

The Progressive Review

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Washington's most unofficial source

We Are Not Making This Up

An Atlantic City casino and resort has installed a high-tech system to see whether employees wash their hands after going to the bathroom.

The Clinton administration attempted to rename *fast track trade legislation* by calling it *Renewal of Traditional Trading Authority*. So far it hasn't worked.

Last May the White House put four "historical national documents" on its web site. The four were the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. After the *Washington Post* took note of the curious assemblage, the White House removed the last two items.

When then defense undersecretary John Deutch ran into then White House aide Harold Ickes, the former said to the latter, "I used to admire you at Sidwell," the Quaker school they both attended. "I don't have time to chat with people I knew at Sidwell," Ickes replied according to an account in *Vanity Fair*.



Washington's culture of impunity

Power without shame or soul

The worst Clinton scandal may be yet to come. This is not a prediction, only a premonition, a realization that time is running out. In a little over three years, the way things are going, the most destructive presidency of modern times will end in a blaze of fawning editorial thumbsuckers, blubbing ruminations on the departee's historical legacy and pompous praise from the blow-dried minds of television news.

Clinton, if nothing changes, will leave unimpeached, unindicted, and largely unscathed -- a triumph not only of his remarkable political sociopathy but of a federal city that no longer cares what anyone thinks about what it does or the way it does it.

No one will have called him to account for willfully having failed to faithfully execute the laws of the land. Only a few will remember the wholesale misappropriation of FBI dossiers, the rampant obstruction of justice following the death of Vincent Foster, or the deeply suspicious links to the drug trade. Clinton's repeated assaults on constitutional and other citizen rights will be unnoted as will his energetic efforts to undermine local, state and national sovereignty (along with the political, philosophical, environmental and economic values protected by the same) in the interest of multinational marauders.

This, I repeat, is not a prediction, but merely a projection of the running average of the past. Which is to say, if nothing changes, it will happen.

Washington is, after all, a city where the two dailies, on the morning after Marv Albert's guilty plea, chose not to consider, for example, any insights that could be gained into the sleazy ways of the rich and famous but rather how Albert might most speedily recover and resume his career. In short, they instinctively identified with the powerful assailant rather than with the weak victim. The *Post* even used Dick Morris as one of its moral authorities.

CAN MARV ALBERT EVER REBOUND worried the *Post's* Style section. The answer was in the *Washington Times*: ALBERT COULD REHABILITATE HIMSELF WITH BIG DOSE OF HUMILITY.

Washington is also a city in which what used to be called the opposition hardly exists anymore. As Gore Vidal has said, we now have one party with two right wings. And they use the same contributor mailing lists.

When it comes time for one party to investigate the other, sudden lapses occur as when Senator Thompson mysteriously lost interest in having his committee pursue Democratic fundraising specifics just beginning to bear fruit.

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The Republicans are willing to peek but they have repeatedly ducked the chance to pursue. They wish to revel without the hazards of revealing too much -- because in the end the story is about them as well.

As for the independent prosecutor Kenneth Starr, had he been a boxer he would have been permanently barred from the ring for the deliberate fall he took in the Vince Foster investigation. To be sure, Starr may ultimately may produce some face-saving, wrist-slapping, quasi-papered charges against one or both of the Clintons but there are no signs that he is willing to deal with the heavy stuff such as drug trafficking and the government's role in it, various unsolved murders and mysterious deaths, and large sums of money moving surreptitiously from here to there.

Then there is the un-independent prosecutor. Ms. Reno, whose repeated poor imitations of Hamlet neither provoke sympathy nor produce results.



Of course, these players are performing according to script. And partisan as the conflict may sometimes appear, the struggle is in many ways just an ritual designed to pacify and deceive the public so the real drama can occur undisturbed some place else.

Underneath the *sturm und drang* of political debate, official Washington -- from lobbyist to media to politician -- has reached a remarkable consensus that it no longer has to play by any rules but its own.

There is a phrase for this in some Latin American countries. They call it the culture of impunity. In such places it has led to death squads, routine false

imprisonment and baroque corruption. We are not quite there yet but we are certainly moving in the same direction and for some of the same causes, not the least of which being the influence of a massive drug industry.

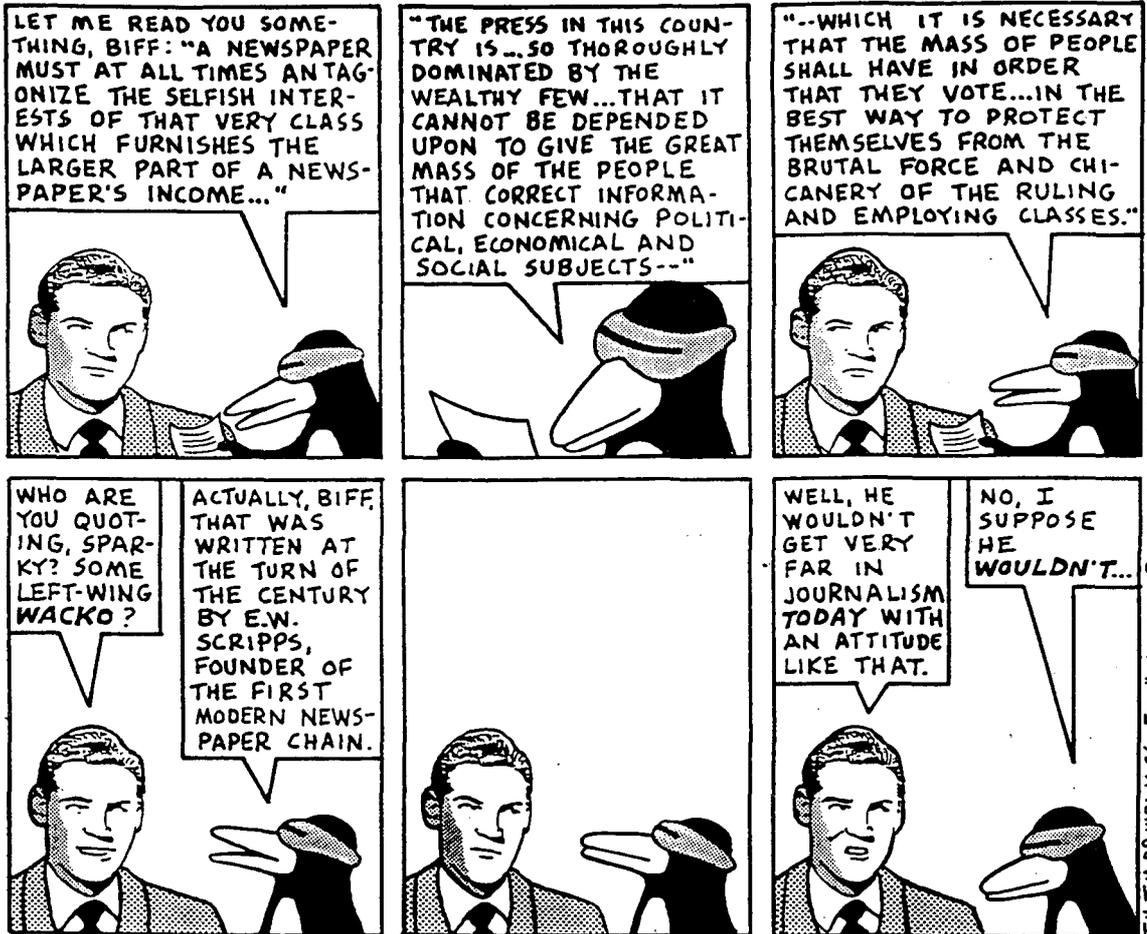
In a culture of impunity the rules serve the internal logic of the system rather than whatever values ostensibly guide a county, such as those of its constitution, church or tradition. The culture of impunity encourages coups and cruelty, at best practices only titular democracy, and puts itself at the service of what Hong Kong with Orwellian understatement refers to as "functional constituencies," which is to say major corporations.

Such a culture does not announce itself. It creeps up day by day, deal by deal, euphemism by euphemism. In recent months we have seen it at work. In one case, states attorney general, representatives of the tobacco industry and some of the more pliable advocacy groups met secretly in hotel rooms to draw up a liability settlement which was they presented to the President and Congress as though representing some recently acquired fourth branch of government. The encephalitic press could barely bring itself to notice that anything was amiss in this remarkable presumptiveness. Fortunately, the White House and Congress, although otherwise indifferent to the niceties of constitutional procedure, could still recognize a power grab and appear to have fought it off, at least for the time being.

In another instance, the President is seeking to turn over the academic testing of the nation's school children to a board composed of bipartisan beneficiaries of political patronage. Since the plan would reverse more than 150 years of precedent in American public education you might think there would be more of a public discussion on the matter. Instead, as with the tobacco settlement and trade issues, such things aren't really debated any more; they are merely slipped onto the rhetorical fast track,

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



ped along by reporters more anxious to write about a bill signing than what the legislation actually contains.



And in a culture of impunity, what replaces the Constitution, precedent, values, tradition, fairness, consensus, debate and all sort of arcane stuff? Simply greed. As Michael Douglas put it in one of his movies: "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works."

Of course, there has always been an overabundance of greed in Washington. What is different today is the stunning lack of restraint on the avarice. The federal city has become a town without heroes, without conflict over right and wrong, with little but an endless struggle by narcissistic

boomer bandits to get more money, more power, and more press than the next guy. In the chase, anything goes and the only standard is whether you win or lose.

The federal government no longer effectively regulates corporate greed. Republicans no longer combat Democratic greed and vice versa. Liberals and centrist Republicans have become pathetically ineffective

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forces within their own parties. The local bar largely devotes itself to undermining decent government. The media has lost both its will and skill for keeping others honest. And, increasingly, law enforcement, intelligence, and military agencies make their own rules.

The culture of impunity is not an exclusively Washington phenomenon, as demonstrated recently by the NYPD officers torturing a prisoner as they cried, "It's Giuliani time." Consider also that the UN estimates the worldwide drug trade accounts for 8% of the global economy -- roughly equivalent to the world automobile industry or, in this country, to all state and local government. Is it possible that such a huge industry -- alone among major economies -- lacks easy access to every statehouse and major city hall?

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