

by Grover G. Norquist



The Bad News Is Wrong

On Tuesday, November 7, Paul Patton was elected governor of Kentucky, after campaigning on a platform of tax cuts, the need to reduce the size of government, reforming the liberal state education act, imposing the death penalty, building more prisons, restoring prayer in schools, opposing gun control, and advocating a “concealed carry” handgun law.

He was the Democratic candidate.

Patton also kept Bill Clinton out of Kentucky during the campaign, and publicly stated that if the president continued his regulatory attacks on the tobacco industry, he would never vote for him again.

Desperate for good news after the election defeats of 1993 and 1994, the Democratic Party is eager to take Patton’s off-year election victory as a sign that they have turned the corner—or at least stabilized their condition. But, despite the major media spin, all evidence points to the contrary.

The Democrats did not gain one governorship in the November elections, and only narrowly held on to Kentucky, one of but nineteen states with a Democratic governor. Holding Kentucky should have been easy; the state’s party registration is 65 percent Democrat and 30 percent Republican, with only 5 percent unaffiliated. The previous Republican candidates for governor, in 1987 and 1991, received only 35 percent of the vote. Patton defeated his Republican opponent, Larry Forgy, by a mere 51-49 margin.

In fact, Forgy did better than any other Republican candidate for governor in Kentucky since 1967, when Louis Nunn became the first Republican governor of the state since 1947. In the last twenty-

eight years, the only Kentucky Republican elected statewide has been Senator Mitch McConnell, who managed to win with 50 percent in 1984, the year of the Reagan landslide, and a whopping 52 percent in 1990.

Still, the Democratic National Committee immediately set to work to turn this mole hill into a mountain by pronouncing Patton’s victory a repudiation of Gingrichism and the Republican budget proposal. Of course, if all they can muster in a Democratic state is a 51-49 win, they are in serious trouble.

Curt Anderson, political director of the Republican National Committee, worked with the Republican campaign in Kentucky. Anderson points out that tracking polls showed that when the Democrats ran negative ads on the Republican Medicare reform plans, the numbers were flat. “Morphing” ads comparing the Republicans to Gingrich did not move poll numbers, either.

But on October 23 Patton announced he was “going negative” and that it was “not going to be pretty.” It was a strategy taken from the 1994 advice of former Democratic House whip Tony Coelho—avoid the issues, and go negative and personal. In 1994 it worked for Ted Kennedy against Mitt Romney in Massachusetts, and for Lawton Chiles against Jeb Bush for the Florida governorship. And it worked for Patton in Kentucky; the barrage of personal attacks on Forgy’s business practices dropped his numbers six percent.

The Democrats found additional solace in the Virginia state elections, in which they had feared losing control of both houses and in fact only lost the state senate. In the house of delegates there was no change in the 52-48 Democratic advantage. But in the senate, Republicans defeated majority leader Hunter Andrews and won a net

gain of two seats, ending Democratic control of the Virginia senate for the first time this century—in fact, for the first time in any century.

In 1983 Republicans had only nine seats in the 40-member chamber. That number climbed to ten seats in 1987, eighteen in 1991, and now to twenty. (The 20-20 split also means that Democratic lieutenant governor Don Beyer now finds himself in the ticklish position of holding the tie-breaking vote. He will doubtless be forced to take public positions on some of his party’s less popular issues.)

In the house of delegates, Republicans held only thirty-three seats in 1983, half as many as the Democrats. In the dozen years since, Republicans have gone from those thirty-three seats to forty-seven, while Democrats have fallen from sixty-six to fifty-two (with one independent). A few more “victories” like this, and the Democrats will be out of power.

Virginia had been targeted by gun-control advocates because of Governor Allen’s successful fight to pass a “concealed carry” gun law that allows all citizens without criminal records to carry concealed weapons in the state. Thirteen other states have passed concealed carry gun laws in the last two years, and Louisiana and Kentucky are expected to do so soon. A “backlash” of gun-control advocates was predicted for Virginia but didn’t materialize; pro-gun advocates had a net gain of two seats in the state senate and one in the house.

In New Jersey, Republicans maintained control of the state assembly with a margin of fifty Republicans to thirty Democrats, down from the pre-election margin of 53-27. The state’s average loss for assembly seats of the party controlling the governorship is eight. Yet Republicans maintained landslide majorities in both houses, which they first won in the wake

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of former Gov. Jim Florio's tax increase. New Jersey Democrats have not been able to retake traditionally Democrat seats, as Gov. Christine Todd Whitman has kept her promise to cut income taxes 30 percent. (Inexplicably, Whitman is privately threatening massive tax increases now that the election is over.)

Further south, Kirk Fordice became the first Republican governor to be re-elected in Mississippi this century, winning by a 10-point margin in the once-solidly Democratic state. In Louisiana, Republican Mike Foster easily defeated the liberal Democrat Cleo Fields in a runoff election November 18. Foster's win gives the Republicans control of thirty-one governorships, meaning that 71 percent of the nation's population now lives in states with Republican governors.

Elsewhere, conservative Republican mayor Tom Fetzter was re-elected with a 60-percent margin in Raleigh, North Carolina, a city full of students and state workers that has never been carried by Ronald Reagan or Jesse Helms. Raleigh voters also gave Fetzter a majority of the city council for the first time. In Indianapolis, popular Republican mayor Stephen Goldsmith won re-election with 56 percent of the vote, giving him a nice platform for his expected 1996 gubernatorial run.

Louisiana voters also passed term limits on state legislators by a margin of 75 percent to 25 percent, but Mississippi gave term limits a rare defeat, voting down an initiative (54-46) that would have limited the terms of local elected and appointed officials as well as state legislators. The Farm Bureau of Mississippi funded the strong opposition campaign, which was joined by (surprisingly) Trent Lott and (not surprisingly) the establishmentarian Thad Cochran.

If you still need confirmation that the Republican Party is the party of the future, you need only follow the money. In the first six months of 1993, political action committees contributed \$20.3 million to Democratic candidates and only \$11.2 million to Republicans. In the first six months of 1995 Republicans received \$23 million, while Democrats pocketed only \$11.7 million. Individuals have also shifted their giving patterns. In the first six months of 1993, individual contributors gave \$23.8

million to the Democrats and \$19.2 million to Republicans. In the first six months of 1995, individuals gave \$57 million to Republicans and \$20.9 million to Democrats. At the presidential level, Bill Clinton may have already reached the \$26 million ceiling in funds raised for his re-election run, which isn't surprising for an incumbent. What's overlooked is that the entire Republican presidential field has already raised an estimated \$70 million. Such fundraising dynamism can only mean one thing: continued GOP gains in future elections.

Meanwhile, Democrats continue to leave their party or retire. Four days before the mid-term election, Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour flew to Texas to attend a ceremony welcoming fourteen local party-switchers into the GOP, making a grand total of fifty-one Texas switchers—and 158 party-switchers nationwide—since Bill Clinton's election. One week later, Rep. Mike Parker of Mississippi made official his long-anticipated jump to the Republican Party. Two more Texas congressmen may soon join the

GOP, and one unexpected Democratic congressman from a neighboring state asked to meet with Newt Gingrich the day after the mid-term election.

To make things bleaker still for the hobbling Democratic Party, an unprecedented eight of their senators, along with twelve members of the House, have announced their retirement. The mounting number of switchers and retirements makes it very difficult for them to take back the House, and almost mathematically impossible for them to recapture the Senate.

These stinging setbacks come at what should have been the Democrats' finest hour. They were in the middle of a media-assisted attack on the GOP budget and a scare campaign on Medicare. But the 1996 presidential and congressional elections will take place after the Republican budget has passed largely as written, and the scare campaign of the Democrats will have been proved false. Looking back from post-election 1996, they may remember their relatively mild losses in November as the good old days. ❧

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by James Bowman

Bad Verse Conditions

On the release of *The Crossing Guard*, Sean Penn, who wrote, directed, and co-produced the film, was profiled in the Sunday *New York Times* as the kind of *enfant terrible* whose temper tantrums and bad behavior are supposed to betoken sensitivity and artistic greatness. Anjelica Huston, one of its co-stars, was quoted as saying: "Look, Sean is a poet and not a simple person. There's a certain male mythology about him, a mixture of tenderness and pugnaciousness that's prevalent in the Irish and causes them to stay up late drinking whisky, writing poetry, getting into fights and falling in love with cool, blond women who'll drive them crazy."

Now, is Sean Penn actually counting syllables over the whisky bottle of an evening? I very much doubt it. This "poetry" is just a makeweight—something to be assumed along with the drinking and fighting and lovemaking and craziness that are traditionally associated with being a poet. Penn makes the same assumption in the film. Jack Nicholson plays a jeweler called Freddy whose daughter was hit and killed by a drunk driver six years before. He is now only able to express his grief by drinking and fighting and womanizing on a truly poetic scale. Of course, it helps that Nicholson has built his career on the portrayal of characters in whom boorish or thuggish behavior is meant to betoken sensitivity and a poetic nature.

As the film opens, the man who killed the child, John Booth (David Morse), is just getting out of prison, where he has served a sentence for manslaughter. Freddy is determined to kill him. But Booth is also a sensitive and poetic soul, although no longer the hell-raiser that his one-time

victim and would-be killer is. He hangs out with a crowd of artists and folk-singers who look as if they have arrived through a time-warp from the 1960's. Quiet, intense, and guilt-ridden, he is given to saying philosophical things like "I think we all know something about confinement." Heavy! But all this poetry, both of the carousing and the non-carousing kind, finally achieves a merely therapeutic resolution. Nowadays, I guess, the poet does not so often drink or fight or rhyme himself to death as he used to; nowadays he goes all too gently into that good night.

This development may be welcome from a hygienic and socially responsible point of view, but artistically it is unsatisfying and anticlimactic. Back when the romantic myth of the disolute, the violent, the rebellious, the hard-living and early-dying poet was young, it was a very different story. In *Total Eclipse*, Agnieszka Holland tries to recapture the spirit of those days by re-telling the story of Verlaine (David Thewlis) and Rimbaud (Leonardo DiCaprio)—a story that, in English-speaking countries anyway, is far better known than the poetry of either of them. The film will not change this regrettable fact. If Holland is interested in the poetry as poetry, she does not convey her interest to the viewer. Perhaps because the poetry is in French and the film is in English, she thought it more diplomatic to confine herself to the lives and let the works remain as closed a book as they already are to the average film-goer.

In any case, this is what she does. Once again, boorish, violent, and self-destructive behavior stands as a synecdoche for poetry that we must take on faith. True, we are given brief snatches of poetic-sounding language and Rimbaud's poetic credo: "Harden up; reject romanticism; aban-

don rhetoric; get it right." But the poetic quotations are too brief to do more than establish an ambiance, and the credo is laughably inaccurate. Reject romanticism, indeed! This from the man we see urinating on a fellow poet whose verses he thinks too "bourgeois" and conventional! Such creative criticism is meant, like Jack Nicholson's drinking and ill-treatment of women, as a hallmark of that ultimate romantic value, personal authenticity: Here is a man whose feelings are too powerful to be masked by the conventions of politeness or consideration. Here is a poet!

At least these poets, whose words we owe to the playwright Christopher Hampton, come to satisfyingly poetic ends: Rimbaud dies young in the Ethiopian desert, and Verlaine is well on the way to death by absinthe when we bid him a fond farewell. But Hampton is not yet finished with us. Having written *Total Eclipse* he slipped into the director's chair for *Carrington*, whose version of British *artistes* contrasts interestingly with the French of Holland's film. The French are revolutionaries: dangerous, unconventional, violent, provocative. The English are, by comparison, polite, sophisticated, and admirably unwilling to call too much attention to themselves. There is less of the theatrical about their defiance of convention, more of the clubbish and self-indulgent. But the romance of authenticity is just as much the story of their lives.

It has to be said that the film is worth seeing just for the performance of Jonathan Pryce as Lytton Strachey, whose *bon mots* ("Ottoline is like the Eiffel Tower: she's very silly but she affords excellent views") have long been preserved against the day when he should be resurrected on film by such a skillful actor. Moreover, the strange relationship

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