

The Worst Book of the Year

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

As the citizenry of this great Republic has arrived at that cloying season when its eminences in the arts and communications display the full hugeness of their self-love. It is "awards time"; hold your stomach. "A" pats "B" on the back, and "B" pats "A." At the Oscar orgies, Hollywood insiders rave over the heroism, artistry, and simple humanity of other Hollywood insiders, who happen to be rogues, mediocrities, and people one would not trust to walk the dog. The Grammy awards are equally meretricious, and the awards for the arts and journalism are the worst.

Pulitzer Prizes have been given to authors who are proven plagiarists and humbugs, for instance, Alex Haley, whose 1977 Pulitzer for *Roots* was never withdrawn, even after Haley was forced in 1978 to make a \$650,000 out-of-court settlement on charges he had lifted some eighty passages from Harold Courlander's slave novel, *The African*, and after later evidence revealed that he simply fabricated much of his family's genealogy. Pulitzers have been given to books that were ghostwritten, for instance John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*. And Pulitzers have been given to journalists who have made preposterous claims, for instance, Janet Cooke in

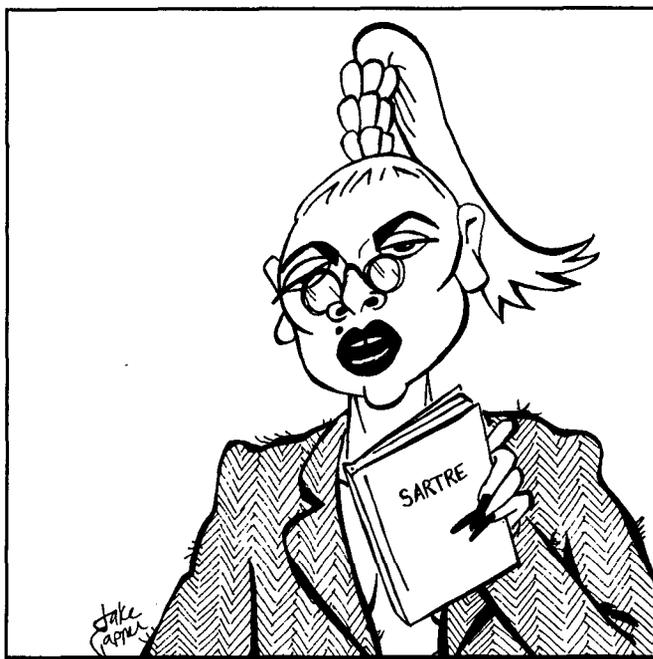
Adapted from RET's weekly Washington Times column syndicated by Creators Syndicate.

1981. In this instance the Pulitzer Committee did yank the award when the story was exposed, but it then gave it to another story that also turned out to be faked. The Committee stuck by the second fake.

The problem with these awards is that they are all so useful. They are a source of riches and influence. Hence, vast lobbying efforts go into acquiring them. Alliances are entered. Reciprocal award arrangements are quietly agreed upon. Moreover, that which is true of journalism's so-called "ethical standards" is true of the so-called "standards of excellence" in the arts and communications—there are none. What intelligent reader actually believes that Garry Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* is such

a meritorious essay into "criticism" as the National Book Critics Circle claimed the other day? Wills is a writer whose work is riddled with sophistry and contradiction. In reviewing it, the indefatigable Professor Kenneth Lynn discovered that Wills's present praise for Lincoln is "at odds with the preface to Wills's controversial study of the Declaration of Independence, *Inventing America* (1978), into which he packed an explosive 10-page assault on the author of the Gettysburg Address." Perhaps now Mr. Wills is older and wiser, but in a world of serious "standards," he would have acknowledged and explained this contradiction. This he has yet to do.

Today the only literary award of genuine worth and integrity is the J. Gordon Coogler Award. No one lobbies for it or shows up at the awards ceremony to blubber and brag. In fact, no Coogler laureate has ever even attended the charming and highly dignified ceremony, now held here in our nation's capital. The J. Gordon Coogler Award is conferred upon the year's worst books. Imaginative as our publishers and authors are, none has ever figured out how to exploit a Coogler, though this year's winner may. She is Madonna. She is a lady who has made much from little. Her book, *Sex*, was only modestly successful at the bookstores, but do not be surprised if she takes her Coogler and turns it into an avenue to literary influence and still greater wealth. →



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Usually, in the past, the Coogler Prize Committee (composed of such distinguished litterateurs as the *Washington Times's* Wes Pruden and *Commentary's* Norman Podhoretz) has given Cooglers in two categories, fiction and non-fiction, but this book is so ambitious in scope—at once a sex manual, at once a series of prurient tales—and so bad that it wins in both categories. As my colleague on the Coogler Prize Committee, John O'Sullivan, editor of *National Review*, summed up: "I have not read this book; nor indeed has anyone else. But I have not even looked at the pictures. I know it is a bad book on the same principle that I know Australia exists: responsible and intelligent people tell me so." He left it to me to look at the pictures.

They are badly done, garish, ham-

pered by faulty composition, and frequently not up to the standards of *Hustler*. From all I can tell from them and from the paragraph or two of infantile prose that I could bear to read, sex, as postulated by Madonna, is not very pleasant stuff. In fact, it comes off as nothing so much as hard work. Groups of unattractive people have to be invited over. Apparatuses not readily available in the home, the back seat of the car, or in a lovely outdoor setting have to be requisitioned. All this and more must be assembled, and still sexual climax is not assured before one tosses one's cookies. It is a view of sex once propounded by the now deceased Nazi air marshal Hermann Goering. I mean no offense to Mr. Goering's memory, but sex with Madonna is not fun. □

are various. There are the politicians themselves, some of whom are very creative in polluting our discourse. (Think of President Clinton's insistence that pork-barrel is "investment.") But more important than the politicians are the other sources of culture: books, university faculties, the media. Adam Meyerson, the distinguished editor of *Policy Review*, has recently demonstrated how the *Kultursmog* is manufactured and spread. In our culture, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* is the most popular reference book for preserving a public figure's oratory. Ronald Reagan was an extremely effective orator. Yet, readers searching for memorable quotations from Ronald Reagan's three decades of public life and eight years in the presidency will find in the new edition of *Bartlett's* just three, the same number as for Zachary Taylor and Gerald Ford. Moreover, all three are fatuous. Jimmy Carter is credited with six sonorities, George Bush with four, and there are twenty-eight attributed to both FDR and JFK, though President Kennedy died in his first term.

With *Bartlett's* preserving the oratory of Ronald Reagan, all his lines describing the momentous clash between Communism and the West will be forgotten. Researchers will have to look elsewhere for his 1981 prediction of Communism's demise as a "bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written." Ordinary Americans might never encounter Reagan's later predictions of Communism's collapse, his brave justification of force on Normandy Beach in 1984, or his 1987 plea in Berlin: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Forgotten, too, will be his many eloquent renderings of America's role in history and government's role in America. Nor will *Bartlett's* preserve Reagan's ability to summon his wit even with a bullet in his chest. "Honey, I forgot to duck."

Instead readers will find in the polluted pages of *Bartlett's* Ronald Reagan sounding like Harding or Coolidge. That is precisely how the *Kultursmog* is preserving him for partisan reasons. As the editor of *Bartlett's* baldly declared to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "I am a Democrat. I despise Ronald Reagan." These are the sentiments of a stupid man and a polluted source. □

You Can't Look It Up

How does one explain the gloomy grey clouds of stupidity that hang over Washington? Why is it that so much of what our politicians and public figures declaim as true is so frequently false and so quickly forgiven?

Consider this: Last fall the Democrats and their noble presidential aspirant were telling us the American economy was in recession. Many Republicans seemed ruefully to agree. From the sidelines conscientious economists said pishposh, but the campaigning politicians persisted. Candidate Bill Clinton even spoke of "Depression." Actually, as even the Democrats and the Republicans now recognize, the economy was then growing at 4.8 percent, its friskiest rate since the fourth quarter of 1987.

Or, consider this: President Clinton is now telling us that this growth will be enhanced by an increase in government spending and that tax increases—he vows—will add to economic growth (though never in history have they). There is no economic theory to support this plan. And economic history suggests President Clinton will return America to the miseries of low economic growth and high inflation that wrecked the economy in the 1970s. Again, how do we explain

such stupidity? Just four years ago America was flush, experiencing its longest period of peacetime growth as a consequence of slowed government expansion and lower marginal tax rates.

The explanation resides in the unhappy fact that America's political culture is thoroughly polluted with the partisan ideas and bugaboos of America's infantile left. The intellectual and political atmosphere in which we speak is beset with a thick smog of left politics. It is *Kultursmog*, in which even words are tainted with false connotations and rendered unreliable vehicles of meaning. For instance, even to call the left "left" is tricky. In the *Kultursmog*, the left often denies it is left and categorizes the word a cruel slur. Equally symptomatic of the polluting effect of the *Kultursmog* by the left is the aura it confers on historic figures and events. For instance, Iran-contra—an arms-for-hostages stratagem not wholly dissimilar to one attempted in 1980 by President Carter—is held to be shocking and President Ronald Reagan, the most successful president since Franklin Roosevelt, is passed off as a dope.

The sources contributing to the *Kultursmog's* vast clouds of stupidity

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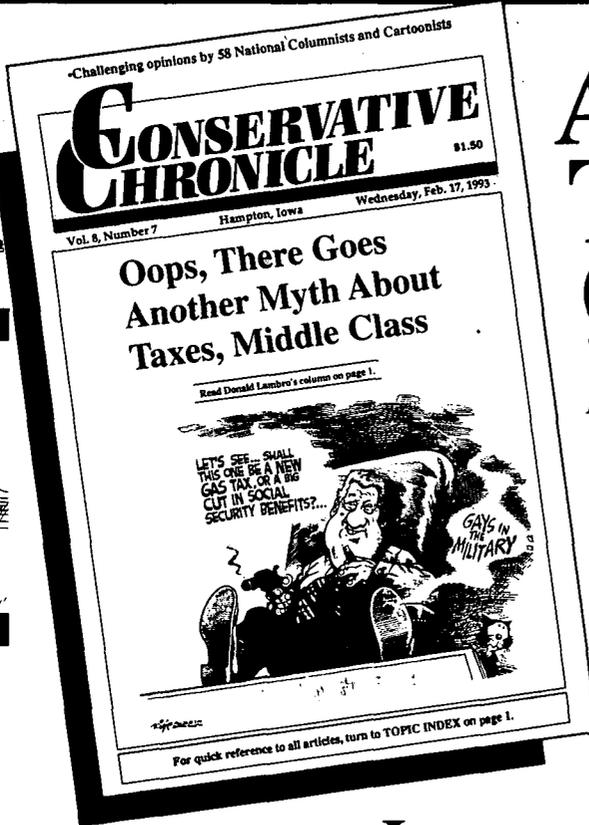
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Dole Drums

by Tom Bethell

It was a little unusual to receive a phone call from Senator Bob Dole's office. Invitation to a breakfast meeting at his office in the Capitol Building, room S230. Hmm, what could that be all about? I set my alarm.

You thread your way through metal detectors on Capitol Hill these days and, if the hour is early, announce your precise destination. The guard picked up a phone. "Does Dole have a breakfast?" (Guardedly.) It reminded me of flying El Al. But eventually I was admitted, and I began to meet other journalists. Mostly conservative, they were milling about beneath the mosaics, marble busts, and oil paintings. Then Bob Dole appeared and he commenced his familiar raucous badinage, pencil gripped in right hand, handshake with left (soft, unlike voice). In a few months he will be 70, but he looked remarkably fit and even happy, as several people commented. One of those present said later that the breakfast may not have been unrelated to a possible 1996 presidential run by Dole. What cynics journalists are!

Shortly before 8:30 we were shown into an inner office, large enough for four circular tables set for breakfast. At the end of the room was a desk with papers piled on it—a "working desk" (presumably Dole's). Several other senators began to appear: Gramm of Texas; both Simpson and Wallop of Wyoming; Domenici of New Mexico, and Nickles of Oklahoma. Packwood of Oregon arrived looking a little wan and hollowed out. One could not help feeling sorry for the man—chased about wherever he goes by these organized packs of feminists.

There were place cards at the table settings, which was a little unexpected. Tom Wolfe would have noticed the cut-

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lery, but I'm afraid I didn't. I was seated next to Senator Simpson, my old friend. He was very quiet and placid—dutifully present and correct, I sensed. Dole obviously had asked these senators to come. I asked Simpson if he has to go to many of these events. He said he tells his staff and schedulers that if he drops dead, they're all out of a job. When I mentioned the metal detectors on the way in he said the guards pick up several guns a week from people coming into the building (but from law-abiding citizens, he stressed). There was no cooked breakfast; cereal, fruit juice, bowls of strawberries and sliced bananas. Simpson opened his cereal package American-style—plunging a knife into its heart and spilling out the contents. Again, he drank water. He said he drank enough coffee in the army to last him a lifetime. Robert Novak leaned over and asked him what was going on in Wyoming.

Bob Dole stood up and named the senators who would be speaking to us. Topic: the administration's budget package and the Republican response. I was trying to hold off using that word, budget, because people won't read about it, and probably you don't want to either. That's why I gave you bananas and strawberries first—the way the Clinton plan gave Democrats a "stimulus package" (more government spending) before they have to vote on tax increases.

There are issues that the people broadly understand, and those they don't. Gays in the military was and remains dangerous for President Clinton, because people understand it. The federal budget, on the other hand, is very elusive. To most Americans, a budget is the limited amount that you have to spend for a specific purpose. In Washington, the budget is an obscure spending total that expands every year,

without political resistance. "The deficit" is the difference between two unspecified numbers and hardly anyone knows what it is. In all the thousands of newspaper stories about "the deficit" in recent months, I have not seen one that mentioned the actual outlay and revenue totals for the most recent (or any other) fiscal year. In the first two months of the Clinton administration, I am prepared to assert, no such numbers appeared in any "budget deficit" story in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or the *Washington Post*.

"Deficit reduction" is a phrase that reliably hoodwinks the public, which is why it is so popular in Washington. It seems to promise less government in the future. In fact, it means billing taxpayers for money already spent: tax increases.

One wonders if Ross Perot knows what's going on. Has he been taken in by rhetoric that dresses up the expansion of federal power in the language of thrift ("deficit cuts")? Or is he hoodwinking his own followers who think that "deficit cuts" are spending cuts, not tax increases? Hard to say. But one thing is certain: if Perot started to demand spending cuts and rejected tax increases, the news media would stop giving him a free ride. And he probably has figured that out.

But the people generally do not understand what's going on when schemes to expand government have been deliberately, consciously, and misleadingly represented as "reductions." Clinton undoubtedly knows the American people don't understand it, and the other senators in the room knew it. Dole was right to dismiss the polls taken shortly after Clinton's speech to Congress, allegedly showing that two-thirds of the voters approved the economic plan. As Dole said, people reacted as though they had been asked whether Clinton had given a good speech.

"A lot of people don't want to know