

Five Dials



NUMBER 4

I REMEMBER 5 NOVEMBER 2008

Eleven Writers Tell Us Exactly What Happened...Days Before It Happened

Featuring

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SUKETU MEHTA

LYDIA MILLET

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Five Dials is brought to you with the help of MATT CLACHER, DEBBIE HATFIELD, ANNA KELLY, NICK LOWNDES, JULIETTE MITCHELL, JAMES CHANT, and SIMON PROSSER.

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On Elections and Chomsky

LET'S SAY IT starts with a view from the moon. There our planet sits, surrounded by the kind of cold space where no one can hear you scream at the television. Keep watching our planet as it hangs in the middle of your screen, silent and still and opinionless, and then notice as the camera begins to zoom in. It picks up speed and pushes closer and suddenly the blue planet begins rushing up to greet us, its landmasses shrouded in cloud. Over there is the continent where they live, from sea to shining sea, from LA to NY, with FLA and many other acronyms in between. And over there is the continent where they're waging their current wars, and over there is us, the island country, where we watch their films, wear their Levis, listen to their bands – but still say 'my God, they're loud' and 'why is their cheddar so orange?' and 'please don't call it a fanny pack' and 'yes it's pronounced "Lester" Square'.

Now the camera falls, gracefully closer, ever closer, away from us, towards them, keeping Alaska in the frame for a while, until we lose sight of some of its bridges – one to the other side of Miles Glacier, one to nowhere – and soon we can no longer see the roofs of the Alaskan libraries that still carry books the governor doesn't like. Closer still the camera comes, until we lose the north to focus on the secured homeland with its rich shadings of red across the centre and blue along the coast, as if the middle states were hot with friction while the ocean lapped at Oregon, and closer still until we see the states they tell us are in the process of changing from red to blue this year. We can see the coating of mauve across the industrial towns of Pennsylvania and the new mulberry tinge of Ohio's fields.

Closer, the camera draws to what must be the buildings that matter most to these people, for they're the ones we hear about: the football stadium in Denver with its Greek columns, the eight houses owned by one of the candidates in their election, the election happening right now. When the camera draws closer still

we can make out the assembled cast of this election, the long roll of supporting characters that have become more familiar than our family members over the last few months. Over there is the Alaskan trooper with his taser, the plumber with his back taxes, the Chicago terrorist with an interest in educational charity, the comedian, in her authentic glasses, who need only recite the politician's words verbatim to garner more laughs than a pratfall, the mother who likes ice sports, the man who would never buy a quintet of beercans.

We're suddenly close enough to be familiar with the main characters, too familiar maybe, so that we can make out the patterns of Michelle's black and white dress, the shine of Cindy's NAVY brooch, the cost of Sarah's Blahniks and, as the camera tightens again, that tiny, sparkling, all-too-important pin on Barack's lapel. We're so close to them now, closer somehow, closer still, to Michelle's fist curled into a bump, Barack's too-relaxed smile, John's taut grimace, Sarah's dazed expression under questioning and the lipstick, so much lipstick, radiant on a pitbull, disrespectful on a pig, and yet the camera still moves closer – does it ever stop? – until we're racing along John's epidermis, past the cancer scars lining his face (and what do they mean?) and then closer, closer still, past the skin somehow, the bone of the skull, for some reason we must know as much as possible, until we've investigated Joe's aneurysm, Sarah's DNA and those dark secrets we know, or at least we're told, are somewhere in Barack's heart, even though there's only room to fit one secret through the aorta. So is it secret socialism or secret extremism? Closer, closer, and closer still. Is it ever enough? Finally, thankfully, it's too much. How interested, enraged, enraptured and appalled can we be by this one country's election? The image disappears, the earth disappears, the screen goes dark and that blackness reflects back an image of you, you the one who can't elaborate on the policies of your own MP but

somehow know the municipal budget of Wasilla, Alaska; you, the one who can't even vote in their election but have become so, so, so well informed.

Here at *Five Dials* we've become tired of the uncertainty and of the waiting. It's time someone told us exactly how this election ends. It's days to go but waiting until the actual results roll in is not an option. Instead we gathered a clutch of writers from all over the country, from Ann Arbor to Arkansas, Tuscaloosa to New York, who have offered up their accounts of exactly what happened on November 5th before we have to sit through the nervous hours of November 4th. The results are shocking, funny and even predictable. Also, I've been told they are all absolutely correct.

This issue also features an interview with Noam Chomsky, just approaching his eightieth birthday but still sharper than most of the humans on this planet. Even if you don't agree with his politics, there is no escaping the calm, persuasive, cooling tone to his language, his line of thought, and the way he builds towards conclusion, the respect he holds for argument and language. After months of being so close to the words of this election, from Obama's embroidered inspiration to Palin's mangled populism, we're happy to have Chomsky here to reclaim language. His thoughts challenge and widen us. He brings us up until thankfully we're back to the big picture.

— CRAIG TAYLOR



I Remember 5 November 2008

HARRY SHEARER

5 November 2008 was the best of times and the worst of times for Senator John McCain. Eking out a surprise electoral-college victory in the presidential election he was favored to lose, McCain was taking a victory lap around his Sedona, Arizona, compound when, complaining of chest pains, he texted his wife Cindy. What turned out to be his final message was: 'sell Budweiser stock'.

Within hours, Vice-President-elect Sarah Palin was being sworn in as President-elect, a peculiar ceremony, since the new President doesn't take office until 20 January. Still, the theatrics at Anchorage's IceDome, were impressive. The cast of Disney's 'Polar Bears on Ice' skated a specially choreographed number to a discoized version of Hall & Oates' *Sarah Smile*, after which President-elect Palin signed a premature proclamation according full rights to the unborn, including the right to vote. Early interwomb polls that evening gave Palin a huge lead in the 2012 election.

LYDIA MILLET

Washington. Due to an epidemic that occurred in voting booths across the country – a sudden-onset fear of black men that's so common in America it has a statistical effect named after it – the margin of victory was smaller than many had predicted. This margin was reduced even further than polling had forecast by a media event, three days before the election, broadcast exclusively by the Fox News Corporation and branded 'The Healing of an American Family' – namely the small, discreet wedding of Sarah Palin's pregnant daughter to her unwilling yet nobly suffering boyfriend. Viewership was 110 million.

Still, Barack Obama held on by the skin of his teeth, and now, as President-elect, has the most extensive and paranoid Secret Service detail in history. Threats against his life roll in by the thousands, concentrated in the rural South-east but trickling in, also, from other racist out-

posts across the country. The running joke among those who find the situation funny is that Joe Biden is the safest white man in the world.

Considerable euphoria on the coasts and other less racist outposts followed the election, which has left liberals, minorities and other usually underrepresented groups feeling oddly vindicated and hopeful. John McCain, after delivering a cheerful concession speech that confused supporters and opponents alike with its puzzling allusions to 'victory over the yellow man', is taking a well-deserved rest in one of his eight homes in Sedona, Arizona while Sarah Palin, who plans to resign the governorship in favour of work in the private sector, is busy signing sponsorship deals with a number of corporations, including a hockey face-guard manufacturer based in Duluth and the trendy Japanese maker of her wire-rimmed glasses.

SUKETU MEHTA

We were so damn sure he was going to make it. He had a twelve-point lead in the polls. We thought he was more than human.

The end began in Pennsylvania, that vast stodgy heart of mining country, the night before the big joint debate that was added during the last week of the campaign. All four of the candidates were shackled up in the same depressed steel town. It was late, we learned later, and raining heavily, and two of them found themselves at the same hotel bar, with the minimum of their Secret Service detail. He told her he wanted to have a private talk, to tell her that her attacks on him were getting increasingly hysterical and dangerous. The man arrested with the rifle at his last rally had said he had 'been riled up' by her speeches. He was going to ask her to cool it down, just a little. So they went up alone, in the still of the night, to her suite in the Sheraton on the square.

Who knows what happened there? Was it just loneliness, the brutal months

on the trail, or just intelligent desire? They're not doing any explaining, and it doesn't matter anyway. When he told his wife the next day, the first thing she said was, 'I'm no Hilary.' The cuckolded husband, on the other hand, didn't bat an eyelid. He was used to it. 'You'll come back,' he predicted.

His followers are devastated – 268 have committed suicide in the last month – but it's not the end of the world. The man who would have been his vice-president will now be his rival's vice-president; after two years, as per the National Reconciliation Agreement, he will switch jobs with his boss. An example of bipartisanship for the whole world. The President and the Vice-President will work well together; they were always each other's best friends in the Senate.

A month later, nobody knows where the couple have disappeared. Some island off Hawaii? An outpost near the North Pole? The op-ed writers keep bringing up the Duke of Windsor. But the last thing he said to the press pack outside their getaway car, on 5 November, was: 'I'm sorry. I don't wanna be the first of anything. I just couldn't wear the suit that all of you had picked out for me.'

SAÏD SAYRAFIEZADEH

What I remember about 5 November was watching the huge crowds run through the streets of the Lower East Side that morning as they celebrated the improbable victory of Róger Calero, presidential candidate of the Socialist Workers Party. I remember the red banners with that simple, straightforward message that had catapulted Calero, the Nicaraguan-born meat packer, to frontrunner in the final three days of the race: *Workers Need to Take Political Power*. My Citibank on Grand Street was still shuttered that afternoon and, with no subways or buses running, my wife and I again had to walk the sixty blocks to the Church of St Paul the Apostle we had been eating at for the past month. We made our way through Chinatown, lined with the mountains of suffocating, uncollected garbage, and then up Bowery, past the ransacked Whole Foods (from which I had managed to cart away fifteen jars of gourmet organic pickles two weeks earlier), and then slowly up Broadway with block after block of boarded-up shoe stores, McDonalds,

Barnes & Nobles, that had all gone under. We could tell the mood in the city had altered, though. People were looking each other in the eye for the first time in a long while. There were even smiles and laughter. 'Róger Calero,' someone would shout out spontaneously. And then an answering cascade, 'Róger Calero! Workers need to take political power!' Even my wife, shy and apolitical up till a week ago, joined the chorus, 'Workers need to take political power! Nationalize the banks!' Every so often a thousand people would appear from around the corner with their red banners and come running by and everyone would applaud and salute with clenched fists.

The Church of St Paul the Apostle was overflowing as usual and it was early evening before my wife and I could get inside. The carrot soup had a slightly metallic taste and the bread was stale and the stench of body odor was oppressive, but it didn't matter. There was lots of excited talk at our table about how Calero had declared he was going to end the use of currency within three days of his inauguration. Within three weeks all factories and farms would revert to complete worker control. Were these just campaign promises? someone at the table asked. No, people responded vigorously, Róger Calero was a different kind of politician, he was a worker – a meat packer – and his interests were working-class interests. Everyone had a good laugh about the way McCain and Obama had tried desperately to salvage their campaigns by claiming that they too were socialists. 'I've always hated capitalism and imperialism just as much as you have, my friends,' someone said, mimicking McCain's much-derided statement. A few of the lawyers got into a lively debate over how quickly Bernanke and Paulson would be brought to trial and whether they should be imprisoned for life or used to build roads and schools. And then everyone voiced their enthusiasm that Bush should also be tried if he could be extradited from the Cayman Islands.

My wife and I left the church in high spirits that night. Feeling full even from the meager portion. We held hands as we walked, musing about what our new world would soon look like. No more private property. From each according to their ability, to each according to

their need. As we turned the corner on to Astor Place we saw a line of tanks surrounded by a crowd. 'Look,' my wife pointed, 'Socialist Workers Party tanks. They've come to consolidate working-class power.' But no, suddenly the turrets swiveled left and right and without warning gunfire rang out. Run, run, people screamed. Quickly my wife and I sought shelter in a gutted Starbucks, huddling on the floor in the sticky wetness of spilled coffee, while we listened to the sound of booming artillery. Cries of anguish could be heard. Then the heavy vibration of rolling steel as the tanks drew closer. More gunfire. More screams. For hours we stayed in that Starbucks, too fearful to speak, to raise our heads. It wasn't until dawn that the tanks had moved so far uptown that they could no longer be heard. I helped my wife stand and together we ventured outside. Utter destruction for as many blocks as we could see. Bodies lined the streets and fires burned. Every single window in the twenty-one-story Astor Place glass condominium had been blown out. A man holding an infant hurried by and I called out to him, 'What happened? Sir, can you tell us what happened?' But he didn't know. No one knew. It wouldn't be until later that day that we would learn that the Democrats and Republicans had declared martial law, Calero was about to be hung on charges of treason, and Obama was issuing his now famous declaration, 'Socialism is not the kind of change I meant we could believe in.'

J. ROBERT LENNON

5 November . . . of course . . . wasn't that when the nice man came to our door with the tasty Freedom Pie? I remember there was something I was supposed to be doing that day, something that seemed awfully important at the time . . . but after a few slices of that delicious pie, I put everything else out of my mind. What? What's that you say? Oh, yes, John McCain. Yes, yes, the wife and kids and I are very excited about going to Washington to view his embalmed corpse with the rest of America. I'm so glad President Palin will be issuing us temporary Red State Visas. Ever since they came and tattooed TAX AND SPEND LIBERAL on my forehead I've been wondering how I'd be able to visit my relatives in North Caro-

lina. In any event, I'm certainly glad I no longer love terror. The Pie took care of that. It's hard to see, looking back, what I saw in terror to begin with. Evidently I wanted everyone to gay-marry, as well, if you can believe that! I honestly don't know what I was so worked up about for so long. Life was too complex back then – nowadays it's hard to remember what it was like not to sit in front of the credit union all day selling pencils to fat men wearing top hats. In any event, I know my place now – right here, on this patch of sidewalk, preemptively apologizing to everyone I meet! Now if you'll pardon me, I've got Pie Stamps to cash in, quick, before the dessert kitchen closes. Be seeing you!

HARI KUNZRU

Here in New York, we're still reeling. The victory celebrations had a tinge of mania to them. For one night, we allowed ourselves to believe that it was the beginning of a new era. Post-racial! Post-feminist! Post-culture wars! Post-Bush! Grumpy Grumpy and Caribou Barbie didn't win through, at least not here. But the real undercurrent of hysteria wasn't the thwarted assassination attempt by that splinter group from the Michigan Militia, but the unwelcome knowledge that we've entered the Post-Boom. America's world dominance is over. There'll be no new buildings in NYC for at least ten years. Brooklyn thirty-somethings are resigning themselves to being in debt forever. Upper East Side pre-schools are offering Chinese as standard. The bank back-office staff are carrying their cardboard boxes to the door and the hipsters are rubbing their hands in anticipation of a revival of the golden era of downtown – cheap rents, cheap drugs, empty spaces to hold parties. Yes, once the yuppies retreat there shall be punk poetry and DIY experimental sound-art for all. One vast pop-cultural reenactment – every nuance of No-Wave studied and recreated. We're only a month in, and Obama's decision to raise tariffs to 'save the economy' hasn't really hit home. There's no money for social programs (we gave it all to bail out Goldman Sachs, remember?) so we can kiss goodbye to free healthcare, or indeed any social protection for the poor. It's dog eat dog time, and the big dogs have the best lobbyists. The President's got a time-

table to leave Iraq, but economists are beginning to point out that America only got out of the last Depression by having a really big war. Lend-lease 2.0? i-Munitions? It's definitely the way to go. All we need is an enemy. The ragheads didn't really work out. But hey, things are hotting up in the Russian border states. It's a long-shot, but it might just work...

DANIT BROWN

The day after the election, I saw Barack Obama standing in the produce aisle of my local grocery store, wearing an 'I voted' sticker and holding a cantaloupe. Outside, his wife waited in a station wagon pointed north. 'What's he doing in Michigan?' my husband wanted to know. 'Where are his bodyguards?' Already, someone had driven through our town and taken down all the signs promising change, requisitioning them for fuel for a bonfire so large that the planes taking off and landing at the airport two towns over were going to be able to see it. Even now, we could catch faint whiffs of burning poster board whenever the A/C kicked on. 'Change, my ass,' said the cashier who rang up our bottled water, first-aid kit and the masking tape we were going to use to keep our windows from shattering. 'I hear they're closing the border to Canada.' In the produce aisle, Obama set down the cantaloupe and picked up a tomato. We all pretended not to see. I imagined walking up to him, taking his hand, saying, 'Come to my house. Stay

with me. We have cable and a fold-out sofa, and a gun for protection.' I imagined his fingers, warm and dry, in mine. I liked him. He was handsome: tall, thin, a father of girls. In the voting booth, the day before, I'd pictured White House interns flashing their thongs, the leaders of nations peeling grapes and swooning, the Oval Office a den of love. How could they help it? I was miles and miles away from Washington, my finger poised over the lever, and on the other side of the privacy curtain, my husband – short and white and blotchy – was coughing politely: I'd already taken too long. Behind us, the line of voters stretched out the door, across the parking lot. I thought I was the only one, but later, on the news, they'd reported I wasn't, that thousands of us had turned in blank ballots, unable, finally, to cast a vote for a world whose rules we didn't know. 'Who does that?' my husband had muttered, his nostrils flaring the way they do when he lies. 'Beats me,' I said. 'Beats me.'

MICHAEL MARTONE

This year I wore a suit and tie to vote.

My polling place this year, as it has been for the last ten years, was Stillman College's Founder's Hall. Stillman College is a traditional black college established by northern white Presbyterian abolitionists during Reconstruction on the Heights in the West End of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Ten years ago, I, a northern white liberal, moved into the

neighborhood. The West End is, literally, the wrong side of the tracks. It was also the *de jure* black precinct of the town and is, today, still the *de facto* one.

The first time I showed up to vote at Stillman, I was dressed casually. I might have even had on running gear or lawnmowing clothes to dart in, vote, and get back home and on with the rest of the day. I was shocked to discover that my black neighbours – those handing out cheat sheets on the way in to vote, the poll workers and observers, the other voters as well, all of them – were dressed in their Sunday-best clothes. The ladies at the table with the registration rolls even wore wide-brimmed sun hats trimmed with gardens of flowers and nests of feathers. I was shocked and embarrassed. I hadn't expected it obviously. And for years after, as I travelled back up north, I would eat out on that moment as my northern friends would ask me what it was really like living way down south. Everyone dresses up to vote, I would tell them.

It didn't take me long to figure out why. The lady highlighting my name with a ruler and a bright yellow marker that stained her cotton gloves as she marked me off remembered when there had been no polling place on the West End, remembered one had to figure the number of nails in a keg in order to qualify to vote, remembered memorizing the entire Declaration of Independence just in case.



Outside the door of Founder's Hall at Stillman, from its seat on the Heights, one can see over to the campus of the University of Alabama where not that long ago George Wallace stood in another doorway. On election night, that doorway saw a silent vigil as the results of the election became known. Late into the evening, in ones and twos, people silently walked through the famous door and into the ruined and decaying basketball arena of Foster's Auditorium waiting there for the news to be official.

Earlier that day, I went to vote in my suit and tie. I waited for hours in the heat of Alabama to approach the table with the ladies dressed to the nines. Everyone was dressed up, fanning with the paper fans provided by the candidates. It was as quiet as a white church. The sound of the markers pulling through the names on the roll. The tractor-fed sheets of the roll, sheet after sheet, yellow yellow. The ladies glowed as they worked in the close heat. I thanked them when they handed me the ballot and the pencil to bubble in the empty O. I would bring the pencil back to them after I slipped the ballot into the scanning machine. I thanked the ladies at my table, M to O, for my ballot and the little nub of a pencil, and in unison in that hushed and solemn room, they told me I was welcome.

PAUL MALISZEWSKI

We awoke still tired. We had, my wife and I, stayed up too late, watching returns and taking in all the commentary, even though we vowed before turning on the television, no commentary tonight, we're just going to tune in periodically, then we'll do something else, read or maybe watch a movie. We were interested in the results, in the actual numbers, but during the months leading up to the election, we consumed our fill of comment and interpretation and what passes for analysis and then declared moratoriums on the sorry lot – the News Hour, Election Center, Ballot Bowl, the best political team on television, if they did say so themselves. We twisted the coverage shut like a tap. What need did we have for additional information? We were not, after all, undecided. Our pronouncements, however, lacked teeth, and will power. So there we were, on the sofa, facing the commentators, listening, weigh-

ing, smirking. Wolf Blitzer advised that the only way to watch was with a laptop at one's side. Someone else said something about narrative, about message, about running a highly disciplined campaign. That is so true, I said. Hadley looked over at me, narrowing her eyes and nodding. We were in profound agreement and we continued to watch.

Our baby got us up at six. Sometimes he sleeps an extra hour, it just depends, on what we're still not sure. As Hadley pumped Elliot some milk for the day and then readied for work, I played with him on the floor. Obama won, I told him, handily. Obama, I said again. It was a name I imagined he liked the sound of. I said the name once more, elongating the syllables this time, enunciating. He, too, had seen some of the coverage, looking up from his blanket as the candidates delivered snippets of speeches. I had explained it to him, who was who and what they were about. I laid it all out, not in baby talk but in complete sentences spoken sweetly and with a little silliness. I try to talk to Elliot in sentences, I guess, so he hears whole thoughts. This was his first election. It was a good year to be born. Tomorrow, I thought, he will be six months old.

KEVIN BROCKMEIER

As late as 3 November, no one could have imagined that the election would culminate the way it did. Certainly I couldn't.

After all, who would have guessed that the worst accusations lobbied against John McCain by Barack Obama's most fervent supporters, and against Barack Obama by John McCain's, would turn out to be true? That Barack Obama was indeed a covert Muslim terrorist – and also, simultaneously, a radical Black Christian – whose true agenda was to disenfranchise white Americans, institute a broad-based socialist agenda of government hand-outs and immense taxation, then hand the whole nation over to the terrorists and retire to an island in the Caribbean? That John McCain was in fact a doddering old fool – and also, simultaneously, a vicious ultra-conservative mastermind – whose actual goal was to deprive middle-class Americans of health care, job opportunities and all their hard-earned social freedoms before dying a year into office and allowing Sarah Palin

to assume the mantle of power, appointing Dick Cheney her vice-president and puppet-master? And that it would all come to light on the afternoon before election day, in a fashion so conspicuous and indisputable?

It was a dispiriting turn of events, to say the least.

Of course, most Americans, horrified by the choice with which they suddenly had been presented – a terrorist on one ticket and a dictator on the other – and unable to fathom voting for the Libertarians or (God forbid) the Greens, chose to stay home, away from the polls on 4 November. But as for the rest of us, and I number myself among them, what were we to do? In the privacy of the voting booth, how were we to make our decision?

I'm sure you'll recall the chaos of election night, as poll workers across the nation counted by hand the tens of millions of write-in candidates whose names marked our ballots. It was several weeks before every vote was recorded and the tabulations checked and rechecked.

As the whole world now knows, the winner, by some ten-thousand ballots, was America's most beloved movie personality, Tom Hanks. Mr Hanks is neither a radical Black Christian Muslim terrorist nor a near-dead senile ultra-conservative, but a patriot. He has announced that he is prepared to accept the responsibilities of high command and is scheduled to be inaugurated on 20 January which, according to *Entertainment Weekly*, should give him just enough time to finish his voice-over work for *Toy Story 3* before assuming the duties of office.

We are all wondering who he will name as his vice-president. I'm rooting for Julia Roberts. Julia Roberts or maybe Will Smith. I'll be happy either way.

In any case, I am certain Mr Hanks will get the economy, the housing crisis and that nasty business in the Middle East straightened out in no time. I, for one, am looking forward to four years of peace, prosperity, and delightful Pixar productions, the kind with those hysterical fake out-takes at the end – you know the ones I mean. I am filled with hope for the future.

SCOTT BRADFIELD

Of course I remember – who doesn't?

Personally, I blame Nader. ◇

Noam Chomsky

On Wars, Bailouts and Elections

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID BARSAMIAN

In addition to his pioneering work in linguistics, Noam Chomsky has been a leading voice for peace and social justice. The New York Times called him, 'a global phenomenon, perhaps the most widely read voice on foreign policy on the planet'. He is the author of scores of books, his latest being The Essential Chomsky and What We Say Goes. I talked with him in his office at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 10 September 2008.

Given the unpopularity of Bush, the wars and the tumbling economy, why isn't Obama way ahead of McCain?

That's an interesting question. Most of the models that political scientists use predict that the Democrats should be way ahead. In fact, by and large they are way ahead, except on the presidential vote. So you have to look for other factors. We can investigate them.

One is probably race. It's well known that when people are asked on polls whether they have questions about racial prejudice, they deny that they have it, but when you see their behaviour, you see that they're underestimating their own racial prejudice. Another element is class. The Republican public relations system – propaganda system – which is quite a formidable apparatus, has succeeded, as they succeeded in 2004, in portraying the Democrats, Obama, as the representative of the elitist liberals who run the world and have contempt for common folk like you and me. And their candidate is kind of like an ordinary guy. It happens he can't remember how many houses he owns, but let's forget about that. George Bush, a little spoiled brat who went to Yale, is the kind of guy you would like to meet in a bar, and wants to go cut brush on his ranch; an ordinary, simple guy. And I think they succeeded in doing that with Obama, in making him so he's presented as, first of all, black, and, secondly, somehow strange, not like one of us. 'Us' means white, working-class American with blue eyes. Obviously not one of us.

Strange values that we don't understand. Where did he come from? And also one of those liberals who runs everything and has contempt for us.

They haven't even gotten started revving up their slander and vilification machine, but it's an impressive apparatus. Goebbels would be impressed. It works very well. One good example, which has been studied in some detail by Ed Herman and David Peterson, is the way they've used the Jeremiah Wright case. They have a detailed article (*Monthly Review*, September 2008) that just came out about that, and it's striking.

Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor in Chicago. This was the main story in the press for weeks, what Jeremiah Wright said. First of all, almost everything he said is entirely reasonable, even if it's unacceptable to mainstream ideology. But even the parts that merit criticism, like the US organized AIDS to kill blacks or whatever it is, it's a marginal part of his message. The white preachers who support McCain have said similar or worse things. So, for example, Falwell and Robertson, I think, blamed 9/11 on the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], gays and so on. How could you get more outrageous than that?

Pat Robertson called openly for the assassination of Hugo Chavez.

See, that probably is considered acceptable. When Wright said the chickens are coming home to roost, incidentally, I think, quoting an American ambassador if I recall, that was considered horrendous. But when Falwell and Robertson say it's the ACLU and gays who are responsible, the press didn't make a fuss about that.

The other thing, which is sort of in the background, is that American elections pretty systematically keep away from issues and focus on personality, character, values – what are called values, whatever that means. They're pretty frank about it. McCain's campaign manager stated that this election is not about issues, it's about personality and character.

So on the one hand there is the way they're portraying Obama – subtext, black, Hussein, who knows who he is, and so on, a pretty openly elitist liberal who owns and runs things and has a contempt for America, meaning everything between the East Coast and the West Coast. On the other hand, there is the way they portray McCain. The press has always had a love affair with him. They portray him, first of all, as a maverick, for which there is no evidence in his record. That's imagery. Also as a hero and an expert at national security. That part is interesting, too.

Let's imagine that, say, in Russia now someone is running for office who was a pilot in the invasion of Afghanistan and was shot down while he was bombing heavily populated urban areas in Kabul, civilian areas, and was then tortured by Reagan's freedom fighters. We should sympathize with him for his fate at the hands of the people who tortured him. But would we call him a war hero and a specialist on national security? How does that make you a hero and a specialist on national security? On the other hand, that's exactly what's being done with McCain. His expertise in national security is precisely that. But you can't raise that matter here, because the jingoism and the commitment to the nobility of our military efforts is so high across the spectrum that you can't bring it up.

And I say across the spectrum. Just recently I read a column by James Carroll in the *Boston Globe* (8 September 2008) – he's their kind of pacifist, former priest, moral, left critic about McCain – in which, among other things he starts off by saying McCain is a man of honour with a heroic career. He made an interesting comment. He said that antiwar activists felt that they had to go to McCain to apologize and sort of beg forgiveness for their opposition to the war. Does some Russian who is opposed to the war in Afghanistan have to go to this pilot who was shot down bombing Kabul and apologize for his opposition to the war in Afghanistan? These conceptions are just foreign to Western doctrinal systems and mentality. You can't think in those terms.

Let's take the invasion of Iraq. Compare it to, say, Putin's invasion of Chechnya. There are a lot of differences, but let's compare it. The Russians invaded

Chechnya, destroyed Grozny, carried out massacres, terror. They pacified it. C. J. Chivers of the *New York Times* was there a couple months ago to report that Grozny is a booming city, there is building all over, everybody has electricity run by Chechens, you don't see Russian soldiers around. Do we praise Putin for his achievement? No. In fact, we condemn him for it. I suppose that if Petraeus could achieve even a fraction of what Putin achieved in Chechnya, he would probably be crowned king.

Surely Obama couldn't have any objection to it. His criticism of the war is completely unprincipled. It was a strategic error; we should have put our resources elsewhere. Therefore, if the US succeeds in achieving what Putin achieved in Chechnya, we should all be applauding. In fact, he's kind of silenced even at the limited achievement. It distinguishes him sharply from his base, a lot of which had principled objections to the war. And he made sure to tell them that he didn't really mean it, for example, by picking Biden as his vice-president. Biden was one of the strongest supporters of the war in the Senate.

It's also interesting that both candidates, Obama and McCain, say the US should lead the world. Because we're so wonderful. They don't say we should lead the world by example, by doing good things. They mean lead the world, run the world. And they're not inventing it. In some respects it traces back to the founding fathers. This is the only country in the world that was founded as, I think Washington's phrase was, a 'nascent empire'. People in the western hemisphere can take it over and be a light to the world. And it continues. But by the Second World War and ever since, US policy has been quite explicit. Plans were formulated during the Second World War. High-level planners recognized that the US would emerge from the war as the world's dominant power. The plans, which were then executed and implemented and are still unchangeable, are that the United States should be the world-dominant power, it should organize a world system that's conducive to US interests, and it should block sovereignty by others that interferes with US interests, and the core of it should be military force. I can't quote the exact words, but that was the gist of it during the Second

World War, and it was implemented in sophisticated ways in the years that followed. That has been the doctrine of every president.

It became pretty dramatic in 1990, when the Soviet Union collapsed. The pretext all those years was, well, we didn't want to do it but we had to defend ourselves against this terrible menace that was going to come to the world. Then it collapsed. What happened? Answer: nothing. As a matter of fact, for anyone who wants to seriously understand US government policy, the obvious question, the obvious documentation to look at, is how exactly did the first Bush administration respond to the collapse of the Soviet Union?

It turns out that there was a national security strategy that was promulgated. There was a military spending programme. What they said is quite interesting and almost ignored, probably because it's so interesting. What they said is that everything is going to go on exactly as before, with one change. Now it is not the Russian menace that we're defending ourselves against. We have to defend ourselves against what they call the technological sophistication of Third World powers. I don't know if they laughed hysterically when they wrote that, but, anyway, that's what they said. What about the military system, what they call the defence industrial base? That's a euphemism for high-tech industry. It has to be exactly as before. Nothing has to change. What about our intervention forces, primarily aimed towards the Middle East? They have to stay exactly the same. And they add an interesting phrase. They still have to be aimed towards the Middle East, where the problems that might have called for military intervention 'could not have been laid at the Kremlin's door'. Nice phrase. That means: Sorry, folks, we've been lying to you for fifty years, but now we can't lie anymore. The clouds have lifted, so the problems could not have been laid at the Kremlin's door, but we still have to have those forces there, because that's the world's major energy resource and we've got to control it.

You're the one principally who talks about institutional structures and how they frame and inhibit policies. So, realistically speaking, whoever is elected, can a president make a difference?

Oh, yes. Presidents make differences. In fact, over time there are systematic differences between Republicans and Democrats. So, for example, if you look over a long stretch, fairly consistently, when there is a Democratic president, there is a level of benefits for the majority of the population. Wages are a little better, benefits are a little better, for the large majority. When the Republicans are in office, it's the other way around. There are benefits, but for the super rich. The same is true of civil rights and other things. It's a consistent difference. So there are differences, even though they're within a narrow spectrum.

The same is true for international affairs. There are some differences. So Reagan, for him Russia was the evil empire; for Kennedy it was the monolithic and ruthless conspiracy, but the behavior was somewhat different, not necessarily in Kennedy's favor, I should say, but somewhat different. And I don't doubt that there would be some difference between an Obama and a McCain presidency. In fact, the McCain presidency you can't really predict very well, because he's kind of a loose cannon. But it could be pretty threatening.

What do you think of the lesser-of-two-evils argument?

You mean that you should vote for the lesser of two evils? It depends whether you care about human beings and their fate. If you care about human beings and their fate, you will support the lesser of the two evils, not mechanically, because there are other considerations. For example, there could be an argument for a protest vote if it were a step towards building a significant alternative to the choice between two factions of the business party, both of them to the right of the population on most issues. If there were such an alternative, there could be an argument either for not voting or for voting for the third alternative. But it's a delicate judgement. On the other hand, there is nothing immoral about voting for the lesser of two evils. In a powerful system like ours, small changes can lead to big consequences. The effects that I mentioned, the long-term effects for the large majority of the population from a Democratic or a Republican administration, if you care about those things, you

will prefer the lesser of the two evils.

One of those institutional structures, particularly pertaining to elections, is the Electoral College, which seems to me to by definition undemocratic. Let's say I'm running for president against you and you win forty states and get 10 million more votes than me, but I win the big states and I'm elected president. This is not talked about at all, which I find rather astonishing.

Actually, it is talked about by political theorists, people like Robert Dahl, Sanford Levinson, and others.

They're in the ivory tower. The politicians themselves don't talk about it.

Basically, I think they're right, because these technical changes wouldn't affect the core issue about American elections, which is that fundamentally they don't take place. The population is not misled about this. The press won't report it, but the polls these days show and have for a long time – the latest ones are that about 80 per cent of the population says the country is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, not for the benefit of the people. The latest polls I saw, by about 3 to 1, a couple months ago, the population criticized the campaigns because they avoid issues and keep to personalities and marginal phenomena. The public is not misled, at least so the polls indicate. And those are critical facts as

compared with the fact that elections are extravaganzas, essentially run by the public relations industry with the goal of marginalizing issues and voters. As compared with that, the technical details, like do the voting machines work or the Electoral College, just don't amount to much. Even if you fixed up those technical details, the fundamental problem would remain.

Even, say, moving elections from Tuesday, a day that people work, to the weekend, which is the case in Italy and Europe and many other countries?

It would make some difference, perhaps, but we still would have the same fundamental programme.

Talk about the bailout of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the giant mortgage lenders, which are called GSEs, government-sponsored enterprises. What is this bailout about and who is going to pay for it?

The people who are going to pay for it are the American taxpayers. One of the major economic correspondents, Martin Wolf, who is a good economist, writes for the *Financial Times*, and is a believer in markets, had a pretty strong column condemning it. He said, yes, it has to be done because of the disaster we're in, but it's outrageous. First the public is compelled to assume the risks of mortgage lending, then it's required to pay the costs when the whole system implodes. So there probably isn't

any choice right now, given the nature of the disaster, but the whole system is an outrage. Why should the public have assumed the risks for financial managers, who are basically unregulated? Part of the dominant ideology of the last couple of decades is that you should dismantle government regulation. Fine. So you dismantle government regulation, you have catastrophe after catastrophe. Now the public is called in to pay the costs of that ideology. That's essentially what happens.

Remember, the first of them, I think it was Fannie Mae, was established in the New Deal, and it was a public entity, I think, until 1968. It was part of the government. It was regulated within the government. Then the other one, Freddie Mac, was set up and they became essentially privatized but with a government guarantee. The government guarantee simply tells the managers and investors and so on, we can play whatever game we want. The government is going to come in and save us, meaning the taxpayer will. That's pretty much what happened. That's Milton Friedman-style economics. It's called free-market economics, with the nanny state there to make sure that the public takes the risks and pays the costs.

Former Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich calls it 'socialized capitalism'.

He does, but it's much too narrow, because that's true of just about all of capitalism. The whole high-tech economy runs that way. So, yes, this is an example. It's kind of interesting to watch the outrage about it, but the same outrage should be expressed about the rest of the advanced economy as well. The financialization is a particularly egregious case, but so are, say, the pharmaceutical industry or the electronics industry.

I hate to remind you, but you're turning eighty on 7 December. You've cut back on your public talks. Do you miss the road travel and mixing it up with people?

I was doing it because I wanted to do it, and I thought it ought to be done. And I miss the opportunity. I miss the fact that I have to stop other things, like teaching, because I just don't have the time for it. But that's my personal problem.

Happy birthday in advance.

Thanks.

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At All Costs

Robin Yassin-Kassab

ABDU, masterful and charismatic, was holding forth above a long table which supported a debris of pastes and salads, when he registered, like a disturbance on a radar screen, a burst of cruel hilarity erupting from a couple of the younger guests. Abdu didn't slow down; instead he increased his volume and amplified the movements of his hands. It was important that as few people as possible noticed the teenagers' disrespect, and that nobody noticed that he had noticed. To notice it was to grant it value, and that he must not do.

This was his sixtieth birthday meal. At the climax of his life, after decades of sustained effort, he'd won the right to celebrate birthdays, like Europeans do, and also to be considered a right-living patriot. That is, an embodiment of modern success. No woman at the table wore a headscarf, and neither, of course, was any alcohol served. His young dyed-blond wife presided quietly at his side. She wore a cream-coloured jacket and trousers from Paris. He wore a new, blue suit. All eyes were upon him. This was essential. If they didn't recognize him correctly now, he would be ruined in his own eyes.

So the teenagers made his stomach lurch with the shock of impending disaster, but he breathed it away, and kept on talking. Perhaps he had interpreted wrongly. Perhaps his loss of control extended only to losing the boys' attention, and they were only giggling at something private and inconsequential, not at the jinn story he was relating with so many careful insinuations and suggestive gaps. Continuing to talk gave him time to observe and analyse and, if need be, to limit the damage. Already he was making evasive manoeuvres so retreat could be more smoothly effected, subtracting mystery from his face and voice and adding light irony in its place.

The change in tone made it necessary to revise the story itself. Specifically, the old man of his tale, the one he'd consulted on the means of communicating with

the jinn, would have to be a more ridiculous figure, and the punch line would be a joke at this primitive's expense. He'd spend more time describing the poverty of the shaikh's surroundings, his wheezy breathing, the rottenness of his teeth. He wouldn't end, as he always had before, with the implication that he, Abdu, had become proficient in jinn lore. He wouldn't refer to the jinn as 'our friends' and then lapse into abrupt and evocative silence.

Silence. Behind the strain of performance, Abdu remembered the years of his poverty. Remembered the silence of death that inhabited his mother when she fell to the floor at the climax of her trance. Little Abdu ran forward from the shadows to tug at her dress, but was restrained by the other women. 'Leave her, boy. Leave her, habibi. She'll come back now and be well.' And his fear receded, for he knew it was so. It had happened before. She had fallen like this, and after a few shivery moments she had risen again, happier than she'd been for weeks, crying happy tears, a phoenix rising from ashes.

In the days before they went to the zar she was ashen-faced and shuffling. She wept steadily as she swept the floor or made the bread. She didn't reply when Abdu or any of his brothers or sisters spoke to her. To their father she only responded yes or no, and he, understandably, spent even the little time he had for resting out of their rooms, elsewhere. Abdu's mother would occupy this depression for such long stretches that Abdu couldn't remember its beginning. Her happiness was like his babyhood, a clouded dream. But when she gathered him, the youngest one, and walked with the neighbour women to the place of the zar, he knew that relief was about to rain upon them.

At the zar there were too many women for him to count, and some round-eyed, world-shocked infants like himself too tired to bother shouting. But the women did shout, though not in their usual

directed fashion. They began in a circle, each woman swaying and twisting, moaning the name of God, making their voices plunge and rise like beaten drums, like waves beating on rocks, like blood in your ears when you run too hard towards home, and two or three of the women would strike at the daf, the homemade tambourines, and then more would beat at their breasts, the chant rising, becoming screams and wails and tremors, until the circle broke, women clawing the cloths from their heads, hiding their eyes with their arms, and his mother trembling, shrieking and falling. 'What's happened to her?' he cried. 'What's happened to Mama?' And after he'd asked six or seven times a panting woman would tell him, 'Akhath-ha al-haal, habibi – the trance has taken her,' and then, 'Leave her, habibi. She'll come back. She'll be well.' And always she did come back, as if she had died and then been resurrected. Brought back to life, given a fresh, smiling face.

The memory was an embarrassment. People nowadays were so much more grown up. These days, only drunkards and hashish smokers would allow their inner feelings to overflow so promiscuously. But back then it was as if everybody drank and smoked; they were weak vessels containing huge emotions. In Lebanon during the passion plays Shia villagers would lynch the man playing the murderer of Hussain, if they managed to get their hands on him. Not a popular role for the actors. But people progressed and developed. By the late sixties, by the time Abdu was an engineer and a respected man, people's understanding of role-playing had developed so far that film baddies became superstars. There was a cinema in every city, and only the dying generation wept and wailed at the zar.

Abdu talked, and grinned a grin of well-kept teeth. His eyes glanced beadily across the faces of his peers, from police officer to doctor, from businessman to party official, and across the white and painted expanses of their wives' faces, and returned again to the young people, the children of his own upwardly mobile generation, children who could take it all for granted. Who hadn't had to struggle. Their heads were pointed towards him but they couldn't quite look into his eyes. They were smirking still; it was quite

clear. On closer examination, they were older than teenagers, probably already returned from foreign studies. In fact, it was possible they owned import licences and car dealerships, mobile phone franchises, land development rights. These were the men he should be establishing relationships with if he didn't want to slip from the place he had climbed to. New men. Smirking, complacent, too comfortable. Dangerous.

He remembered a fairground game he'd played once in England. A white woman was holding his shoulder, taller than him, and the air smelled of rain and fish and chips, deep fried. The game itself involved smirking plastic rabbits popping out of holes, and him wielding a plastic hammer to bang them back in place. All the teeth and the spinning lights, and English people expecting him to be confused and clumsy; and the rabbits speed up, as he remembers, until sooner or later, inevitably, you can't keep them all down any longer.

'Ha!' He finished off the anecdote with a flash of noise and a triumphant bucking of his forehead. 'The man didn't have any people to talk to, but he did have the jinn! His friends the jinn! Ha!' He was a little breathless, and glad to have finished. With the hand kept concealed under the table's surface he clutched and crumpled a serviette. Tears of sweat were pooling in his eyebrows. As soon as somebody else began speaking he would mop his brow. For now the guests were laughing, and nodding at him as they did so. Everything as it should be. He felt his wife's grateful simpering.

What had disgusted him most in England was the London carnival that a woman had made him visit – its single surging communal body – and all the whites and blacks losing themselves in reggae music and smoke. In that mire of limbs and colours and odours he lost the woman for a few minutes. When he found her again she was delirious, forgetful of herself. But Abdu, he's done so much work on his self, he will protect it at all costs.

The laughter went on, and Abdu wiped his nose, looking graciously outward. But the two that concerned him most were laughing at a different pace to the others, too slowly, and for each other's benefit, not his. One swarthy and snake-thin; the other plump and pale, with a

brownish fuzz of beard around the mouth in the style they called *sek-sooki*, like the English word *sexy*. They disrupted everything. Abdu's fixed grin fell, bringing relief to his cheeks and throat but an immediate tension to the table – which perked up the older guests. Their laughter scattered and stopped, Abdu's temporary allies still enacting appreciation with nods and smiles and wrinklins around the eyes, collaborating with him, keeping it going. But what would they say to each other in their cars as they drove home, in their offices, on the telephone?

'And do you talk to them too, Uncle, the jinn?' The swarthy one with slicked-back hair had spoken. The sneer in his tone was unmistakable.

What do you do to reply to this? He'd like to reach over and slap these two, show them the strength he had left. He'd like to shake them until they whimpered for him to stop. He'd like to squeeze their necks. He felt great power stirring. But it wouldn't be safe. He realized suddenly that he didn't know whose sons they were. Their names escaped him. They must be someone to be here at the table. He should have taken more care of these things. Had he relaxed too much? Had he fallen asleep?

Whoever they were, he had to restrain himself. Screeching in abandon is not religion. The country had built schools and hospitals. Those willing to work hard had



become educated. Abdu especially had become an educated man, looked up to, a pillar of respectable society. He wasn't rubbish. He wasn't people in the slums plugging their toilets against rats, sharing meals with cockroaches.

Nevertheless, he felt himself angering, like bubbles and fizz escaping from a half-uncorked bottle. He heard cracks, buzzes, whinings in his head, air squeezed through tiny skull tubes, traffic through

hidden tunnels. He bit back on it. This kind of emotion is better kept indoors, better targeted at the children. Better a door or two away even from the socially advantageous wife. Come, gather yourself, for he'd done well until now, negotiating party men when the Resurrection came to power, negotiating the sects and each individual's prickliness, dominating those he could and submitting when he'd had to. He'd developed a good technique in garrulousness, and he understood the codes of success. Live a sedentary life. Make yourself likable. Know the rules.

A certain amount of deception was necessary, it went without saying. It was true that isolation was the price of control. And it was also true that, out of necessity, he had returned to that world which still nobody denied, not even the petty boys before him, the realm of the beings of fire, which the *Qur'an*, after all, describes. Let them deny the jinn, and publicly prove themselves unbelievers! Abdu, even if he knew it was forbidden to seek their company, had learnt to deal with the jinn. He wouldn't be ashamed. The jinn became his friends. His servants, really, for he didn't go to them moaning and shaking, but as one in command. His order for them was always the same, just applied to different people: 'Show me x's true face. Tell me what is in his inner heart. What his body hides.' What he'd been shown had given him an edge.

Yet now, in the restaurant, Abdu realized with mild shock that he had lost the struggle. He was on his feet, and his throat was open. 'Do you know who I am?' he roared. 'Do you know what I have achieved?' Anger unleashed contradictory currents, of domination and submission both at once. He frightened the world; he gave in to himself. His fist struck the table so the pillaged dishes jumped. Masks flopped from the guests' faces. Some of them, too, showed anger – a clean and righteous anger targeting Abdu, because rules had been broken. The wives shrank into expert disdain.

Abdu's voice, now wordless, bellowed louder. He screamed. He sounded like his mother at the zar before the silence. His voice sounded distant, further and further away. He saw his body from afar and forgot that it was his. Yet he didn't mind. For once, bodies didn't matter, and inside he was blank. ♦

American Aspects

Looking Back To 1964

Amidst the turbulence of 1964, British historian Denis William Brogan published a compilation of his recent essays on US political life called American Aspects – a necessarily bland title as he'd already used The American Character (1944) and The American Political System (1933). The first essay is a reflection on the role of the President and its mournful tone can be traced to the fact that only months before Brogan had spent time with the dashing Kennedys in their Camelot, writing admiringly of the mind of the 'Catholic President' and the home decoration skills of his wife. His love was not solely for the rulers. Enamoured with the US and its post-war vitality, Brogan was certain the bond between his two nations would never unravel. 'I don't see a British Declaration of Independence casting off the Yankee yoke,' he wrote in the essay 'America Through British Eyes', 'even though it does chafe at times.'

But then Brogan never envisioned a time when Britain might have to question the behaviour of any particular administration. Old Europe had emerged from the Second World War with a sober view, never again to be fuzzed by mirage. 'In modern times a great many Americans have thought, many still think, that they can go it alone. So they see everything in a bright New England winter sunshine when it is not an Arizona desert of blinding light and shade. We see things in the less distinct colours of a Thames-valley October.' Such nuance, such autumnal shading and shadow, was evidence Great Britain would never follow in the wake of a belligerent US administration.

'I don't believe that "I can lick any man in the room" is the American attitude,' Brogan continued, 'but it is the attitude of some Americans and if (Heaven forbid) it became or could plausibly be made to seem to be the attitude of any American administration, many partisans of the present Anglo-American alliance would reluctantly quote Sam Goldwyn and say: "Include me out." Or would they? Sam Goldwyn was, of course, a movie producer in the 30s who didn't last long enough to become an advisor to Tony Blair.

In the following edited excerpt of his essay 'The Presidency', Brogan reflects on the man – yes, always the man – who inhabits the most famous house in town, the Parthenon of the

American Acropolis. He speak of the President's solitary nature and what it means to be the one whispering into his ear.

HE LIVES IN the most historical building in Washington, the only one that has an aura of majesty about it. American boys are continually told that they can, when they grow up, become President of the United States (girls are not yet told that they can). Under the easy and democratic exterior, the protocol of the White House is as severe as the protocol of Buckingham Palace. The presidential inauguration is a kind of quadrennial coronation. And even the President who has made an immense number of enemies remains President and is entitled, except among the most pathologically minded, to respect and indeed, for his office if not for himself, to reverence.

The White House itself symbolizes the character of this great office. On the one hand, it is a princely residence; on the other, it is a power house. It is what Versailles or the Hofburg were in the days of the great monarchies of Europe. Beside, behind Buckingham Palace, there is 10 Downing Street; there is nothing beside, nothing behind the White House.

Children and their parents pour through the White House during the visiting hours, entering a shrine far more august than that of the Supreme Court, not to speak of the Capitol. For one thing, the building is much more a part of history. It has been altered inside and out, it has been tactfully extended, but it is fundamentally the building into which John Adams moved while it was still unfinished for the last month or two of his unhappy term in office. It has known the horrors of wars. It was burned by a British army, and there is a legend not totally vindicated that it got the name White House because of the paint put over it to hide the scars of burning. It was called the White House by the American people long before Theodore Roosevelt made that the official name of

the Executive Mansion.

An elegant piece of Dublin architecture transplanted to the United States, it is perhaps the only important official building in Washington of intrinsic architectural merit. But it is not to admire this copy of Leinster House in Dublin (which now houses the Dail) that the pilgrims come. They come to what may not extravagantly be described as the Parthenon of the American Acropolis. It is a house soaked in history and soaked in blood. The great ghost that walks through the White House is that of the greatest of Presidents, Abraham Lincoln, and this gives the necessary tragic note to this national shrine. It was to the White House he returned after his visit to conquered Richmond; it was on the way to the White House upon the Potomac that he recited, '*Duncan is in his grave. After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well.*' It was here his body was brought and the Lincoln Room is still the most sacred part of the White House.

But not all memories of the White House are as dark as those of the Good Friday of 1865 on which the first assassination of an American President took place. The first real tenant of the White House, and one who left his mark on it, was Thomas Jefferson, and it was characteristic of the late President Kennedy that when he gave his famous party for the American Nobel prizemen in literature and science he should have said there was more talent and genius gathered in the White House that night than there had ever been except when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.

Other great makers of the American tradition haunt the White House. Across Lafayette Square is the absurd and endearing equestrian statue of General Andrew Jackson, one of the great makers of the presidential office. The first man to dare to tamper with the sacred structure was Theodore Roosevelt; and the President under whose direction the White House was totally reconstructed within is still alive, Harry S. Truman. To see American families going through the public rooms of the White House which are shown to them (and, which are far more attractive now than they were a few years ago, thanks to the energy and good taste of Mrs Kennedy) is to get a good lesson in the intensity of American

reverence for American history and the degree to which that artificial construction the United States of America has gained blood, flesh, and spirit since it was launched uncertainly in the dread year 1789. In that year there was a King of France, a King of England, a Holy Roman Emperor, a Tsarina of all the Russias, a very powerful and sagacious Emperor in Peking, a powerful Shogun and an impotent Emperor in Japan. Of all these strictly monarchical offices, only one now remains, that of the Queen of England. Yes the office that Queen Elizabeth II holds is very different indeed from the office held by George III, while the office that President Lyndon Johnson now holds is basically the office to which George Washington was unanimously elected.

We tend to think of America as having no history or having a short history, when in fact it has the longest effectively continuous political history in the world, marked by only one great breakdown, the Civil War – and that ended in the triumph of the Union, a triumph won at the immense expenditure of blood and an immense expenditure of national feeling – a loss from which the United States is still suffering, and of which it is indeed possible that President Kennedy's assassination is one of the long-term consequences.

The White House is open not only to tourists, it is also open to not very important visitors to parties and receptions, and I was myself struck and moved by seeing on television the East Room where the dead President's body had been brought

and where I had seen and talked with him and his wife – one full of energy, the other dazzling – only a few months before.

But there is, of course, another side to the White House which gives it its double character. There are the private rooms where the President and his wife, and his children if he has them with him, can take some refuge from the intense pressures of the publicity that beats on any American President. President and Mrs. Kennedy were especially successful in preserving something of the air of a private house in the midst of this great national monument of publicity and power. But the real contrast is not between the public and the private quarters. It is between the White House as a residence, as the great official American home, and the White House as the centre of power of the most powerful state in the world. Its weight of power can be felt, it seems to me, oddly enough in the silence which at times pervades the administrative quarters, the two wings on each side of the White House which accommodate the closest members of the presidential staff. They of course have floods of visitors in the daytime, and the President, however hard he tries, cannot always protect himself against intrusive visitors, including some whose impudence startles a European. But I have been in the White House executive wing at night and felt its powerful silence. These corridors, half underground, are indeed 'corridors of power'. Kipling, in a famous passage describing how he received the Nobel prize in Stockholm during the period of Court mourning for the death of King

Oscar, remarked that the only sound in the vast palace was the click of the decorations on the chests of the Court officials. There are no decorations worn by non-military officials in the White House, but there are Court officials all the same.

The White House is a court because the President is a monarch. I used to be asked frequently during the last war by British officials posted to Washington what was the best book to describe the strange new world they were entering? I didn't recommend Toqueville or Bryce or even Brogan. I recommended Saint-Simon. I used to say, 'You must remember you are going to a Court. You must abandon all your regular Whitehall ideas of official priorities and hierarchies. You cannot estimate the power of some people you will meet by their official title or by the quality of their carpet. You must watch out for those who have the ear of the President, the only ear that really counts.'

In F.D.R.'s day, it was advisable to notice who saw the President in his bedroom, before he put on the crippling apparatus which alone allowed him to make public appearances. Confidants rose and fell, grew in favour or became an intolerable political burden, as happened to the unfortunate Governor Sherman Adams under President Eisenhower. But all of their importance came from their access to the President, off the record, unofficial, or in some instances official but still off the record. The White House is very much smaller than Versailles, but the corridors round the President's private offices are like the Grande Galerie or the Oeil-de-Boeuf at Versailles. One could almost feel the hopes and fears, the desires as strong as sexual lust, in the breasts of some who had, and others who wished to have, access to the *arcana imperii*.

It is for this reason that the President of the United States must be 'a lonely man'. If he has too many friends, especially friends of the wrong kind, and if he too openly abandons to them the prerogatives that the nation has conferred on him, he goes the way of Warren Gamaliel Harding. The power must finally be in his hands. As Mr Truman put it on the little brass ornament he kept on his desk, 'The buck stops here'.

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