

POLITICS

Everything Old
Is New Again

by Janet Scott Barlow

Maureen Dowd, premier columnist for the *New York Times*, is possessed of a rare professional gift: She can be mean (often really mean) and funny (often very funny) at the same time. What's more, her potent powers of observation and sheer talent as a writer usually combine to mitigate her predictable Washington cynicism.

But with the election of George W. Bush, Maureen Dowd is behaving like a writer off her feed. She is not all that mean lately, and not all that funny, either. And she's certainly not very incisive. What she is, it seems, is bothered—*invested*. And for a writer like Dowd, one whose every column is a precarious balance between humor and criticism, being bothered, being invested—caring—is like throwing a fistful of salt into a delicately seasoned sauce: It's ruination.

I have no idea what kind of President George W. Bush will become; but he is already an interesting public presence because he has demonstrated that it's possible for Maureen Dowd, the woman who had the Clintons' number like no one else, to miss the point and miss it completely. One of the many fascinating consequences of the 2000 election is that, for the first time, Dowd's surveys of the political landscape reflect not the faintest understanding of the view. In other words, the sharpest gal around just doesn't get it. Over the years, Dowd's columns have been great, and they've been lousy; she's been right, and she's been wrong. But never has she looked silly—until now. An examination of the reasons behind this turn of events yields revelations that are signified by, but far more important than, the thinking of the *New York Times*' most talked-about columnist.

In early January, Maureen Dowd wrote a piece complaining that George W. Bush, along with the men and wo-

men chosen to staff his administration, are boring. "Where is W.'s boomerness?" she demanded. "If Bill and Al tried too hard to be trendy," she went on, "W. tries too hard not to be." Which two words in those sentences suggest the source of Dowd's current disorientation? The words are *boomerness* and *trendy*, and it is not an overstatement to say that Maureen Dowd is completely preoccupied with both, a fact which is revealed in everything she writes, whatever her subject.

Every so often, Dowd offers up a "girly" column, a piece filled with talk of high-priced face creams, upscale handbags, and cashmere sweater sets—"trendy" stuff, you might say. That she knows of such things—and writes of such things—suggests she cares about such things: things that are in, with it, happening. Maureen Dowd cares greatly—in a boomerish, I'm-actually-above-it-all sort of way—about what is hip. What she does not understand—and here is the source of her problem with the Bush team—is what is cool.

The difference between the outgoing and the incoming presidential administrations is all about the dissimilarity of hip and cool. In a nutshell: Hip entails effort; cool just is. Hip comes and goes; cool is eternal. Hip is about attitude; cool is about essence. Hip is, yes, trendy; cool doesn't know from trends. (And since the first rule of cool is *Don't try to be hip*, I'd say it speaks well for Bush's cool potential that he has, as Dowd disapprovingly puts it, "a defiant anti-trendy streak.") Cool is a mysterious combination of self-possession (which is not the same as self-confidence), self-knowledge (which is not the same as self-awareness), excellence (choosing and then meeting high standards), and humor—that is, the coloration of a unique personality.

By that measure, the coolest man in America at this moment is a balding, overweight, white guy with a problematic ticker and not a trendy bone in his body. I am speaking of Dick Cheney. By the rules of cool, which have been all but forgotten in the boomers' slavish pursuit of hipness, Dick Cheney is the real deal. He's The Man. (Some would say The Man is Colin Powell. But I'd pick Cheney over Powell because Powell is just a tad too aware of his own cool-

ness.) And Cheney is the most positive thing to happen to this country in years—not necessarily for his politics but for his public comportment, his demeanor.

When Dick Cheney speaks, he says no more than he has to and no less than he needs to. When asked a question, he either answers it or explains why he won't answer it. And like many of the men and women with whom Bush has surrounded himself, Cheney seems to view language as a storehouse (if not a treasure trove; after all, he's in politics), a place from which words are to be borrowed, used carefully, then put back in their proper spot. He appears to operate from the simple premise that the purpose of language is to clarify meaning, not obliterate it, a premise which, in the context of our times, generates but one heartfelt response: *Holy cow!*

What Maureen Dowd finds depressing, I consider thrilling: the re-emergence of politicians who dare to be honestly boring. Call me easy, but it's enough to put a spring in my step and a song in my heart. I even welcome George W.'s awkward, self-stifled verbal style—especially after eight years of a president who viewed language as his personal river, a president who was never happy until the Big Muddy had overflowed its banks, leaving every citizen within earshot squirming in clammy socks and squishy shoes.

We keep hearing that the Bush team is a "throwback." What is not noted—apparently because it's not comprehended—is how shocking it is these days to create a (nonironic) throwback to anything. In her Bush-generated doldrums, Maureen Dowd wrote, "There is nothing about the government President-elect W. is putting together that feels the least bit modern." She went on to lament that the "men [Bush] will rely on to tell him what to do . . . reflect a bland, unadventurous adherence to tradition."

I am a great fan of Maureen Dowd's talent, but she is an example of what can happen when you spend too much time thinking that cashmere sweaters represent anything other than a really expensive way to keep warm. The "boomerness" she misses in George W. Bush occupies so large a place in her own persona that it blinds her to the nature of our

current culture. The fact is, we live in times that are so relentlessly and obsessively “modern” that the most modern thing a president could possibly do is to put together a government that feels “not the least bit modern.” In a society that has proudly assaulted as “judgmental” everything from federal law to everyday etiquette, it is positively futuristic—it’s downright *radical*, for God’s sake—to be “bland and unadventurous.” And the government officials whom a yawning Dowd dismisses for their “adherence to tradition”? In the post-Clinton United States of America, those tradition-bound officials can properly be called revolutionaries.

My own hope is that the Bush traditionalists/revolutionaries have the courage to bore us silly. I am ready for people who go off and do their jobs while keeping their lips buttoned and their pants zipped. After two terms of the drama queen and the emperor (to be clear: Bill Clinton was the drama queen; Hillary, the emperor), I am ready for the very modern idea of being entertained by boredom.

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RELIGION

Debating the “Gentile Vice”

by Mark Tooley

At its annual “Ministers Week” lectures last year, the theological school of Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas provided a revealing window into the contemporary debate within mainline church circles over homosexuality.

Taking a pro-homosexuality approach was Victor Furnish, a professor at SMU’s Perkins School of Theology. Defending the traditional Christian stance was Richard Hays of Duke Divinity School in North Carolina. Both seminaries are Methodist institutions, but they train ministers for nearly all major mainline Protestant churches.

Over 500 clergy and laity attended the Perkins event. Furnish and Hays were both frank about their beliefs. For Furnish,

the Scriptures are not the final authority but an incomplete record that points to a higher authority. For Hays, the Bible is God’s revealed will.

Furnish warned against accepting the “words of the Bible as collectively the Word of God.” He seeks guidance from the “kerigmatic core” of the Bible, which affirms the love and faithfulness of God. This “core” apparently excludes what the Bible says about the physical world, political institutions, domestic and social relationships, and sex. The Bible’s attitudes toward these areas are “time-bound and culturally conditioned”; therefore, they are not reliable guides for today, according to Furnish.

“This means we must resist speaking ponderously of Scriptures as providing norms that are valid for all times and places,” Furnish argued. “Specific moral norms are always derived from one truly absolute norm, which is the grace and faithfulness of God.” He did not describe how God’s grace can be fully defined without reliance on the biblical text.

“We do the Bible no honor by regarding it as an inert static body of teachings boxed up and tied tight by the creeds and church laws,” Furnish said. The Bible must “remain open to critique and correction like all of our creeds and statements of faith.”

The Bible’s sexual morality was created by “patriarchalism,” “stereotyping of gender roles,” and “total ignorance concerning the complexities of sexual identity,” according to Furnish. For the Church to establish which parts of the Bible carry “authority,” Scripture must conform to what we know about God as disclosed in Christ and to what we know about “Creation.”

Specific Scriptures that condemn homosexual behavior are “simply no longer credible,” Furnish claimed. “None can stand unchallenged given what modern research is teaching us about human sexuality,” he said. The Apostle Paul had “no knowledge of sexual orientation.”

The Bible’s expectation of sexual monogamy, according to Furnish, passes the twofold test of conforming to what we know of God’s love and to our modern knowledge of the world. But the prohibitions against homosexual behavior and divorce fail.

Responding to Furnish, Hays declared that the biblical texts about homosexuality speak with one voice, and “there is no serious doubt about their meaning.” The argument that Jesus never addressed homosexuality shows a “lack of historical perspective,” Hays insisted. Jesus was a

first-century Jew who agreed with Jewish teaching that homosexual conduct was a “gentile vice.” If he had taught anything else, it would have been the “basis for controversy and slander by his enemies.”

Although all scriptural texts agree in their disapproval of homosexuality, Hays argued that a theological position should not be based exclusively on such passages. Instead, his own views, and those of the historic Church, are based on a constant message throughout both the Old and New Testaments that man and woman are created for each other.

Hays said that a homosexual orientation, even if involuntary, is not morally neutral. All of us live in the flesh within a fallen Creation and are prone to sins that are not freely chosen. “The Bible undercuts our obsession with sexual fulfillment,” Hays argued. “Lives of freedom, joy, and service are possible without sexual relations.” The Bible does not make sexuality the “basis for defining a person’s identity or for finding meaning and fulfillment in life.”

Although the Bible does speak of sexual practices, it never acknowledges classes of persons based on sexual practice. And the Bible “never considers sexuality merely a private matter between consenting adults.”

“The Bible tells a story with which we find our identity,” Hays said. “The Bible doesn’t always tell us what we should do. But when it does, we should listen long and hard . . .” He argued against modern studies that are “influenced by understandings of humanity that are at odds with the New Testament.”

“We cannot decide what it means to live in holiness before God by doing empirical studies taking polls about contemporary sexual practices,” Hays insisted. “Contemporary culture . . . has produced enormous confusion, anxiety and debasement in our sexual lives.”

Victor Furnish proposes to judge biblical material on what is “credible” for “modern people,” Hays noted. He called Furnish’s proposal ironic, since modern people have produced an unprecedented epidemic of divorce, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, and abortion.

“In view of our propensity for self-deception, I think it is prudent and necessary to let Scripture and Christian tradition order the life of the Church on this painfully controversial matter,” Hays concluded.

Other speakers besides Furnish espoused pro-homosexuality arguments. Charles Curran, a Catholic priest who lost his teaching position at The Catholic