and responded by rushing the cockpit and crashing the plane before it could reach Washington.

On another flight where the cell phones alerted the passengers, the captain came on the intercom. I don't have his exact words before me, but what he said in general was that, while it was possible that his flight had terrorists on it, the passengers should “If you see a hijacker, throw whatever's handy at his head. He'll have to duck, and you can rush him. Get a blanket over him and wrestle him to the ground. Don't forget that while there may be four or five of them, there are 300 of us.”

Sounded like good advice to me. What would have happened if, when the Bush White House saw those reports indicating that suicide crashes were at least a possibility, somebody with smarts had persuaded the networks to run self-defense shows on television, incorporating the kind of advice that pilot gave about throwing things and using blankets?

Suppose, for example, that the passengers of the World Trade Center flights – who had time between Boston and New York to realize they had been hijacked, had in the months between July and September seen public notices that such hijackings might be negotiable situations or they might be suicide runs. Wouldn't some of them, watching the plane's course out of their windows, have realized what the terrorists were up to?

And if they did, does anyone doubt that those groups of Americans would have acted any less valiantly than their contemporaries over Pennsylvania? Why does

the Bush Administration assume that we, the people, can't be trusted with the truth?

I read Winston's Churchill's History of the Second World War. In those volumes he wrote about the desperation of the British when Germany seemed invincible, and an invasion was expected any day.

He did not hide the hard truth from the public. He talked instead about taking down road signs so German paratroopers could not find their way. He talked about fighting them at every crossroad. He talked, not about the need for secrecy, but about how the ordinary man and woman should “take a few of them with you” and how such dogged resistance would win the day.

That's the kind of stuff that pilot with his throwing objects and blankets was dishing out, and it's the kind of stuff any of us would do if we understood the situation.

Don't tell us, Mr. President, that some secret Committee on Homeland Security will look after us. I hope they do, but it's not the American way to wait for orders from Washington. Like the passengers on Flight 91, we'd rather tackle the problem now than wait for instructions.

The reason you're on the defensive, Mr. President, with the press jumping on you so vehemently and Congress drafting subpoenas, is because you don't trust the people, the press, the Congress, or anybody else except your closed circle of election-driven political strategists. For too long you and your top people have followed the mushroom grower's theory of governance — keep the public in the dark and feed us horse manure.

It's time, Mr. President, to start trusting us. Get off this extreme partisan kick. You're my President, not the President of the Republican Party. Spend your evenings reading intelligence reports, not campaign checks: Stop inferring that loyal American Democrats are traitors to the country they serve and love. And keep in mind that political spin and simple trust don't go together. Grow, Mr. President, grow. We need you.



Chapter Nineteen

God made me do it: Rendering unto Caesar...

5/6/2002 - From a recent news item in the *Washington Post*:

“Tasikmalaya, Indonesia. The Taliban Brigade stormed into the hotel lounge shortly before midnight, wielding rattan canes and screaming 'God is great!'”

“As patrons cowered under the rickety wooden tables, and the leather-clad singer bolted off the stage, witnesses said, three dozen young men in flowing white robes swung their sticks at beer mugs and highball glasses...

“The Taliban Brigade members want to abolish the country's secular legal system and replace it with ... Islamic law that would ban the sale of alcohol, require women to wear head scarves and permit courts to order the amputation of thieves' hands.”

I was a law student in Washington when the news came over the radio in mid-day that the Supreme Court had outlawed prayer in the schools. Although I wasn't particularly religious it seemed a shocking decision to me. Until I thought about it.

Stretched tight for money, I'd kept the family in New Jersey rather than in the more expensive Washington.

My small home town was solidly Republican. The school board that ran the public school then, and I suspect to this day, consisted almost exclusively of people who'd earned appointment to it by serving first as presidents of the local Republican Club. I was a Democrat, but trusted Republicans to run a good school system. Nobody on it was Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or, as best I remember, anything other than Protestant, usually Presbyterian, although that's probably changed since those days. I was Catholic, but I trusted Presbyterians, then and now, to do the right thing.

Prayers in school didn't bother me. I'd gone to Catholic schools, where the Hail Mary was both a prayer and a football play, and the Our Father started a day full of rosaries, grace, and bowing your head at the name of Jesus or getting your knuckles rapped with a thick ruler. It was a good system that eventually produced millions of fallen-away Catholics who forgot both the rulers and the rosaries when we grew up. The boys discovered wine, women and song. The girls discovered birth control, temporary restraining orders and divorce.

So it wasn't until somebody mentioned the ending to the Lord's Prayer that I understood what was at the heart of the Supreme Court's school prayer decision.

The Lord's Prayer, a comfort and solace to hundreds of millions of people around the world, had a Catholic ending and a Protestant ending in those days. We Catholics were taught to end with “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, Amen.” The Protestants added the rhetorical flourish of “deliver us from evil, for thine is the power and the glory, Amen.”

Nobody ever explained to me the difference about the power and the glory, neither its origin nor its place in the grand scheme of things. But every Catholic hearing that “power and glory” stuff knew he was in the presence of heresy and

hellfire and should head for the nearest exit.

The squabble must have sounded downright comic to a Jew, a Muslim or an atheist. Yet there it was; the verbal evidence of passions that had Catholics and Protestants burning each other at the stake for centuries. The silliness of it all is shown by the fact that the Catholics have since tacked “the power and glory” onto the accepted version. But in those days that trivial difference was considered the difference between the saved and the damned.

Clearly the School Board, good Republican Presbyterians that they were, never realized the spiritual perils into which they plunged their young Catholic charges when they started the school day with the power and the glory. If they had known, I'm sure they would have found some all-purpose prayer that would have satisfied everybody but the atheists, of whom only two voted regularly, and both of them Democrats.

For me, the difference was hardly worth noticing. And yet, and yet. Why should my kids be made to say prayers written (as I saw it) by the Republican Club?

It all unraveled from there. Once you start asking who writes the prayers your kids have to say, it's a short step to armed revolution, anarchy, and running around the hotel bar smashing liquor bottles.

It's easy to ridicule those white-robed fanatics of a foreign land. But what of the American schoolteachers who insist on lifting the skirts and togas of high school girls and boys at a school party to make sure they were wearing modest underwear? What of John Ashcroft, Attorney General of the United States, a staunch Christian Republican who draped a statue in the Justice Department's hall — an inert, marble, cold statue — to hide its depiction of a female breast?

And what of this nonsense that cardinals of the Catholic church have some undefined right to shield a priest accused of molesting more than 130 boys, or another priest accused of repeatedly raping young boys in confessionals?

There are few innocents in the religious wackiness that plagues the world today. In the Mideast Orthodox Jewish settlers put their yarmulkas on their heads and build settlements on Arab ground, insisting that God wants them to have the land. It is their birthright. If ten thousand fellow Jews must die to protect it, so be it.

The Arabs gird their young in dynamite and Jihad and send them forth to murder Jews and martyr themselves in the name of Allah, before whom no other god shall survive.

This business of religious nuts taking over governments and claiming God made them do it has gotten out of hand. It's time to put a stop to it and call a spade a

bloody shovel.

If you want to worship your god in your own way, go for it. But don't claim God has given you the right to get in my face. Skip the public posturing and save your prayers for private use. I don't care if you're a cardinal, a Jew, a Mullah, or a Christian Conservative. If you bust up my Saturday night with your white robes and sticks or order my daughters and granddaughters to wear veils and burkas in the name of whatever god you claim orders you around, you can count me as your enemy.

And if you rape kids entrusted to your religious care, I'm not about to tell the prosecutor to respect our religion. I want you, as the no-trespassing signs say, "prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," and hung out to dry.

Most of all, I want an end to the hypocrites, fanatics and wackos who pop up everywhere from Washington to Tasikmalaya trying to use governments to jam their religious beliefs down everybody else's throats on the claim that God wants it that way.

There are things that belong to Caesar and things that belong to God. Government does not belong to God. Outside of whatever comforting use rituals can offer, religion has no place in government. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that whatever faults any government may show, when you have had enough you can vote the nitwits out. You can't do that with the cardinals, the mullahs, or other zealots. Guys who claim their power comes direct from God won't let you vote them out, which is why our forefathers laid it down that the church and the state shall be forever separated.

That was clear thinking when they wrote the Constitution, and it's a principle worth insisting upon today. It's a protection that should be in the organic law of every country in the world.



Chapter Twenty

The Mystique of the AP StyleBook...

4/28/2002 - I watched logs burning in a fireplace the other night and dreamt like an old dog remembering uncaught rabbits. The particular uncaught rabbit that toyed with my mind was a boyhood fantasy of being a foreign correspondent.

What invoked such dreams was the insistence of an editor that I conform my writing to the Associated Press Stylebook, the professional bible and arbiter of all things journalistic. It being foolhardy to argue with somebody who has the last crack at your article, I bought the book and read it cover to cover.

It is a flying carpet of a book, sweeping you off on unexpected adventures. You find yourself deciding whether you should say the arch-villain was being tracked down by “Interpol” or spell out the “International Criminal Police Organization.” This is the stuff of excitement. The Associated Press Stylebook will set you up with everything you need to know about writing news copy except how to cheat, lie and steal on your expense account.

The AP is an ancient outfit, organized in 1848 and serving more than 15,000 newspaper and broadcast outlets around the world with its 240 bureaus and 3,500 employees. Its Stylebook is eclectic, bouncing alphabetically around from idea to place to rule following no predictable plan except to enforce good writing standards among reporters around the world.

It's a romantic book. The mystique of foreign places and earthshaking events drifts through its authoritarian tone like the smell of gunpowder through the marching beat of drums.

“London. The city in England stands alone in datelines,” commands the AP. So do Beijing, Rome, Tokyo and Paris. When you're reporting from a stand-alone city, you've arrived and need an agent.

Hopscotching through the Stylebook teaches you much about the world. Here are *“boycotts,” “assassinations,” “Air France,”* and the difference between the hard Gee of *Gamal* (Egypt) and the soft Jay sound of *Jamal* (Saudi Arabia).

A man with blond hair is a man with blond hair, but a woman with blond hair is a *“blonde.”* A *“bug”* is not, in the AP world, an insect. It is *“a concealed listening device.”* The *“Canal Zone”* is no more. We gave away the Panama Canal and no longer call it *“the Zone.”* *“AT&T,”* like the artist formerly known as Prince, is *“the full name of the business formerly known as American Telephone and Telegraph Co.”*

The editor's job is not easy. Reporters bring their own styles to the job.

“Collide, collision. Two objects must be in motion before they can collide. An automobile cannot collide with a utility pole, for example.” And yet they do, every day in newspapers everywhere.

The sense that form really matters begins to grab hold as you read. You can almost hear the anxious young reporter pestering the grizzled old editor:

“Harry, that story on the approaching asteroid. Should it be 'World's End' or 'the End of the World?' ”

“Neither. You don't capitalize flat news.”

“The world's gonna end tomorrow and we don't use capitals?”

“Not according to the AP Stylebook.”

There is an air of unquestionable authority. *“History. Avoid the redundant 'past history.' ” “Girl. Applicable until 18th birthday is reached. Use 'woman' or 'young woman' afterward.”*

“Commonwealth.” The sun never set on the British Empire and now that the Empire's gone, it never sets on the Commonwealth, whose members the Stylebook lists for you by the dozen. In deference to readers scattered about the old Commonwealth, the AP devotes three pages to the titles of the galaxies of royal superstars; the dukes, duchesses, barons, earls, and lesser lights of the aristocracy. As for us simple peasants: *“Do not,”* says AP, *“use the courtesy titles 'Mr., Miss., Ms. or Mrs.' except where needed to distinguish among people of the same last name ...”*

“Cover-up” is hyphenated. It is also a sure-fire winner when you get your journalistic teeth into one. *“Cynic, skeptic. A 'skeptic' is a doubter. A 'cynic' is a disbeliever.”* Either outlook will help you spot a cover-up.

The AP is not content to teach its reporters style. They must learn the difference between right and wrong, and the little things that keep you on the good side of the law.

“Kidney punch. A punch to an opponent's kidney when the puncher has only one hand free. An illegal punch. If the puncher has both hands free, a punch to the opponent's kidney is legal.” I should think punching a man in the kidney when you have two hands to pound him with would be twice as illegal as having only one, but one does not question the AP Stylebook and it does not believe in lengthy explanations. Obedience is what it's after.

“Demolish, destroy. Both mean to do away with something entirely. Something cannot be partially demolished or destroyed.” I'm not sure this applies to the Vatican's credibility these days, or to the Mideast peace process.

“Innocent. Use 'innocent,' rather than 'not guilty,' in describing a defendant's plea or a jury's verdict, to guard against the word 'not' being dropped inadvertently.”

On this one the AP should blush for shame. It's telling us to mislead our readers rather than risk a libel suit. If a notorious crook beats the rap on a technicality the AP, fearful of libel, will take a finding of *“not guilty”* and proclaim the sleazeball *“innocent,”* when what is meant is “not found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.” I know all about the presumption of innocence, but let's get real. We're talking news coverage here.

“Names. In general, people are entitled to be known however they want to be known, as long as their identities are clear” I once tried to convince a county clerk in the bowels of Mississippi to let my sex-changed client change the name on the birth certificate from “Robert” to “Roberta.” How I wish I’d had the AP Stylebook to back me up.

“Neutron weapon. A small warhead designed to be mounted on a Lance missile or fired from an 8-inch gun can kill people while causing little damage to buildings officially known as an ‘enhanced radiation weapon’.” By which euphemism do you wish to be killed?

Not every entry is defined. *“Worthwhile.”* The word appears, a blank line is left, and we move on to *“Wrongdoing,”* which also stands alone. In the eyes of the AP Stylebook, even a rookie should know instinctively what is worthwhile and what is wrongdoing, although she may be relieved to hear no hyphen is needed in either case.

“Weapons. ‘Gun’ is an acceptable term for any firearm” Except in the U.S. Marine Corps. Call your rifle a gun within hearing range of a Drill Instructor and you’ll spend the afternoon at port-arms reciting a little poem about the difference between your rifle and your gun which is not quite suitable for a family newspaper.

In a world of shaky institutions and slippery standards, I’m glad that both the mighty AP Stylebook and the U.S. Marine Corps are still standing strong for the right things.



Chapter Twenty One ***Woman with Dog...***

10/21/2002 - The quality of local theatre critics took a severe hit these past weeks. They lost that cool analytical eye needed to decide whether this or that number made or ruined the first act; and whether the finalé was up to snuff. Many applauded wildly at the end of the performance – a disgrace to theatre critics everywhere.

It’s no excuse that we critics – I include myself in this indictment – allowed personal relationships to influence our response. The mere fact that it’s our niece, nephew, son or granddaughter doesn’t entitle us to shout “Bravo!” and “Encore!” when the lights go up.

Fortunately such applause was earned. The standards of the theatre were upheld by the casts, if not the audiences, of the spirited productions of *Annie* (Absegami High School), *South Pacific* (Holy Spirit High), *Sweet Charity* (Atlantic

City High), and *Pippin* (Egg Harbor Township High).

In hundreds of high schools across the country talented young players everywhere brought brilliance, vigor and fresh enthusiasm to the stage in their annual high school play.

That's my unbiased judgment and I stand by it – including the sterling performance of the show-stopping role of “Woman with dog” by an actress whose single line of dialogue matched the best any actress ever delivered anywhere. That the Woman with dog is my 15-year-old granddaughter didn't affect my judgment in the slightest.

There were other kids in the play, probably pretty good, considering the competition from Woman with dog (that was her, back row, third from left). I'd say more about the others but they had their own mothers, fathers, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents in the audience, fully capable of writing their own columns.

The Woman with dog comes by her acting talent naturally, being the latest generation of a theatrical family as distinguished as the Barrymore's or the Fonda's. I hesitate - lest I seem boastful, but my own high school performance is still talked about in local theatrical circles.

It came about quite by accident. Holy Spirit High, then located on Massachusetts Avenue in a fading Atlantic City, had little money. The costs of the annual play had to be carried by ads sold for the program. With true justice, the school decided to marry incentive to art by assigning roles according to how many ads each of us sold.

Unaware of the new policy and expecting to pass my senior year as stagehand extraordinaire, I stumbled across several local businessmen in unusually generous moods and came in fourth in the advertising sweepstakes. Not enough to play the lead, but enough to land me a part that included dialogue, stage business, and a song to be sung solo.

The play was Booth Tarkington's *Seventeen*, a light musical about a young man who falls in love with a lovely Quaker girl. Its dialogue included lines such as one about the young man's new car: “I can get her up to thirty miles an hour, and keep her there!”

The song, if I remember correctly, included the refrain “There's a Quaker down in Quakertown; when I'm around, she swoons.” Today's rappers would be hard-pressed to come up with such lyrics.

Here at my feet was stardom. That I couldn't sing a note without wringing tears from the orchestra was irrelevant. Selling ads was the key. I'd sold the ads, and

in the great scheme of things it was imperative that I take the part.

The dialogue was witty and easily delivered. The stage business was a snap, and what was an orchestra for if it couldn't drown out the singer? Never short on confidence, I faced the job with sunny outlook. All this was made easier by the fact that I, myself, thought my singing rather good. It was others who winced and claimed I was throwing them off-key.

At the last minute Mrs. McGee, our music teacher whose entire career consisted of urging teenagers to speak and sing "with round, pearl-shaped tones", threw in the towel. At her suggestion, we arranged that I would handle dialogue and stage business with my natural elán. When we got to the solo, however, a classmate would hide behind the nearest scenery and sing while I silently pantomimed the words. He proved a better singer than ventriloquist.

The audience – a sophisticated crowd of clam-diggers, jitney drivers and Irish waitresses then resident in the city's Inlet neighborhood, soon caught on that, while I was strolling about the stage throwing my arms around with gusto, it was in fact the nearby tree painted upon canvas that had burst into song.

They were a great audience and when the hoo-rahs and howling died down and they'd wiped the tears of laughter from their cheeks, they gave me – and the tree – a standing ovation. It was the high point of my stage career; a moment I shall always treasure and which established the family tradition of theatrical brilliance which continues to this very day.

A generation later my eldest daughter, eager to continue the family tradition but too modest to eclipse my fame by taking a singing role, gave expression to her artistic genes by serving as make-up artist in Holy Spirit High's production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. It is an undisputed fact that the beards she glued to Tevya and the Rabbi have never been equaled. In fact, they were not removed for weeks after the show, so well had she and the glue done their jobs. Genius simply cannot be hidden.

It came as no surprise, therefore, that my granddaughter should follow in the steps of her talented mother and almost equally talented grandfather. Freed by the passage of time from worries that her singing might outshine my fame, she appeared last week as a member of the chorus in *Sweet Charity*.

Sweet Charity is, as you know, the name of a taxi-dancer at the Fan-Dango Ballroom, where lonely men buy tickets to dance with pretty but world-weary girls who've no other employable skills.

The parts are played by pretty girls who proved their acting ability by shedding their real lives (rowing on crew, studying micro-biology and physics, deciding whether to apply for medical school, law school, or help merge Compaq with

Hewlett-Packard) and posing as gum-chewing, high-heeled floozies dependant upon some dork to buy a dance ticket. Real life is not always portrayed accurately on the stage.

But the girls were up to it. I was entranced, and particularly impressed by the young starlet (back row, third from left) who brought such talent and grace to the role of "Woman with dog".



Chapter Twenty Two

Pat Buchanan: Voice of the Groundhog...

4/4/2002 - Pat Buchanan's all over television these days, hustling his new book of gloom-and-doom prophecies called "The Death of the West." He says America has gone to hell in a handbasket, what with lower birth rates and hordes of immigrants. Europe, too, is dying. There are "more burials than births, more coffins than cradles. All the Christian faiths are represented in the great death march of the West." In case you miss his point, he subtitled the book: "How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization."

You have to take Pat Buchanan with a lot of salt. He makes his living running for President every four years. In between he's a political groundhog. After each election he holes up in his basement and writes a book about how wrong the voters were. Then he pops up on all the talk shows. After milking the book signings, he goes back to raking in millions as a right wing-nut TV commentator until the next election.

I seldom agree with Pat's politics. He ran Nixon's White House communications office, insisting Nixon wasn't a crook even as the FBI were hauling the evidence out in boxes. He was still going on about it after all the rest of the Republican leaders told Nixon to quit or they themselves would vote for impeachment. I've been wary of Pat's judgment ever since.

But he must be smart because he's gotten rich by losing elections, which is a neat trick. Not wanting the country to go to hell if I can stop it, I read his book to make up my mind about his claims.

You can see right off how gloomy the man is. He quotes T.S. Eliot: "This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but with a whimper." Then he goes on to say America's "a moral sewer not worth living in and not worth fighting for." Strong stuff, that. "We are," Pat says, "a vanishing race – no longer able to civilize and Christianize the rest of the world."

I'm not sure how he gets to that conclusion. Most of the immigration he's worried about is coming from Mexico which, last time I looked, is at least as Christian as

Ireland, Spain, France, and Italy. Pat's "we," however, only includes those of us who are "Christians of European descent." Except, of course, the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and others of partial Spanish descent, who don't count. Neither do the 30 million or so mostly Christian tenth and fifteenth generation Americans of African descent, no matter how many of them can trace part of their heritage back to Europe.

He's alarmed – in fact downright hysterical – that the Mexicans are in California, in New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and are still pouring across the desert by the millions. And it's La Reconquista! They want the land back, the ingrates, after we stole it from them fair and square!

It's not just immigrants who are driving Pat crazy. It's the Western women. They refuse to have babies by the barrelful. They've made up their minds to limit production to 1 or 2 per family, while thousands of new immigrant babies are born every minute, ready to toddle up and steal our toys.

It's a hellish situation, this death of our civilization, but Pat's too big a man to limit the blame to any one cause. He knows who did it, and he's willing to point fingers and name names. It was The Pill! It was The Feminists! The DINKs! The Gays! Revisionist Historians! The Trial Lawyers! The Sixties! (Oh, those damned Sixties. If only Nixon were still President!) The Elite! Darwin! Karl Marx! Environmentalists! Socialists! Globalists! Bill and Hillary! The Oscars! (The Oscars? Oh, yeah. Didn't you notice all the Oscars go to the left wing elite? How long since Charlton Heston got nominated?)

Pat swings wild, but what's the fun of being a wing-nut if you have to be accurate all the time? Loud and sensational is what brings in the big bucks.

It's far too late to save the country, he says, but Pat dreams great dreams down there in his basement. We could try a few things. Let's kick out the illegal aliens, and get a grip on future immigration by imposing quotas. Close the borders and lock 'em down. Oppose globalism. Support good old Americanism like the Mississippians who voted to keep the Confederate flag as part of their state flag. I'm not clear how Pat got the Confederate flag into a book about the death of Christian civilization, but it's there, trust me. There must be three or four counties in Mississippi that vote for him, and Pat's loyal, if nothing else.

What the hell. Let's all move to Vermont and let the Muslims fight it out with the Mexicans. The winner gets California, including the San Andreas fault and the water shortage. The loser gets Mississippi.

A good book should make you question things, and at least Pat did that much. One of my questions is this: If all those immigrants are ripping the country apart, how come New York City exists? How come New York didn't blow apart after September 11th, Pat? Are they all white Christians? Are there no Puerto Ricans,

no Mexicans, no Koreans, no Indians, no Chinese, no Japanese, no Filipinos, no Jews, no Arabs, no Blacks? Has anybody told Al Sharpton that? I wonder if Pat's looked in the yellow pages under "Restaurants" lately. Must be a *** finding a listing for "White Christian Dining."

According to the Bible, Jesus himself said "on this rock I shall build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." But Pat's convinced Jesus was wrong, and Pat's got the statistics to back himself up. They're right there in his book, page after page of demographics proving Christ didn't have a clue about the perils facing Christianity when He made that statement.

Pat's often wrong, but never uncertain. In one chapter he tells us that "In one of the more controversial addresses of the twentieth century I told the Republican National Convention at Houston...." A man that fatheaded is hard to ignore, although as I recall the voters managed it by going out afterwards and electing Bill Clinton. Twice.

The presence of non-Christians among us scares Pat like a burglar in the night. But nobody else seems worried. The synagogues keep their lawns cut, and every time I see a new mosque it's got more expensive architecture than the previous one. On weekends the parking lots of every faith and denomination are full, and nobody's out to rip apart the other guy's place of worship – except the occasional burning of black churches in the South, which is as American as cherry pie. It's white Christianity that's got to be saved, right, Pat?

Now I have to confess that, aside from the immigrants I see every day clearing tables, cleaning shirts, cutting grass, pumping gas and picking crops, and those few I've represented as a lawyer over the years, all I really know about immigrants is from the family history.

The American side of our family traces back to two brothers who were born in a little village in England, and were sent to America as young boys in the year 1677. I'm descended from the younger brother, who was 5 years old when he arrived here as an indentured servant.

Having a head start like that, it's a source of some embarrassment to report that it took nearly 300 years and a good many generations after my ancestor's arrival for me to land a job as a busboy so I could pay my way through school. The Mexican kid that cleared my table tonight managed to get as far as that right off the bat, which I admire, speaking as one busboy to another.

Having read your book, Pat, I'm bound to say I don't believe the guys that stagger across our deserts near dead of thirst on their way to find jobs, and the Asian families that suffocate in the horrible holds of smuggler's freighters off our coasts, and the people from all over the world who work, save, suffer and risk their lives in leaky boats and makeshift rafts to come live under our flag are any

more of a threat to that flag than my ancestors were. Or yours.

But cheer up, Pat. The Sioux and the Navajo and other tribes agree with you. They've had more experience with immigrants than anybody in the country, and all of it bad. They'll buy you a one-way ticket home to the old country any time you want it.

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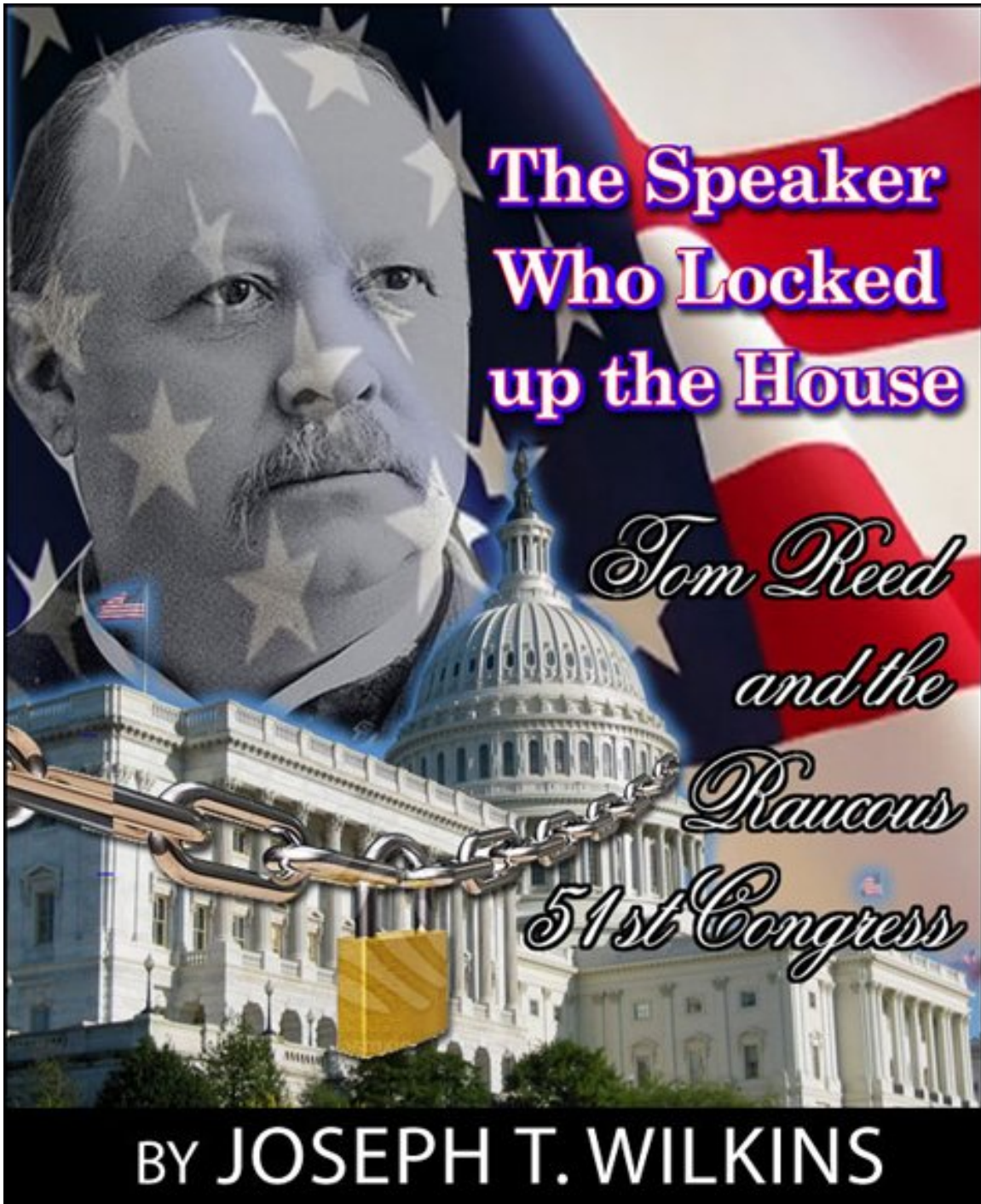


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