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## The Vision Thing

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# The Vision Thing

Shaun O'Connell

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The works discussed in this article include:

- All by Myself: The Unmaking of a Presidential Campaign*, by Christine M. Black and Thomas Oliphant. 343 pages. The Globe Pequot Press, 1989. \$19.95.
- The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed*, by Barbara Ehrenreich. 275 pages. Pantheon Books, 1989. \$19.95.
- The Quest for the Presidency: The 1988 Campaign*, by Peter Goldman, Tom Mathews, and the Newsweek Special Election Team. 430 pages. Simon and Schuster, 1989. \$9.95 (paperback).
- Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency, 1988*, by Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover. 478 pages. Warner Books, 1989. \$22.95.
- What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era*, by Peggy Noonan. 353 pages. Random House, 1990. \$19.95.
- The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath*, by Kevin Phillips. 262 pages. Random House, 1990. \$19.95.
- My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan*, by Nancy Reagan, with William Novak. 384 pages. Random House, 1989. \$21.95.
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Where there is no vision, the people perish.

— Proverbs

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind.

— Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

**A**rchibald MacLeish noted that W. B. Yeats was unable to use a proper “public” language in his poetry on Irish politics.<sup>1</sup> In reply to this charge, Yeats wrote “Politics,” a poem that invokes Thomas Mann — “In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms.” The poem asks, “How can I, that girl standing there, /

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My attention fix / On Roman or on Russian / Or on Spanish politics?"<sup>2</sup>

Yeats wrote "Politics" at the end of the 1930s, W. H. Auden's "low dishonest decade."<sup>3</sup> In our time — Paul Kennedy calls it "fin-de-siècle America" — our destiny no less defined in political terms, we may have similar difficulty fixing our attention on American politics, at least as it was evidenced in the low, dishonest election of 1988.<sup>4</sup>

For all its idiocy and hypocrisy, the presidential election of 1988 seems fraught with import: the beginning of the end of America's economic primacy, as we became a debtor nation, or the end of our beginning as a model of democracy, as the worldwide turn away from tyranny in 1989 indicates. Safely past Orwell's 1984, the momentous year 2000 (or Stanley Kubrick's dystopia, *2001*) looms. Writing on fin-de-siècle fantasies," Hillel Schwartz imagines vast implications.

For the West, in fact, these last years have come to seem a now-or-never time. The Nineties, in particular 1999 and 2000, are not simply numerological curiosities; they are critical markers on which we have come to lay our cultural bets. Either the Nineties will see the Politics of Desperation and the twenty-first century the Era of Annihilation, as political scientist Richard Falk has written, or with futurist Alvin Toffler we will master *The Third* (and glorious) *Wave*. . . . Some 6 billion people will be either suffocating or celebrating on — or off — this greenhouse Earth in the year 2000.<sup>5</sup>

It is enough to turn you away from the political process to recall that neither candidate for the American presidency seriously addressed this issue in 1988.

For Yeats "politics" was one thing and "that girl" another. She embodied simple beauty and love, the rhetoric of the heart. "But O that I were young again / And held her in my arms." By implication, "politics," for Yeats, meant difficult issues and complex analysis, the rhetoric of the head. The presidential election of 1988 obliterated Yeats's distinction. The "handlers" — the campaign managers, speech writers, media consultants, spin controllers, flacks, advisers, friends, and wives of the candidates — did their best to convince Americans that each candidate for the presidency — George Bush or Michael Dukakis — was nothing less than "that girl standing there," a worthy emblem of beauty and a sufficient object of desire. Since both Bush and Dukakis suffered from severe charisma deficiencies, each made his case by running down the other. Forget issues and analysis, implied both candidates in their misleading rhetoric and their manipulatory media messages. Come live with me and be my love, courted Bush through the long, hot summer and fall of 1988. Trust in me, cooed Dukakis. In November, America decided it liked Bush better, but all of us were diminished by the inane campaign. Small wonder that now, after the midterm congressional elections, on the brink of the 1992 presidential campaign, as a new millennium approached, we would like to forget all about 1988, a bad dream that continues to haunt the American mind.

Try as they might — or as their mighty manipulators managed — neither presidential candidate could match the beauty or loveliness of Ronald Reagan, the cover boy of American politics, still standing there; still smiling, nodding, joshing, and waving his way through the Iran/contra and arms-diversion scandal; still trying to remember what he knew and when he forgot it. (Reagan maintained "plausible deniability" of his subordinates' actions, though Oliver North, Reagan's point man on the Iran/contra extravaganza, assumed "that the president was aware of what I was doing and had, through my superiors, approved of it.")<sup>6</sup>

In her memoir, *My Turn*, Nancy Reagan neatly characterizes her charming and baffled husband in a domestic epiphany that plays like a scene from an unmade movie. *Mr. Reagan Goes to Washington*, a scene that illustrates his innocence at the risk of exposing his ignorance. In November 1986 he entered their White House bedroom and said, “Honey, I’ve got some bad news. Ed Meese just came in and told me that money from the sale of arms to Iran went to the contras.”<sup>7</sup> Darn it, sweetie, why don’t those other guys tell me what’s going on around here?

But is it pointless to mock Ronald Reagan. He remains the Great Deflector, refracting light and heat. During his first televised debate with Walter Mondale in 1984, Reagan’s halting and confused performance raised questions about his age and competence, but his advisers came up with the campaign-winning quip, which he delivered, flawlessly, at the beginning of their second debate: “I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.”<sup>8</sup> The issues of age and competence were thus neutralized — transcended rather than confronted — by clever advisers and an actor who found, late in life, the role for which he was born. America, amused, gave its heart and soul again to Nancy’s “Ronnie.” Unlike nagging, worried Jimmy Carter, who told the nation it was suffering a “great malaise,” or Walter Mondale, who *promised* to raise taxes, Ronald Reagan was America’s buoyant personification — cute, pious, optimistic, manly, wry, and, above all, innocent. He was the Gipper — not the true George Gipp, of course, just the actor who played the part of the Notre Dame football hero in *Knute Rockne — All American* (1940) — and America, the supporting cast in his movie of the mind, was on his team. As Garry Wills puts it.

The power of his appeal is the great joint confession that we cannot live with our real past, that we not only prefer but need a substitute. Because of that, we *will* a belief in all his stories. . . . He is the ideal past, the successful present, the hopeful future all in one. He is convincing because he has “been there” — been almost everywhere in our modern American culture — yet he has “no past” in the sinister sense. He is guilelessly guiltless.<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere Wills shows he is well aware that Reagan *has* a past, “in the sinister sense.” (For example, in 1952, when he was president of the Screen Actors Guild, Reagan signed a waiver allowing Music Corporation of America to produce television programs. *General Electric Theater*, which Reagan would host, was an MCA production. In 1962 John F. Kennedy’s Justice Department investigated MCA and Ronald Reagan lost his General Electric contract.)<sup>10</sup>

Yet Ronald Reagan remains an American enigma, a mysterious source of power and persuasion whose absent presence hovered, like the voice of the Wizard of Oz, over the 1988 campaign. He had been a popular actor who got by on his looks and his smile; a genial salesman for the right; a host of two television series (also *Death Valley Days*) who believed that “politics is just like show business.” He became America’s White House host.<sup>11</sup>

His wife, however, insists he is a man without mystery. “The Ronald Reagan you see in public is the same Ronald Reagan I live with.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Nancy’s Ronnie is an idealist who is too trusting of those around him, like the folk hero played by his Hollywood friend Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. On the other hand, Peggy Noonan, speech writer for Reagan and Bush, represents Reagan in an arresting image that evokes his enigmatic, charismatic, and symbolic qualities. Her Ronald Reagan is a “gigantic heroic balloon floating in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, right up there between



Superman and Big Bird.” The Reagan White House, she decided was “a void.”<sup>13</sup> This from a woman who agreed with Reagan’s policies, who wrote for him (inflating his balloon with air?), who admits she had a “crush” on him.

Nancy Reagan and Peggy Noonan, in their own sweet ways, effectively handled the Great Communicator. Thus their memoirs of the Reagan era allow us to glimpse the mystery behind the rational facade of American politics. Nancy, by her own admission, worried about his image as a warmonger, prodded Reagan to meet with Gorbachev, leader of the formerly “evil empire.” At the Geneva “summit” conference in 1985, she and aide Michael Deaver contrived to place the world leaders before a cheery fire for a photo op. Thus public relations became foreign policy, though Nancy insists that she, despite passing along advice from her astrologer to presidential aides, did *not* make policy. “First Lady, Dragon Lady,” is a chapter title in *My Turn*, showing Nancy trying to deflect the criticism that she was another Edith Wilson, another power-hungry woman behind another disabled president.<sup>14</sup> With her passion for remodeling public buildings in which she dwelled (in California and in Washington, D.C.), her spendthrift ways (the new china), and her shop-till-you-drop acquisitiveness (those “borrowed” gowns), Nancy developed, as essayist Barbara Ehrenreich acidly puts it, a “reputation as a senescent bimbo with a lust for home furnishing.” But Ehrenreich grants that the former First Lady is more than that: Nancy is a woman who cannot take full credit for the good work she did as First Handler because she is determined “to prove that Ronnie really *was* president after all.”<sup>15</sup>

*My Turn*, as its title implies, is a self-centered, dramatic monologue in which the misunderstood heroine gets mad *and* gets even. Nancy thinks that she was criticized for her lavish clothes because “some women aren’t all that crazy about a woman who wears a size four, and who seems to have no trouble staying slim.”<sup>16</sup> Romance, envy, and spite mix in revealing anecdotes. For example, she fondly recalls her 1952 marriage to Ronnie at the Little Brown Church in the Valley. The bride wore “a gray wool suit with a white collar and a small flowered hat with a veil.” Thirty-six years later, after eight years in the White House, living again in Los Angeles (now in Bel Air), she discovers her suit still fits. Take that, all you fat, jealous whiners who accuse her of extravagance!<sup>17</sup> Nancy Reagan lives in a world where all values and motives are personal, where there are no substantive issues beyond imagery and loyalty.

Nancy Reagan’s memoir is most convincing and sympathetic when she shows her devotion to her husband and reveals her parental pains over the wayward lives of their children.<sup>18</sup> She is far less convincing in persuading us that Ronnie was his own man, not a mere actor who prided himself on making his morning calls to the set, hitting his marks, and delivering his lines with artfully contrived sincerity. Nancy argues, for example, that Reagan wrote many of his own speeches, including that famous one in support of Barry Goldwater at the 1964 Republican convention — the speech that persuaded many Americans that Ronald Reagan (actor, host, salesman) was a plausible politician. She cites the eloquent conclusion of Reagan’s speech.

You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We can preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we can sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness. If we fail, at least let our children, and our children’s children, say of us we justified our brief moment here. We did all that could be done.<sup>19</sup>

However, this speech better shows Reagan’s ability to plagiarize and recompose than it does to formulate ideas in his own language. Beyond the obvious nod to FDR, Reagan’s

resonant summing up closely echoes Abraham Lincoln's Message to Congress (December 1, 1862):

Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. . . . The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. . . . We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just — a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.<sup>20</sup>

Reagan spoke of protecting the free enterprise system from government interference and the nation from the threat of communism, while Lincoln spoke of freeing the slaves. Lincoln's "last best, hope of earth" became Reagan's "last best hope of man on earth." Both men appealed in the name of future generations. Both men faced the possibility of failure, before which Reagan was curiously humble ("We did all that could be done") and Lincoln overreaching ("The world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless"). But Lincoln, to say the least, inspired whatever eloquence and originality Reagan (or his supportive wife) might claim. Ronald Reagan knew how to say (or play) his lines; he also knew where to find them.

Peggy Noonan gave Reagan the words with which to soar into realms of obscurity and pseudopoetry. After 248 soldiers of the 101st Airborne died in a plane crash, she drew from several sources — Shakespeare, JFK's speech writers, and James Agee, as she cheerily admits — to give Reagan voice: "They must be singing now, in their joy, flying higher than mere man can fly, as flights of angels take them to their rest."<sup>21</sup> For his fine speech at Normandy — "These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc" — Noonan found her source in the plangent title and tone of Roger Kahn's memoir of the postwar Brooklyn Dodgers, *The Boys of Summer*.<sup>22</sup> Take from where you can and go with what you've got! Noonan's compositional credos are entirely consistent with Reagan's theatrical-political principles. She affirms that "history really is biography," that "hyperbole is the soul of oratory," that "a speech is a form of theater."<sup>23</sup> (Aphorism is the soul of glibness?) In Ronald Reagan's farewell address, she invoked John Winthrop's city upon a hill for his final flight of rhetoric.

And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was eight years ago. But more than that: After two hundred years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what the storm.<sup>24</sup>

Her revelations about Reagan's detached presence during his presidency make me wonder about the stability of that glowing city, set upon a ridge, during a stormy winter night. In his/her words, it seems too mystic, too much the evocation of an evanescent dream, to last.

Of course, apart from rhetoric, Reagan had his "values" — anti-tax, anti-abortion, pro-SDI, pro-contra — which drew Noonan away from CBS, where she wrote for Dan Rather, and into the White House. "I was a partisan. I yearned to help the president whose views I shared. I ached to write his words."<sup>25</sup> But her yearning ache transcended ideology. Like other Americans, she was attracted to Reagan more by passion than by reason. "He moved us. We loved him."<sup>26</sup> Unlike any other president since Kennedy, Reagan evoked the promise of American life. Reagan — not Gary Hart, who tried and failed to recompose himself into an ideal image — was our Gatsby. For Reagan, too, evident in his every ges-

ture and phrase. “there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promise of life.”<sup>27</sup> Reagan told America, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet” — an Al Jolson line revived as a motto for the 1984 campaign by speech writer Ken Khachigian — and America believed him.<sup>28</sup>

Star-struck Peggy Noonan, growing up in Brooklyn, papered her walls with pictures of men in Kennedy’s cabinet. (Bobby Kennedy, granted, had star qualities, but it stuns the mind to imagine Dean Rusk as anybody’s pinup.) Transformed into a Republican yuppie during the anti-Vietnam War protest era, she lost her heart to Ronald Reagan — his anti-government rap songs, his endearing young charms, even his smile and his shoe shine. In one of her weirder anecdotes, she recalls waiting outside the Oval Office to meet Reagan. All she could see was his foot, dangling and bouncing. It was oh so “frail. I imagined cradling it in my arms, protecting it from unsmoothed roads.”<sup>29</sup> Head-over-heels, so to speak, she smoothed Ronnie’s road with carpets of rhetoric.

Noonan’s mind, revealed in *Revolution*, is a mishmash of enthusiasms (for the rich and powerful), prejudices (against liberals, communists, and those pushy homeless who, egged on by liberals, insisted on begging near the White House), and fantasies (about saving the world and becoming famous). Her book reads like the overwrought diary of a bewitched, bothered, and bewildered groupie when she contemplates the White House through a romantic haze and Scott Fitzgerald-like imagery. “There is the whiteness of the paint and the play of the sun; the shadows look so clean and well defined. The flowers are so beautiful against this house, so crisp and rich.”<sup>30</sup> (Presidents are different from you and me. They have whiter paint!) Yet Noonan also has a keen eye for artifice, noting how creepy it is that the flowers planted around the White House are always replaced before they fade, and how the Reagan White House felt like the MGM commissary in the 1940s.

But Noonan’s political “values” are revealed as self-serving rationalization when she claims that the Reagan “revolution” was designed to lift the burden of taxation from average American families — those same families who paid for Reagan’s arms buildup and illegal contra funding, those same families who will pay for generations for the bailout after the savings and loan scandal. These are the result of Reagan “values”: military might, paramilitary operations, and unregulated free enterprise, underwritten by vast government investments. Noonan, of course, was no policy analyst. Rather she was, in the words of Donald Regan, chief of staff, “the girl who does the poetry.”<sup>31</sup> Her “poetry” mixed personal anecdotes about the “boys” or the “heroes” in the balcony during Reagan’s speeches, with soaring, upbeat rhetoric, which the president delivered with the appropriate quaver and far-seeking gaze.

Noonan, intrigued by the mystery of Ronald Reagan, compares him with several figures: FDR and JFK, predictably, for charm, charisma, and a way with words. However, one of her analogies calls into question the quality of her literary training at Fairleigh Dickinson University: Reagan “was to popular politics what Henry James was to American literature: He was the master.”<sup>32</sup> (Pop techno-thriller writer Tom Clancy would be, as Nancy Reagan might say, a more “appropriate” comparison than Henry James, who never pandered to popular tastes.) Amazingly, revealingly, Noonan’s Ronald Reagan is also compared to the Gentleman Caller of Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, a man “who comforted a shy girl and touched a demoralized family.”<sup>33</sup> Noonan, of course, is that girl, and America, protect us all, is that demoralized family.

Peggy Noonan saw Ronald Reagan as a hero who assuaged Americans’ loneliness. They had a mystic faith in a great leader who would rescue them from the dreary isolation of their lives. She believed that Americans looked to him for just the right words (which



she would compose), words that would take “them inside a spinning thing and make them part of the gravity.”<sup>34</sup> Ronald Reagan, then, looms over the 1988 election like a “gigantic heroic balloon,” floating “above the written law” (Fawn Hall’s memorable phrase, uttered during her breathless testimony to Congress on Ollie North’s illegal actions), spinning inside the White House “void,” where flowers are ever fresh, where never is heard a discouraging word, where only gravity keeps the republic from flying apart.

When she wrote George Bush’s acceptance speech for the Republican Party’s nomination for the presidency, Peggy Noonan contributed key catchphrases: “a kinder, gentler nation,” “Read my lips—no new taxes,” and “a thousand points of light.”<sup>35</sup> This speech fabricated a new image for George Bush. No longer the whining bumbler he had been portrayed, he suddenly appeared assured, safe. Revised, recomposed, Bush became a tough winner.

In August 1990, President Bush, speaking at the dedication of the Richard M. Nixon Library, repaid his debt to his mentor. Bush said that Nixon believed that “politics is poetry, not prose.”<sup>36</sup> By which we can only assume that Bush and Nixon would agree with Aristotle in equating “poetry” with “fiction.”

Back in August 1988, in New Orleans, George Bush began to win the image war, conducted on television, against Michael Dukakis. A month earlier, in Atlanta, that did not seem possible, for Dukakis appeared strong, inevitable. His acceptance speech before the Democratic convention was an emotional success, though it contained no memorable phrases or proposals. Indeed, Dukakis seemed determined to avoid both issues and rhetoric, to make the campaign impersonal and drab rather than political or poetical. “Because this election isn’t about ideology. It’s about competence.”<sup>37</sup>

However, as we read the lips and other body signs of these candidates, points of enlightenment dimmed in a mean-spirited campaign, empty of relevant public policy ideas, a campaign that revealed the compromised character of each candidate, a campaign that demonstrated stunning incompetence by the Democrats and cynical certitude by the Republicans, whose appeal to a range of prejudices (racial, ethnic, nativist) marked a new low in the American political process.

Despite our efforts to forget, the presidential campaign of 1988 still echoes hollow sounds in the spinning center of the American psyche, sounds that call up images and feelings, like lyrics from old songs. “The sleaze factor” — Democrats’ description of corruption in the Reagan administration — and “the character issue” — a standard of moral measure that impaled two Democratic presidential candidates, Gary Hart and Joseph Biden — are phrases that put us back into the 1988 presidential election as though it were yesterday, as though we never left that fetid, rainless summer of forest fires and hot air masses lifting off podiums from sea to shining sea, a summer when we talked about the end of man and the death of the heart.

Pat Robertson, the apocalyptic preacher who thought prayer could divert hurricanes, insisted he was “not a politician” and proved it by fading in the primaries. George Bush was hobbled for a while by the “wimp factor” until he yelled at Dan Rather on CBS. Robert Dole told Bush to “stop lying about my record” on NBC after Bush beat Dole in the New Hampshire primaries, but nothing could stop George Bush, not even his oxymoronic demand for a “flexible freeze.” Gary Hart, the self-appointed “new ideas” man, was struck dumb by a *Washington Post* reporter’s question that established a new standard in journalistic intrusiveness: “Have you ever committed adultery?” To which Hart responded, haltingly, “Ahh . . . I don’t think that’s a fair question.”<sup>38</sup> But fairness, like personal mo-



ality, seemed a quaint quality in the cynical atmosphere of 1988. After the pictures of Hart and model Donna Rice aboard the *Monkey Business* on Bimini were published, Hart was sunk, so he said he “never wanted to be president” anyway and dropped out; later he reconsidered and reentered; still later he resigned again. “Where was George?” asked Senator Ted Kennedy at the Democratic national convention. “George was there,” replied President Ronald Reagan at the Republican national convention, but was there any *there* there? All we were certain of was that though Michael Dukakis was, as George Bush accused, a “card-carrying member” of the American Civil Liberties Union, Dukakis was also, by his own testimony “on your side.” Though Republican vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle established beyond any doubt that he was, as his opponent Lloyd Bentsen put it, “no Jack Kennedy,” it did not seem to matter. Numbed Americans watched George Bush’s lips as he promised peace, prosperity, and, yet again, “No new taxes.” On November 8, 1988, Bush-Quayle won 53.9 percent of the popular vote and 426 (to Dukakis-Bentsen’s 112) electoral votes.<sup>39</sup>

Three studies portray the 1988 election with different emphases but considerable agreement that this was a sad, sordid story. Yet the 1988 presidential campaign and election also serves as a cryptic parable in which we can discern, through a glass darkly, the state of the nation.

In *The Quest for the Presidency: The 1988 Campaign*, Peter Goldman, Tom Mathews, and the *Newsweek* Special Election Team stress the “handlers” of the presidential campaigns, those artists of the possible who composed the images that became “George Bush” and “Michael Dukakis” in America’s mind. Nineteen eighty-eight was

the Year of the Handler in our politics, the final triumph of the image-makers, the computer modelers and the gun-for-hire managers over the process of electing a president. They were, in 1988, like Giotto confronting a bare wall or Joyce a blank page; there were no galvanic issues, no lofty visions, no vivid personalities to get in the way — nothing, that is, to impede their artistic fancies.<sup>40</sup>

“Whatever it takes” is a motivational motto at Ailes Communication Inc., whose president, Roger Ailes, handled George Bush’s advertising. Ailes sold the image of George Bush with the cynical skills of Madison Avenue. Michael Dukakis, equally merchandised, was generally mishandled during his campaign against Bush, his image blurred and tarnished. “It could be fairly said that the George Bush and the Michael Dukakis who were presented for public view were articles of manufacture. The problem, from the governor’s point of view, was that Bush Inc. had created them both.”<sup>41</sup>

In *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency, 1988*, Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover are appalled by the video-game atmosphere of this election: the inability or unwillingness of candidates to address the real issues confronting the nation while they pushed buttons to run up high scores of vote totals. Germond and Witcover fault Bush and his Republican handlers — Ailes, Lee Atwater, Jim Baker, and others — for raising nonissues (Dukakis’s patriotism, for example) and for taking the low road in their advertising (the Willie Horton ads, in particular). On the other hand, Germond and Witcover show respect for the Bush campaign team’s professionalism and reveal their contempt both for Dukakis’s irresolution and his team’s ineptness.<sup>42</sup>

The Republican campaign was quintessentially shallow but dramatically effective. The vice president raced around the country from one camera-ready setting to another, attacking, attacking, attacking. And if the attacks were centered on issues that had

little relevance to the presidency — most notably the pledge of allegiance and the prison-furlough program — it was also true that they provided excellent videotape to enliven the evening news broadcasts. Dukakis, by contrast, clearly didn't know how to play the game. He spent almost the entire time on the defensive, forever explaining, explaining, explaining. And — with one or two exceptions — when the Democratic candidate did try to play the good-videotape, sound-bite game, he made a hash out of it.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, in *All by Myself: The Unmaking of a Presidential Campaign*, Christine M. Black and Thomas Oliphant (reporters for the *Boston Globe* who covered Dukakis during the campaign; they show the anger felt by Massachusetts residents who felt falsely lifted and then betrayed by the Dukakis candidacy) focus upon Michael Dukakis as a “significant loser.” The candidate’s character — rigid, passionless, technocratic, arrogantly independent yet tentative, a reluctant suitor — defined the character of his campaign. Black and Oliphant write “a case study in how to lose a presidential election.”<sup>44</sup>

In the spring of 1990 Michael Dukakis thought he had finally figured out what the 1988 campaign had been about. He then told the American Civil Liberties Union of Hawaii that the election was *not*, as he had often said, about competence. “It was about phraseology. It was about ten-second sound bites. And made-for-TV backdrops. And going negative.”<sup>45</sup> Amazingly, it took Dukakis a year and a half to wake up to the most obvious fact of American political life.

“TV had by the eighties become not the final arbiter of reality, but reality itself,” suggests Peggy Noonan. Television makes things “real” to Americans. Television induces “wordbursts” as a form. “TV in a way *was* the presidency.”<sup>46</sup> And the irreducible reality of television is selling — presenting flattering, warm-and-fuzzy images of products, ads designed to enhance viewers’ empty or anxious lives. So, too, television politics. As Neil Postman puts it in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, “Just as the television commercial empties itself of authentic product information so that it can do its psychological work [of pseudotherapy], image politics empties itself of authentic political substance for the same reason.”<sup>47</sup> The *Newsweek* writers describe the televised “debates” between Bush and Dukakis as “politics as game show, ninety minutes of trivia-tease questions, pre-packaged answers and media-hyped suspense.” They concluded that “the election was not about ideology *or* competence — it was about cosmetics.”<sup>48</sup>

The Bush cosmeticians repainted the formerly faint visage of the vice president (a gray, New England patrician) in vivid colors as a no-nonsense patriot (a country-and-western, Texas broncobuster), wrapped in the American flag.<sup>49</sup> He testified that he was a born-again Christian and an environmentalist; he promised to be the “education president”: he told Americans what his pollsters indicated voters wanted to hear. “Whatever works” worked. Bush’s ads set him amid a swirl of flags, balloons and bunting, Olympic athletes, schoolchildren, police, and ordinary but wholesome (white) middle Americans — guilt by association! In turn, Bush’s team of painters used a tar brush to coat Michael Dukakis, that tepid man, as a dark-browed, wild-eyed, suspiciously foreign liberal who opposed school prayer and the death penalty. Dennis Frankenberg’s commercials were particularly effective. One showed scenes of polluted Boston Harbor and claimed that Dukakis did “nothing” to clean it up — an outrageous distortion of the governor’s record and a distraction from the fact that the Reagan administration had cut funds for such cleanups! Another Frankenberg television spot, which showed prisoners moving through a “revolving door,” shot in grainy chiaroscuro, centering upon a prisoner who looked like Willie Horton — a black man who had raped a white woman while on furlough from a

Massachusetts prison — was most effective, for it made Dukakis's policies seem threatening to every citizen's safety.<sup>50</sup> Germond and Witcover make sense when they conclude, "George Bush ran a campaign distinguished by a degree of negativism and intensity that had never been seen in presidential politics in the television age — a campaign that appealed to the lowest common denominator in the electorate."<sup>51</sup>

But Michael Dukakis is too self-serving when *he* explains his loss by blaming the Bush team's low campaigning techniques. All commentators agree that Bush's advisers seized the day from Dukakis, who had built up a seventeen-point lead in public opinion polls by the time of the Democratic convention. Dukakis dithered — touring western Massachusetts in August, muffling the efforts of his own divided staff — while Bush burned him with negative ads. The Dukakis team belatedly countered with its own images and shaped its own sound bites, but they were less effective. His "counterpunch" commercial, for example, a confusing ad (shot in black and white with a hand-held camera) resembled a documentary; it portrayed Bush advisers "managing" his campaign, and seemed to imply that Dukakis had no media advisers of his own. As Black and Oliphant say, Dukakis's

advertising failure was colossal, stupendous, dramatic, intricate, but also at times side-splitting, thigh-slapping, head-scratching. It was a failure that needed long and complex roots because it was far too gigantic a goof to have been produced by one lone bumbler. To produce a failure this sweeping took scores of people, meetings, committees, plans, proposals, outlines.<sup>52</sup>

The Bush advisers were major league professionals who knew how to play the game they were in; they could do what needed to be done, while the Dukakis advisers were, it could fairly be said, bush league!

Months after the election of George Bush as president, the League of Women Voters announced a drive to clean up American politics, after "one of the most shameful, insulting and negative presidential campaigns in modern political history." They described the 1988 campaign as "a nightmare for the voters . . . an embarrassment . . . manipulative . . . [with] plenty of mudslinging, distortion and even outright lies."<sup>53</sup> Commentators on this sordid affair reflect anger and disgust in their books. The era of Teddy White is long past. His books on presidential elections, beginning with *The Making of the President, 1960*, made the transfer of presidential power into a national epic, a contest of wills and values, through which Americans, mysteriously and wondrously, decided their destiny. In White's myth, Jack Kennedy, the Massachusetts politician who campaigned alone in the snows of New Hampshire against a sitting vice president, emerged as the better man, and the republic was restored. (In 1988 Dukakis seized on the parallels, particularly after he too chose a Texan for a running mate, but Dukakis proved himself to be no Jack Kennedy.) In the campaign analyses of 1988, White's "Camelot" myth yielded to parables of depletion, a political world populated by small men — mean-spirited, manipulative, hypocritical, and empty of redeeming vision.

Black and Oliphant's *All by Myself: The Unmaking of a Presidential Campaign* ironically echoes the White campaign sagas. What once was heroic became parodic in their account of George Bush, who stooped to conquer, and Michael Dukakis, the proud loner who met abuses with self-pitying complaints, the candidate with nothing to say, "a not-ready-for-prime-time player."<sup>54</sup> Germond and Witcover, in *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars?* though more willing to accept the notion that politics is a game that is played



with varying degrees of skill, also note that “something has gone terribly wrong” in our elections, in which technique has replaced leadership.<sup>55</sup> The *Newsweek* team’s study, *The Quest for the Presidency*, underscores this point, shifting the metaphor from gamesmanship to power relations. Not a contest of ideals, this

was instead a contest between two men who could not say with any precision why they wanted to be president, or why they ought to be. In the circumstances, there was no agenda to fight for, only victory for its own sake. The result was a contest at manipulation, a war between high-tech button-pushers unburdened by contending visions or issues, and, whatever else one made of the outcome, the better button men surely won.<sup>56</sup>

George Bush had trouble articulating “the vision thing” in 1988, so he shattered Dukakis’s image of character and competence, but Bush was not alone. Only in the final days of the campaign, when all was lost, did Dukakis return to the traditional commitments of the Democratic Party and register a telling attack on Bush, on Reagan, and the me decade, the Republican 1980s.

George Bush wants to help the people on Easy Street. I want to help the people on Main Street. He wants to help those who have already made it. I want to help every American make it. He’s on their side; I’m on your side, because standing on your side is what I think being President of the United State is all about.<sup>57</sup>

By then, however, few Americans were listening.

Kevin Phillips, former Republican Party strategist, was listening, with mounting fury, to what was *not* said during the “brain-dead” 1988 presidential campaign. His outrage at both parties is evident in *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, a scorching indictment of the Republican 1980s, a second “great barbecue” symbolized by conspicuous consumption, garish display, and flaunting vulgarity of the Reagans. The Democrats fare no better in Phillips’s view. During the 1988 election Democrats behaved as they have in the past “during capitalist heydays. Which is to say cowed, conformist and often supportive of the prevailing entrepreneurial, free-market mood.”<sup>58</sup> As a result, America suffered a massive shift of wealth during the Reagan era, to the benefit of the top one percent of its citizens. Increasingly, we were becoming two nations.

In July 1990, months after the Phillips book was published, in confirmation of his findings, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities announced that the richest one percent of Americans receive 12.6 percent of the nation’s total after-tax income, while the bottom 40 percent of Americans receive 14.2 percent. “This marks a sharp change from 1980, when the top one percent received half as much after-tax income as the bottom 40 percent.” The share of the majority of Americans in between is lower than at any time since the end of World War II.<sup>59</sup>

All of which finally, decisively, answers the question Ronald Reagan so often posed during his 1980 campaign: “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” “No,” might reply at least 80 percent of America’s citizenry. They were faced with a new president who, by summer 1990, reneged on his read-my-lips pledge of no new taxes and launched a risky military campaign in the Middle East. They were faced with the awesome consequences of Reagan’s deregulation of savings and loan banks, what Charles Schumer, member of the House Banking Committee, called “a horror show of swindling, administrative delusions and Congressional and regulatory bungling” that it is estimated

will cost the nation \$169 billion.<sup>60</sup> Americans were faced, as well, with mounting national debt and diminishing world status.

The 1990s promise to be a morning after in America — tough times for an aging, hung-over, dehydrated, withdrawal-suffering body politic. As Phillips more optimistically puts it, “The 1990s would be a time in which to correct the excesses of the 1980s, for the dangers posed by excessive individualism, greed and insufficient concern for America as a community went beyond the issue of fairness and, by threatening the ability of the United States to maintain its economic position in the world, created the unusual meeting ground for national self-interest and reform.”<sup>61</sup>

All of which, of course, remains to be seen. But Kevin Phillips’s predictions have to be taken seriously because he proved himself a shrewd prognosticator in his 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*. There he predicted that a Republican populism would displace entrenched, elitist Democrats, which is what came to pass in five of the last six presidential elections. Now, in *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, Phillips sees the Republican cycle coming to an end. America, he believes, is ready for another political transformation, a new redistribution of wealth and power, to the benefit of that “other America” not invited to the Reagan galas. The cowering, imitative Democratic Party, in particular, must seize the day. “Democrats, having run out of New Deal ideas more than twenty years ago, still don’t grasp that Republicanism has been in the White House so long that *its* ideas — from constitutional amendments to protect the flag to further tax cuts — are themselves shrouded in cobwebs.”<sup>62</sup>

Phillips develops his thesis of cycles by comparing the Reagan years with the Gilded Age (1880–mid-1890s) and the 1920s — Republican “heydays” all, eras marked by anti-regulation, anti-tax, and anti-government policies. Ronald Reagan reduced top individual tax rates from 70 percent to 28 percent — then George Bush pushed for a cut to 15 percent — while Reagan raised some middle-income Americans’ tax rates to 33 percent. “Upper Americans” concentrated in affluent communities along each coast triumphed, as Phillips notes in the opening sentence of his introduction, in “an ostentatious celebration of wealth, the political ascendancy of the richest third of the population and a glorification of capitalism, free markets and finance, . . . [a] second Gilded Age.”<sup>63</sup>

By 1988, before the election, however, many Americans had developed doubts about Reagan’s rule and his successor, George Bush, despite the country’s apparent affluence. (Thus Dukakis’s seventeen-point lead in the election polls at the time of the Democratic convention.) “One explanation was pervasive national uncertainty about the shape of the American dream — and suspicion that the Republicans were administering it on behalf of the few, not the many.”<sup>64</sup> Americans had turned away from television programs that celebrated the garish lives of the rich and famous. They were then reading Tom Wolfe’s satire on Wall Street greed, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). In newspapers they read about Michael Milken, “junk bond” dealer, receiving \$550 million in salary and bonuses in 1987. In movie houses they could see, in Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987), takeover hustler Gordon Gekko echo Milken’s values: “Greed is good.”

Yet these suspicions did *not* result in a presidential victory for Democrats. Phillips blames Dukakis for this, for not taking a populist line. “Dukakis was too caught up in Massachusetts’ own affluence and high civic culture to promote populist economics — at least until late October, when flagging polls left him no choice.”<sup>65</sup> Phillips also calls attention to the closeness of the presidential vote: “A switch of 535,000 votes in eleven states, analysts noted, could have elected even Dukakis.”<sup>66</sup> But the fact remains that the Republi-

cans won with a weak candidate who chose an obscure and absurd figure as his running mate. That is, Americans' suspicions about the Republicans were overwhelmed by their even greater suspicions about the Democrats, particularly about Michael Dukakis, once the Republican propaganda machine went to work waving flags and threatening the republic with Willie Horton. The Democratic defeat was not only a demonstration of incompetence, it was an abandonment of party ideology — perhaps a failure of nerve — for a party which, as Phillips himself notes, seems to stand for nothing in particular except another advocate of corporate America. It is difficult to see a bolder Democratic Party winning the hearts and minds of America in 1992 against a sitting president and a perfected propaganda machine.

Yet a confirming aspect to Phillips's thesis can be found in Mario Cuomo's endorsement. "Phillips says convincingly what Democrats have not been bold enough to say and Republicans won't admit: we have redistributed our wealth from the poor and working middle class to the rich."<sup>67</sup> At least one potential Democratic candidate for the presidency, one with charisma, high intelligence, and traditional Democratic beliefs, is willing to admit the obvious and, presumably, base a campaign upon the issue of who owns America. By the spring of 1990 the rhetoric of a Cuomo campaign was taking shape — a Bobby Kennedy type of call to service and justice. In a commencement address at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Cuomo invoked a political vision that reached back to FDR and echoes Lincoln.

Imagine what we could do if we realized the full potential of all our people. Think of it. If we could reaffirm the notion of family and reject — as we always have at our best — the proposition that we can exist and thrive as a house divided — or a world divided . . . fractionalized . . . by sex, or nationality, or race, or color, or religion. If we could rouse ourselves from indifference toward the growing gap between our wealthiest, most fortunate citizens and those who continue to struggle.<sup>68</sup>

That is, as Kevin Phillips predicts, if America could reject Reaganism, the politics of selfishness.

At the Democratic national convention in Atlanta, in the summer of 1988, Neil Diamond's "America" lifted the hearts of delegates. "Got a dream to take them there / They're coming to America. Got a dream, they come to share / They're coming to America."<sup>69</sup> However, the dream of increasing opportunity was dimming for most Americans during the Reagan era. Even that bastion of unregulated capitalism, the *Wall Street Journal*, noted, "Statistical evidence already suggests that the American dream is fading."<sup>70</sup> America, suddenly a debtor nation, even discovered that its emblem of capitalist achievement, Rockefeller Center, was foreign owned, as were Brooks Brothers, J. Press, Sohio, Allis-Chalmers, Ball Park Franks, the Las Vegas Dunes Hotel and Country Club, RCA, Tiffany, United Artists, Twentieth Century-Fox, Harper and Row, Doubleday, Bantam, Dell, Viking, Charles Scribner's, and other publishers, record companies, and banks still thought of as American. "While entertainment was becoming one of America's major exports, a diminishing percentage of the firms involved remained under U.S. control."<sup>71</sup> Drugs proliferated throughout the republic, destroying the young and the marginal (economic, ethnic, racial) members of the society. Young Americans had little hope of doing as well as their parents, of owning their own home, much less of surpassing the previous generation. Americans had no national health care system to protect them. The



nation's infrastructure rotted from neglect, its ghettos appalled, its educational system produced cultural illiterates. All of this and more was true of the state of the nation during the "trivial pursuits" campaign of 1988: flags and fustian, balloons and balderdash.

Phillips reminds us that Herbert Croly, in *The Promise of American Life* (1909), blamed excessive individualism, personal and corporate, for "a morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth" that strained the "social bond" of American democracy. "The remedy, he said, was a 'new nationalism' — a renewal of national spirit through democratically controlled (as opposed to oligarchic) government activism"<sup>72</sup> Neither candidate in 1988 spoke to these issues. Both, indeed, were apologists for a social system of inequity, leaving the unelectable Jesse Jackson to address, however quixotically, issues of social and economic justice. It is valuable to review the literature of presidential politics on the Reagan era and the 1988 election. To apply George Santayana's famous aphorism, only if we know the recent political past can we avoid repeating its mistakes in the 1992 election.

In 1988 Americans contemplated a distorted vision of themselves in the television campaign for their votes. Bush and Dukakis flattered Americans with pap — ludicrously abbreviated sound bites, cartoonlike pictures of middle-aged men waving and grinning idiotically — and lies about each other's record. As a result we are further removed from a true vision of the promise of American life, that "fresh green breast of a new world," writes Scott Fitzgerald, "that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes."

For a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.<sup>73</sup>

In the presidential election of 1988 Americans learned, like Robert Frost's oven bird, "what to make of a diminished thing."<sup>74</sup> 🐣

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## Notes

1. Archibald MacLeish, "Public Speech and Private Speech in Poetry," *Yale Review* (Spring 1938), noted in A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 392.
2. William Butler Yeats, "Politics," *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 348.
3. W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939," *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), 57–59.
4. Paul Kennedy, "Fin-de-Siècle America," *The New York Review of Books*, June 28, 1990, 31–40.
5. Hillel Schwartz, "Fin-de-Siècle Fantasies," *The New Republic*, July 30 and August 6, 1990, 22.
6. *New York Times*, July 8, 1987, A-8. "Deception and duplicity have simply become standard operating procedure in the national security state. . . . The tokens of the new mendacity are all about us." Michael Zuckerman, "Charles Beard and the Constitution: The Uses of Enchantment," *George Washington Law Review* 56, no. 1 (November 1987): 92.
7. Nancy Reagan, with William Novak, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1989), 318.
8. *Ibid.*, 267.

9. Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 387.
10. *Ibid.*, 284–285.
11. Cited in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 125.
12. Reagan, *My Turn*, 104.
13. Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (New York: Random House, 1990), 280.
14. Reagan, *My Turn*, 55. After Chief of Staff Donald Regan resigned, March 3, 1987, William Safire called Nancy “an incipient Edith Wilson, unelected and unaccountable, presuming to control the actions and appointments of the executive branch.” Cited, 333.
15. Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 86–92. Ehrenreich’s summary of Nancy Reagan’s reputation echoes Joan Didion’s 1968 essay for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which portrayed Nancy, then the California governor’s wife, as a smiling woman “who seems to be playing out some middle-class American woman’s daydream, circa 1948.” Curiously, Nancy Reagan preserves this and other damaging criticisms in her memoir, *My Turn*, 35.
16. Reagan, *My Turn*, 33.
17. *Ibid.*, 101.
18. Maureen and Michael, who was adopted, were born during the marriage of Ronald Reagan and Jane Wyman; Patti and Ron are the issue of Reagan’s second marriage, to Nancy Davis, in 1952.
19. Cited in Reagan, *My Turn*, 130–131.
20. Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” December 1, 1862. *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1859–1865* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 415.
21. Noonan, *Revolution*, 261.
22. *Ibid.*, 87.
23. *Ibid.*, 65, 124, 221.
24. *Ibid.*, 335.
25. *Ibid.*, 32.
26. *Ibid.*, xiii.
27. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles A. Scribner’s Sons, 1953 [1925]), 2.
28. Noonan, *Revolution*, 132.
29. *Ibid.*, 49.
30. *Ibid.*, 40.
31. *Ibid.*, 291.
32. *Ibid.*, 148.
33. *Ibid.*, 184.
34. *Ibid.*, 69.
35. *Ibid.*, 304, 307, 312.
36. Cited in Sidney Blumenthal, “Yorba Linda Diarist: The Last New Nixon,” *The New Republic*, August 20 and 27, 1990, 43.
37. Michael Dukakis, cited in Christine M. Black and Thomas Oliphant, *All by Myself: The Unmaking of a Presidential Campaign* (Boston: Globe Pequot Press, 1989), 176.

38. These and other key phrases are taken from Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency, 1988* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 205.
39. Ibid., 455.
40. Peter Goldman, Tom Mathews, and the *Newsweek* Special Election Team, *The Quest for the Presidency: The 1988 Campaign* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 333–334.
41. Ibid., 334.
42. Germond and Witcover, *Broad Stripes*, 390.
43. Ibid., 401.
44. Black and Oliphant, *Unmaking*, vii.
45. Cited in Chris Black, "Dukakis Rues Ignoring Tilt Toward 'Sound Bites,' Negativism in '88," *Boston Globe*, April 21, 1990, 1.
46. Noonan, *Revolution*, 137–143.
47. Postman, *Amusing*, 136.
48. Goldman and Mathews, *Quest*, 372.
49. "The artists who painted 'George Bush' and 'Mike Dukakis' . . . saw the featurelessness of their clients as an opportunity, a pair of empty canvases inviting court portraits in heightened colors and heroic attitudes." Ibid., 417.
50. Black and Oliphant, *Unmaking*, 226.
51. Germond and Witcover, *Broad Stripes*, 413.
52. Black and Oliphant, *Unmaking*, 234–235.
53. Cited in David Nyhan, "Is Kaufman in Bush's Doghouse?" *Boston Globe*, June 17, 1990, A-21. Nyhan writes about charges that Ron Kaufman, assistant White House personnel director, conspired with the Springfield, Massachusetts, police union to disrupt the Massachusetts Democratic convention in June 1990.
54. Black and Oliphant, *Unmaking*, 302.
55. Germond and Witcover, *Broad Stripes*, xvi.
56. Goldman and Mathews, *Quest*, 15.
57. Black and Oliphant, *Unmaking*, 304.
58. Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1990), 47.
59. Associated Press, "Study: Rich Got Richer, Poor Poorer in '80s," *Boston Globe*, July 24, 1990, 34.
60. Charles Schumer, "The S & L Horror Show: Act II," *New York Times*, July 24, 1990, A-21.
61. Phillips, *Politics*, 220–221.
62. Ibid., x–xi.
63. Ibid., xviii.
64. Ibid., 23.
65. Ibid., 5.
66. Ibid., 215.
67. Ibid., cited on dust jacket.
68. Governor Mario M. Cuomo, Remarks, SUNY Stony Brook commencement, Long Island, N.Y., May 20, 1990.



- 69. Cited in Black and Oliphant, *Unmaking*, 174.
- 70. March 31, 1989. Cited in Phillips, *Politics*, 3.
- 71. Ibid., 140–141.
- 72. Ibid., 220.
- 73. Fitzgerald, *Gatsby*, 137.
- 74. Robert Frost, “The Oven Bird,” in Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 120.