

The Nation.

State of the Union, 2004

By GORE VIDAL

IN THE 1960S AND '70S of the last unlamented century, there was a New York television producer named David Susskind. He was commercially successful; he was also, surprisingly, a man of strong political views which he knew how to present so tactfully that networks were often unaware of just what he was getting away with on their—our—air.

Politically, he liked to get strong-minded guests to sit with him at a round table in a ratty building at the corner of Broadway and 42nd Street. Sooner or later, just about everyone of interest appeared on his program. Needless to say, he also had time for Vivien Leigh to discuss her recent divorce from Laurence Olivier, which summoned forth the mysterious cry from the former Scarlett O'Hara, "I am deeply sorry for any woman who was not married to Larry Olivier." Since this took in several billion ladies (not to mention those gentlemen who might have offered to fill, as it were, the breach), Leigh caused a proper stir, as did the ballerina Alicia Markova, who gently assured us that "a Markova comes only once every hundred years or so."

I suspect it was the dim lighting on the set that invited such naked truths. David watched his pennies. I don't recall how, or when, we began our "States of the Union" programs. But we did them year after year. I would follow whoever happened to be President, and I'd correct his "real" state of the union with one of my own, improvising from questions that David would prepare. I was a political pundit because in a 1960 race for the House

of Representatives (upstate New York), I got more votes than the head of the ticket, JFK; in 1962, I turned down the Democratic nomination for US Senate on the sensible ground that it was not winnable; I also had a pretty good memory in those days, now a-jangle with warning bells as I try to recall the national debt or, more poignantly, where I last saw my glasses.

I've just come across my "State of the Union" as of 1972. Apparently, I gave it fifteen times across the country, ending with Susskind's program. Questions and answers from the audience were the most interesting part of these excursions. As I look back over the texts of what we talked about, I'm surprised at how to the point we often were on subjects seldom mentioned in freedom's land today.

In 1972, I begin: "According to the polls, our second principal concern today is the breakdown of law and order." (What, I wonder, was the first? Let's hope it was the pointless, seven-year—at that point—war in Southeast Asia.) I noted that to those die-hard conservatives, "law and order" is usually a code phrase meaning "get the blacks." While, to what anorexic, vacant-eyed blonde women on TV now describe as the "liberal elite," we were pushing the careful—that is, slow—elimination of poverty. Anything more substantive would have been regarded as communism, put forward by dupes. But then, I say very mildly, we have only one political party in the United States, the Property Party, with two right wings, Republican and Democrat.

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Since I tended to speak to conservative audiences in such civilized places as Medford, Oregon; Parkersburg, West Virginia; and Longview, Washington, there are, predictably, a few gasps at this rejection of so much received opinion. There are also quite a few nods from interested citizens who find it difficult at election time to tell the parties apart. Was it in pristine Medford that I actually saw the nodding Ralph Nader whom I was, to his horror, to run for President that year in Esquire? Inspired by the nods, I start to geld the lily, as the late Sam Goldwyn used to say. The Republicans are often more doctrinaire than the Democrats, who are willing to make small—very small—adjustments where the poor and black are concerned while giving aid and comfort to the anti-imperialists. Yes, I was already characterizing our crazed adventure in Vietnam as imperial, instead of yet another proof of our irrepressible, invincible altruism, ever eager to bring light to those who dwell in darkness.

I should note that in the thirty-two years since this particular state of the union, our political vocabulary has been turned upside down. Although the secret core to each presidential election is who can express his hatred of African-Americans most subtly (to which today can be added Latinos and "elite liberals," a fantasy category associated with working film actors who have won Academy Awards), and, of course, this season it's the marriage-minded so-called gays. So-called because there is no such human or mammal category (sex is a continuum) except in the great hollow

pumpkin head of that gambling dude who has anointed himself the nation's moralist-in-chief, William "Bell Fruit" Bennett.

Back to the time machine. In some ways, looking at past states of the union, it is remarkable how things tend to stay the same. Race-gender wars are always on our overcrowded back burners. There is also—always—a horrendous foreign enemy at hand ready to blow us up in the night out of hatred for our Goodness and rosy plumpness. In 1972, when I started my tour at the Yale Political Union, the audience was packed with hot-eyed neocons-to-be, though the phrase was not yet in use, as the inventors of neoconnery were still Trotskyists to a man or woman or even "Bell Fruit," trying to make it in New York publishing.

I also stay away from the failing economy. "I leave to my friend Ken Galbraith the solving of the current depression." If they appear to know who Galbraith is, I remark how curious that his fame should be based on two books, *The Liberal Hour*, published a few years before the right-wing Nixon criminals tried to hijack the election of 1972 (Watergate was bursting open when I began my tour), and *The Affluent Society*, published shortly before we had a cash-flow problem.

In the decades since this state of the union, the United States has had more people, per capita, locked away in prisons than any other country, while the sick economy of '72 is long forgotten as worse problems—and deficits—beset us. For one thing, we

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no longer live in a nation, but in a Homeland. In 1972, "roughly 80 percent of police work in the United States has to do with the regulation of our private morals. By that I mean controlling what we smoke, eat, put in our veins—not to mention trying to regulate with whom and how we have sex, with whom and how we gamble. As a result our police are among the most corrupt in the Western world."

I don't think this would get the same gasp today that it did back then. I point out police collusion with gamblers, drug dealers, prostitutes and, indeed, anyone whose sexual activities have been proscribed by a series of state legal codes that were—are—the scandal of what we like to call a free society. These codes are often defended because they are very old. For instance, the laws against sodomy go back 1,400 years to the Emperor Justinian, who felt that there should be such laws because, "as everyone knows," he declared, "sodomy is a principal cause of earthquake."

Sodomy gets the audience's attention. "Cynically, one might allow the police their kinky pleasures in busting boys and girls who attract them if they showed the slightest interest in the protection of persons and property, which is what we pay them to do." I then suggested that "we remove from the statute books all penalties that have to do with private morals—what are called 'victimless crimes.' If a man or a woman wants to be a prostitute, that is his or her affair. Certainly, it is no business of the state what we do with our bodies sexually. Obviously,

laws will remain on the books for the prevention of rape and the abuse of children, while the virtue of our animal friends will continue to be protected by the SPCA." Relieved laughter at this point. He can't be serious—or is he?

I speak of legalizing gambling. Bingo players nod. Then: "All drugs should be legalized and sold at cost to anyone with a doctor's prescription." Most questions, later, are about this horrific proposal. Brainwashing on the subject begins early, insuring that a large crop of the coming generation will become drug addicts. Prohibition always has that effect, as we should have learned when we prohibited alcohol from 1919 to 1933; but, happily for the busy lunatics who rule over us, we are permanently the United States of Amnesia. We learn nothing because we remember nothing. The period of Prohibition called the "Noble Experiment" brought on the greatest breakdown of law and order that we have ever endured—until today, of course. Lesson? Do not regulate the private lives of people, because if you do they will become angry and antisocial, and they will get what they want from criminals, who work in perfect freedom because they know how to pay off the police.

What should be done about drug addiction? As of 1970, England was the model for us to emulate. With a population of 55 million people, they had only 1,800 heroin addicts. With our 200 million people we had nearly a half-million addicts. What were they doing right? For one thing, they turned the problem over to the

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doctors. Instead of treating the addict as a criminal, they required him to register with a physician, who then gives him, at controlled intervals, a prescription so that he can obtain his drug. Needless to say, our society, based as it is on a passion to punish others, could not bear so sensible a solution. We promptly leaned, as they say, on the British to criminalize the sale and consumption of drugs, and now the beautiful city of Edinburgh is one of the most drug-infested places in Europe. Another triumph for the American way.

I start to expand. "From the Drug Enforcement Administration to the FBI, we are afflicted with all sorts of secret police, busily spying on us. The FBI, since its founding, has generally steered clear of major crime like the Mafia. In fact, much of its time and energies have been devoted to spying on those Americans whose political beliefs did not please the late J. Edgar Hoover, a man who hated commies, blacks and women in, more or less, that order. But then the FBI has always been a collaborating tool of reactionary politicians. The bureau also has had a nasty talent for amusing Presidents with lurid dossiers on their political enemies." Now in the year 2004, when we have ceased to be a nation under law but instead a homeland where the withered Bill of Rights, like a dead trumpet vine, clings to our pseudo-Roman columns, Homeland Security appears to be uniting our secret police into a single sort of Gestapo with dossiers on everyone to prevent us, somehow or other, from being terrorized by various implacable Second and Third

World enemies. Where there is no known Al Qaeda sort of threat, we create one, as in Iraq, whose leader, Saddam Hussein, had no connection with 9/11 or any other proven terrorism against the United States, making it necessary for a President to invent the lawless as well as evil (to use his Bible-based language) doctrine of pre-emptive war based on a sort of hunch that maybe one day some country might attack us, so, meanwhile, as he and his business associates covet their oil, we go to war, leveling their cities to be rebuilt by other business associates. Thus was our perpetual cold war turned hot.

My father, uncle and two stepbrothers graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point, where I was born in the cadet hospital. Although I was brought up by a political grandfather in Washington, DC, I was well immersed in the West Point ethos--Duty, Honor, Country—as was David Eisenhower, the President's grandson, whom I met years later. We exchanged notes on how difficult it was to free oneself from that world. "They never let go," I said. "It's like a family."

"No," he said, "it's a religion." Although neither of us attended the Point, each was born in the cadet hospital; each went to Exeter; each grew up listening to West Pointers gossip about one another as well as vent their political views, usually to the far right. At the time of the Second World War, many of them thought we were fighting the wrong side. We should be helping Hitler

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destroy Communism. Later, we could take care of him.

In general, they disliked politicians, Franklin Roosevelt most of all. There was also a degree of low-key anti-Semitism, while pre-World War II blacks were Ellisonian invisibles. Even so, in that great war, Duty and Honor served the country surprisingly well. Unfortunately, some served themselves well when Truman militarized the economy, providing all sorts of lucrative civilian employment for high-ranking officers. Yet it was Eisenhower himself who warned us in 1961 of the dangers of the "military-industrial complex." Unfortunately, no one seemed eager to control military spending, particularly after the Korean War, which we notoriously failed to win even though the cry "The Russians are coming!" was heard daily throughout the land. Propaganda necessary for Truman's military buildup was never questioned...particularly when demagogues like Senator McCarthy were destroying careers with reckless accusations that anyone able to read the New York Times without moving his lips was a Communist. I touched, glancingly, on all this in Nixonian 1972, when the media, Corporate America and the highly peculiar President were creating as much terror in the populace as they could in order to build up a war machine that they thought would prevent a recurrence of the Great Depression, which had only ended in 1940 when FDR put billions into rearmament and we had full employment and prosperity for the first time in that generation.

I strike a few mildly optimistic notes. "We should have a national health service, something every civilized country in the world has. Also, improved public transport (trains!). Also, schools which do more than teach conformity. Also, a cleaning of the air, of the water, of the earth before we all die of the poisons set loose by a society based on greed." Enron, of course, is decades in the future, as are the American wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the end, we may offer Richard Nixon a debt of gratitude. I'm in a generous mood. "Through Nixon's awesome ineptitude we have seen revealed the political corruption of our society." (We had, of course, seen nothing yet!) What to do? I proposed that no candidate for any office be allowed to buy space on television or in any newspaper or other medium: "This will stop cold the present system, where Presidents and Congressmen are bought by corporations and even by foreign countries. To become President, you will not need thirty, forty, fifty million dollars to smear your opponents and present yourself falsely on TV commercials." Were the sums ever so tiny?

Instead, television (and the rest of the media) would be required by law to provide prime time (and space) for the various candidates.

"I would also propose a four-week election period as opposed to the current four-year marathon. Four weeks is more than enough time to present the issues. To show us the

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candidates in interviews, debates, uncontrolled encounters, in which we can see who the candidate really is, answering tough questions, his record up there for all to examine. This ought to get a better class into politics." As I reread this, I think of Arnold Schwarzenegger. I now add: Should the candidate happen to be a professional actor, a scene or two from Shakespeare might be required during the audition...I mean, the primary. Also, as a tribute to Ole Bell Fruit, who favors public executions of drug dealers, these should take place during prime time as the empire gallops into its Ben-Hur phase.

I must say, I am troubled by the way I responded to the audience's general hatred of government. I say we are the government. But I was being sophisticated when I responded to their claims that our government is our enemy with that other cliché, you are the government. Unconsciously, I seem to have been avoiding the message that I got from one end of the country to the other: We hate this system that we are trapped in, but we don't know who has trapped us or how. We don't even know what our cage looks like because we have never seen it from the outside. Now, thirty-two years later, audiences still want to know who will let them out of the Enron-Pentagon prison with its socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor. So...welcome to Imperial America.