
Books in Review

Mr. Personality

The Assault on Reason

by Al Gore

Penguin Press. 308 pp. \$25.95

Reviewed by
Gary Rosen

PART OF THE fascination of watching Al Gore run for President seven years ago lay in his obvious struggle to convey some sort of authentic emotion. A famously stiff and awkward public speaker, Gore always seemed to be trying on different personas—folksy populist, cerebral policy wonk, devoted family man, loyal son of an admirable father. His discomfort in his own skin (as it was inevitably put) became an issue in itself, embroiling him in a largely manufactured controversy about whether the feminist writer Naomi Wolf, as a consultant to the campaign, had instructed him to wear earth tones and act the part of an “alpha male.”

Unlike candidate George W.

GARY ROSEN is the managing editor of COMMENTARY.

Bush, whose expressions and body language seemed uncalculated to a fault, Gore came across as a man incapable of spontaneity. Had he even choreographed “the kiss,” his impassioned, televised smooch with his wife Tipper in front of the Democratic National Convention? Was he really unaware of the annoyingly theatrical sighs that he directed at Bush during the first debate? Could he have meant the gracious words of concession that he delivered, with rigid good cheer, after the Supreme Court brought the vote-counting fiasco in Florida to an end?

What struck me as the best glimpse of the real Gore came not from a public appearance but from a long profile of the candidate by Nicholas Lemann in the *New Yorker*. Plainly flattered by the attention of an elite journalist who took him seriously, Gore opened up, leaving behind the market-tested lines of his stump speech. Aboard Air Force 2 on the way to Miami, he spoke to Lemann about the explanatory power of metaphor, the significance of revolutions in scientific “paradigms,” and the deeper reality behind genetic engineering, racial tensions, and the U.S. Constitution. All the while,

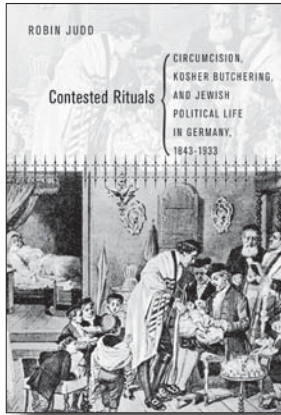
he scribbled diagrams to illustrate his ideas, filling several pages with circles, dots, and parallel lines.

Surprised by this quirky, earnest display, Lemann would write in the *New Yorker* that “an image flashed in my mind”:

Gore in breeches and a powdered wig, composing something at his desk with a quill pen. Perhaps it was a plan for an experiment with new agricultural methods on his land, or correspondence with a like-minded officeholder in another state, or a letter to a packet merchant requesting scientific instruments from France or philosophical texts from England. It also occurred to me that, whatever happens in this election . . . [Gore will] want to redeem himself from his painful excursion into hard-nosed politics . . . by launching a moral crusade—either from inside the White House or from private life.

A good deal has happened to Al Gore and to the country since that brief moment in the 2000 campaign. But the image of the self-styled philosophe, eager to expound his pet theories and to transcend the crude drudgery of politics, remains

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helpful in trying to understand the former Vice President, especially when confronted by a book as odd and aggravating as his latest best-seller.

AT FIRST glance, *The Assault on Reason* would appear to be just another standard-issue indictment of the Bush administration. But Gore's unhappiness extends well beyond the controversies of present-day politics. As he sees it, our constitutional system itself is undergoing a long-term crisis, not (exclusively) because of Republican machinations but because of "unprecedented changes" in the "public sphere"—that is, in "the environment within which ideas either live and spread, or wither and die."

The great insight of America's founders, Gore writes, was that humankind no longer needed kings to rule over them: "the rule of reason could be sovereign." From a technological point of view, this revolution was made possible by the invention of the printing press. Literacy opened the marketplace of ideas to every individual, and the merit or standing of the individuals promoting them) largely determined their success. The "democratic enterprise" depended on the unspoken but widely accepted duty of all citizens to try to reach "reasoned collective judgments."

Today, Gore laments, "our facility with rational analysis is not what it used to be," and the explanation again lies with technology. The well-informed citizenry of the past was shaped by reading and writing, by the rationalizing influence of the printed word. By contrast, for the past forty years, Americans have drawn ever more of their information from television, with its reliance on sensationalism and base emotion. Thanks to the "quasi-hypnotic effect" of the medium, American politics has lost its foundation in logic and fact. "The world of television," Gore writes, "makes it

virtually impossible for individuals to take part in what passes for a national conversation."

THE CHIEF beneficiary of this distressing trend, Gore believes, has been the political Right, whose interests, especially since 9/11, have been served by the exploitation of unthinking fear. Republican speechwriters, image-makers, and consultants have developed the ability to manipulate opinion as never before, creating illusory dangers while distracting the public from real ones. Thus, Gore writes, the decision to invade and occupy Iraq, "a fragile and unstable nation that did not attack us and posed no threat to us," was "not only tragic but absurd"; it could only have happened at a time when "reason was playing a sharply diminished role in our national deliberations." The ongoing "assault on reason" accounts, too, for the ease with which the Bush administration has curtailed civil liberties, violated the rights of detainees, and undermined the core of our constitutional checks and balances.

This transformation in our public discourse has also allowed the energy industry and its Republican allies to confuse the American people about the defining crisis of our era—the "planetary emergency" of climate change. For no other reason than naked self-interest, the Bush administration has censored scientists, suppressed unwelcome research, and given key government jobs to representatives of Big Oil and dirty coal—all in defiance of an international "consensus that we will face a string of terrible catastrophes" unless we act now to deal with global warming.

Despite these developments, Gore has not given up on our national project. American democracy may yet be saved, he suggests, if we can figure out how to take full advantage of yet another technology—the Internet. In the 21st century, a well-informed citizenry must be "well-connected." Our crucial

public space is now online, where people “discuss and debate ideas and issues” and “constantly test the validity of the information and impressions” they receive. With luck (and sound regulation from Washington), the Internet will help to restore the “rule of reason” and reverse the “shocking decay and degradation of our democracy.”

THAT SUCH a book would find a large readership among angry, exasperated Democrats is no surprise. Long before the war in Iraq, Gore was the focus of the first burst of vehement anti-Bush sentiment—as he likes to say when introducing himself, “I used to be the next President of the United States”—and he has now assumed the mantle of a vindicated prophet, ill treated by the public and the pundits alike and now prepared to declare what the god of Reason demands of us. Though no part of Gore’s indictment is especially original, he does identify a range of Republican wrongs and abuses, many of them very much worth criticizing.

But a book that sets itself up as a rational counterpoint to an American democracy gone mad has a heavy burden to carry, and Gore does not begin to manage it. *The Assault on Reason* is not a conversation with a wise, disappointed elder statesman; it is the rant of a blustery autodidact who, while endlessly invoking the need for logic and evidence, seldom engages in anything like serious analysis.

As a writer, Gore is still very much the insecure Harvard undergraduate, eager to demonstrate his smarts—and to pad his argument—by citing fancy authorities. In the first several chapters alone, we encounter John Kenneth Galbraith, Walter Lippmann, John Stuart Mill, Marshall McLuhan, Jürgen Habermas, John Donne, Adam Smith, Plutarch, Kant, Hannah Arendt, and such present-day notables as the “leading neuroscientist” Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, the “UCLA re-

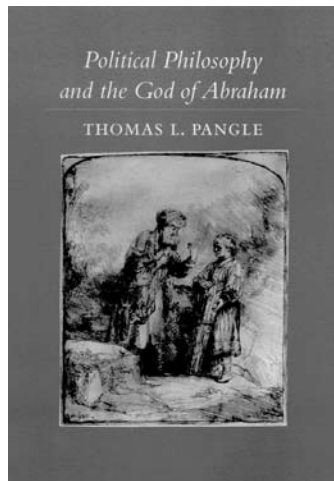
search psychologist” Michael Fanselow, and the sociologist Barry Glassner, an expert on “fear-mongering.” And always and everywhere, Gore invokes the memory of “our founders,” letting us know, with copious quotations, that Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Hamilton—even the conservative Hamilton!—would weep to see how the Bush administration has undone their noble experiment.

What is absent from these pages of windy digression and polemical assertion is any hint of debate—that is, of Gore trying to answer the best arguments of those with whom he disagrees. He spares himself this task, presumably, because those who disagree with him (on Iraq, the surveillance of terror suspects, global warming, etc.) are not simply misinformed or of a different opinion; they are, properly speaking, villains—or, as Gore would have it, people who “drive the public agenda without regard to the evidence, the facts, or the public interest.” For Bush and his cronies, “it is all about power.”

THE UTTER bad faith of your political rivals is a strange premise for a book whose declared aim is to restore the possibility of public-spirited deliberation. The founding fathers whose rationalism Gore reveres (and grossly exaggerates) might have suggested to him that conservatives, too, occasionally have reason on their side. Madison would have added that the passions of self-interest and faction are necessarily entangled with every public cause, even liberal ones. Take, for instance, the question of “fear-mongering,” a charge that Gore deploys at every turn but that perhaps should be used with greater care by an advocate who, despite the best scientific evidence, continues to forecast, in lurid detail, the global-warming-induced deluge of the world’s major coastal cities.

One has to wonder if Gore himself really believes, ultimately, that

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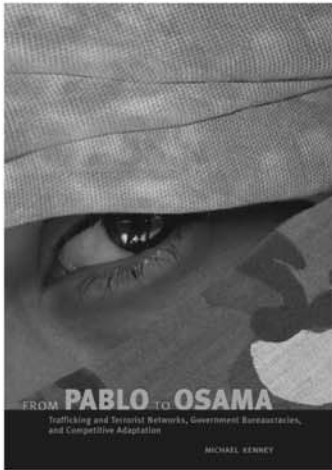
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American democracy is in danger. After all, for all his hand-wringing about Republican perfidy and the public's television-fed ignorance and indifference, his party now controls both houses of Congress thanks to vigorously contested elections that were largely a referendum on the Bush administration and its policies. The Democrats now stand a good chance of winning the White House as well. *The Assault on Reason* does not stand above this partisan campaign, as Gore pretends; it is part of it.

What, then, is the purpose of Gore's elaborate, historically naive tale about the lost golden age of American democracy? Why the ridiculous hope for redemption by way of his beloved Internet? Though one hesitates to psychologize in such matters, the temptation, in this instance, is irresistible. An essential clue, I suspect, can be found in the book's introduction, where Gore describes the college thesis that he wrote decades ago about, of all things, the corrupting influence of television on our politics:

In the course of that study, I pointed out the growing importance of visual rhetoric and body language over logic and reason. There are countless examples of this, but perhaps, understandably, the first one that comes to mind is from the 2000 campaign, long before the Supreme Court decision and the hanging chads, when the controversy over my sighs in the first debate with George W. Bush created an impression on television that for many viewers outweighed whatever positive benefits I might have otherwise gained in the verbal combat of ideas and substance. A lot of good that senior thesis did me.

Like Gore's much-repeated line about once being the "next" President of the United States, the self-effacing humor only goes so far to cover the self-pity and the lingering indignation. As the *New York Times Magazine* recently observed (para-

phrasing Tipper Gore), the former Vice President has never "quite gotten over" the "agony of 2000." Indeed, *The Assault on Reason*, for all its empty theorizing and technological determinism, reads at times like an *apologia pro vita sua*. In Al Gore's eyes, the real defect of modern American democracy is not its lack of "ideas and substance," however severe, but rather its failure to recognize and reward those qualities as they are embodied in his own pompous, maladroit person.