

The People's Militia

The U.S. Capitol may be the most easily parodied symbol of America. It is a gift to cartoonists, who can use the dome to symbolize graft, foolishness, hot air, scandal, self-seeking—everything, in fact, that can go wrong with a democratically elected legislature. In the past few years, though, all that has changed utterly, and not, of course, because of any decline in the amount of foolishness spoken therein, but in the fact that the building stands at all. These days, whenever I see the Capitol—and now I really do see it in ways I never have before—I know that I am looking at one of the most powerful lessons ever written on the nature of American government. To see the Capitol is to see material proof that the American people came first, before the government, and before the nation itself.

It all comes down to a matter of 15 minutes. Thanks to the commission that reported this past summer on the attacks of September 11, 2001, we now know much more about that day and, above all, about the epic of United Flight 93. The story is familiar enough. A group of vermin hijacked the aircraft, murdering some of the crew and passengers, and then directed the flight to Washington. It is morally certain that their target was the Capitol, since the principal plot organizer has admitted as much. Knowing roughly what the terrorists intended, the surviving passengers attacked their captors, overwhelming one thug, and then storming the cockpit door, using an airline food cart as a battering ram. Realizing they were about to lose control of the aircraft, the terrorists crashed the plane into a remote area near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing everyone on board.

So much has been known for three years, but now we have two more critical pieces of information. First, we know how very close the enemy came to achieving their objective. The airliner crashed at 10:03 A.M., with between 10 and 20 minutes separating them from the Capitol. Let's split the difference and assume it was 15 minutes. Around 10:18 A.M., the aircraft would have smashed into the Capitol. News crews, ordered to evacuate the area, were waiting nearby, the cameramen told that on no account should

they take their lenses off the building in what were presumed to be its last minutes of existence. Physical devastation apart, the enormous moral shock of September 11 would have been compounded beyond imagination.

And that brings us to the second piece of new information. The United States defends herself with a great deal of high-tech weaponry. On September 11, though, virtually none of that was remotely near ready or available for use. Aircraft summoned to defend Washington were careful not to break the speed limit, lest windows be broken and citizens agitated. Meanwhile, fighters that were in reach of the city were under strict orders not to intercept hijacked flights without direct authorization from the highest command. That, in practice, meant Vice President Dick Cheney, who did his job superbly in an impossible situation, though never sure when or whether his orders were finding their way to their intended recipients. And Cheney's order permitting airliners to be shot down reached the fighters no earlier than 10:31 A.M. If matters had gone very slightly differently, the orders might have been received just as the pilots were circling the billowing flames emerging from the Capitol dome, after it had smashed down to destroy the building below. All of which is to say that the passengers of Flight 93 saved the Capitol, at a moment when all the President's aircraft and all the President's men did not stand a chance of doing so.

The way they acted sounds like an unlikely civics lesson from the most heroic days of the Revolutionary War. Knowing they had no one to depend on but themselves, the passengers returned to the most basic principles of Anglo-American popular democracy. Despite the desperate circumstances, they *took a vote* on possible courses of action and then formed what can only be termed an unorganized militia. From their phone calls, we know some of the reasons motivating them, and they were beyond what the most far-fetched superpatriotic scriptwriter might have devised. The words of Todd Beamers have entered history: "Are you guys ready? Let's roll." Other remarks, however, deserve to be remembered no less.



Passenger Tom Burnett told his wife, "If they're going to crash the plane into the ground, we have to do something. We can't wait for the authorities. We have to do something now." The last words of flight attendant Sandy Bradshaw to her husband were: "Everyone's running to first class. I've got to go. Bye." Mark Bingham, Jeremy Glick: Every surviving word from these heroes deserves to become an American legend.

We can't wait for the authorities. They have multimillion-dollar F-15's, and we have—a food cart. And the fate of the Capitol depended on as tough and dedicated a fighting unit as the nation has ever produced. The salesmen, the corporate honchos, the rugby player . . . and Sandy Bradshaw in the galley boiling pots of good hot water to throw in terrorists' faces. Not long ago in these pages, H.A. Scott Trask wondered whether the U.S. Army in these degenerate modern days was indeed the lineal descendant of its Continental predecessors in the 1770's. I am happy to tell him that that spirit is very much alive in our time. The Capitol stands because of what the people did, the people who existed before the government, who made the government.

Everyone should visit the site of the crash at Shanksville, a beautiful, tranquil place. You need very little imagination to think that the spirits of Sandy Bradshaw and the rest still haunt the site. The ghosts are serene, triumphant, and about 60-feet tall.

Visit the
CHRONICLES BOOKLOG
at
www.ChroniclesMagazine.org

A Third Way?

When Stupid and Evil Are the Same

by Tom Piatak

I went into the 2000 presidential campaign an enthusiastic supporter of Pat Buchanan's bid for the White House as a third-party candidate. I emerged more convinced than ever that Buchanan would have made an outstanding president but skeptical that a serious right-wing party will be able to emerge, at least in the short run.

I knew that no major national party had emerged since the Republican Party was formed in the 1850's, helped along by the implosion of the Whig Party and the increasingly sharp divide between North and South. I knew, too, that the most successful of all third-party candidacies, Teddy Roosevelt's in 1912, accomplished little beyond the election of Woodrow Wilson.

There were more recent precedents, however, showing how third parties could effectively shift the national debate. George Wallace's 1968 campaign sounded the death knell for the great New Deal coalition that had dominated American politics since 1932. Wallace's campaign pushed the GOP to the right on social and cultural issues and laid the groundwork for millions of Southerners and ethnic Catholics to join Reagan and the Republicans in 1980. Ross Perot's 1992 bid forced both the Republicans and the Democrats to make at least an effort to address ballooning deficits and burgeoning debt, helping make the 1990's a time of comparative fiscal restraint in Washington. In fact, if Perot had not temporarily withdrawn from the 1992 race and if he had never begun talking about Republican dirty tricksters plotting to ruin his daughter's wedding, he may very well have won: Most Americans had soured on Bush the Elder and were wary of Clinton, who was better known for the many scandalous rumors (most of them true) swirling around him than whatever he may have accomplished as governor of Arkansas.

I knew, too, that the major argument offered against conservative third parties by Republican propagandists—that the worst Republican candidate for president would always be better than the Democrat—was both unconvincing and, taken to its logical conclusion, a guarantor of the continued incremental leftward drift of American politics. The flaw in this argument can be seen by examining a favorite specter raised by those making it, that of a Democratic president being able to nominate new justices to the Supreme Court. Although we are always told that the Supreme Court hangs in the balance, this is seldom the case. Republican commentators poured forth column after column in 2000, warning that Al Gore would get to pick three Supreme Court justices if he were elected. In point of fact, he would have been able to appoint zero. None of the current justices seems particularly eager to leave, and the only events that will reliably create a vacancy—death or disabling illness—are beyond the control of even Karl Rove.

More to the point, justices appointed by Republican presidents have repeatedly been responsible for the decisions that have caused the most distress to conservatives, beginning with Eisenhower appointee Earl Warren. The two decisions of most concern to the GOP's conservative base were both written by Republican justices: *Roe v. Wade* was authored by Nixon appointee Harry Blackmun; and *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas*, which struck down all statutes against sodomy, was penned by Reagan appointee Anthony Kennedy. (Ironically, a Democratic appointee, Byron White, both dissented in *Roe* and wrote *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the opinion overturned by *Lawrence*.) So many liberal justices have been appointed by so many Republican presidents that conservatives who insist that Bush will appoint only conservatives to the high court sound like nothing so much as a battered woman insisting that, "this time," her drunken, abusive boyfriend will act differently. After all, a Machiavellian Republican strategist might not want the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which would both risk the wrath of voters who want abortion to remain legal (a group that includes many major GOP donors and such figures as President Bush's mother and wife) and perhaps allow some pro-life voters to declare "Mission Accomplished" and return to their ancestral home in the Democratic Party.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the Republicans' standard argument against third parties also paves the way for a continued, incremental movement to the left in American politics. If conservatives should vote for George W. Bush because he is better than John Kerry, shouldn't they also support Rudy Giuliani for president? Only when Republicans are made to realize that they cannot take conservatives for granted will Republicans regularly begin giving conservatives anything more than occasional rhetoric.

Unfortunately, my experience with Buchanan's Reform Party candidacy—while not vindicating Republican arguments—fell far short of my hopes. I underestimated the many practical challenges facing third parties. I was not aware of the often fractious and occasionally unstable nature of some of the people attracted to third-party efforts. Above all, I mistakenly believed that most Americans were interested in having presidential candidates willing and able to conduct a serious debate on the major issues facing the country. These factors doomed Buchanan's candidacy, and they threaten to doom any attempt to create a serious conservative third party in the foreseeable future.

Ballot access is a daunting challenge for a third-party candidate, consuming a large amount of his scarce resources: Third-party candidates need to be familiar with the election laws of all 50 states, and campaigns need to allocate many volunteers to gather the necessary petitions, pay professionals to do it, or both. Furthermore, they must deal with the open hostility of the two major parties. For a time, virtually all

Tom Piatak writes from Cleveland, Ohio.