

## **I Told you So: Gore Vidal Talks Politics**

Interviews with Jon Weiner

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**Q.** Could you tell us about your formative political experiences? What was the process by which you became a radical?

**A.** I don't know how I did. I was brought up in an extremely conservative family.

The British always want to know what class you belong to. I was asked that on the BBC. I said "I belong to the highest class there is: I'm a third generation celebrity. My grandfather, father, and I have all been on the cover of Time. That's all there is. You can't go any higher in America." The greatest influence on me was my grandfather, Senator Thomas Pryor Gore. That's his chair. Not from the Senate. From his office. He was blind from the age of ten. He would plot in that chair. He made Wilson president twice rocking away in that thing.

**Q.** He's denounced by Teddy Roosevelt in *Empire*.

**A.** Yes. T.R. didn't like anything about him. But T.P.G. was only 36, I think, when he came to the Senate. He was a Populist who finally joined the Democratic Party. They all did. He helped write the constitution of the state of Oklahoma, which is the only socialist state constitution. He was school of Bryan: anti-bank, anti-Eastern, anti-railroads, anti-war. Also anti-black and anti-Jew- what they now call nativist. But he was not a crude figure like Tom Watson or the sainted Huey. He was a very literary man. So his prejudices were all low-keyed, except the hatred of the rich and the banks—because farmers suffered at the hands of capital that was in the East. They had no capital; only land and lousy crops. He was a tribune of those people. As he got older he got more and more conservative; later he wrote the oil depletion allowance. But he was honest personally. When he died, he was far from being a millionaire, which most Oklahoma senators are—with the exception of the sainted Fred Harris.

**Q.** I gather you were not on the Left as a young man.

**A.** No. I was very much on the Right. I was a practical politician. This is very hard to describe, particularly in a journal like yours, where ideology and political thought matter. They don't care if you are brought up in a political family, with every intention of being a politician, which I had. There's no such thing as ideology. You have, as the Marxists would say, a structural response to things. You have class responses, which, as a kid, I was not about to start analyzing. But I

thought of the world in practical terms. I knew how politics worked, which the theoreticians and the people who learn about politics in school never quite grasp. I knew that it didn't make any difference what your positions were, the game was power. I was, to use the boring word, pragmatic. That's how you get elected.

My first political activity: I was America First at Exeter when I was 14. My guru in Washington was Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who was a maniac on the subject. I knew a lot of the leading

America Firsters. I did not see why we should go into a European war because I saw it in terms of the First World War, and I still believe we should never have gone into that war, which my grandfather nobly opposed. Of course we didn't know anything about Hitler at the time—I'm speaking now of 1939 and 1940. In 1941 it all changed. The Japanese attacked us and I enlisted in the army at the age of 17 as a private.

**Q.** What happened between your America First days at Exeter and your work on the national security state and the American empire in the 70s?

**A.** I suppose it was an evolution. In 1948 I wanted to go into politics and I was all set to establish residency in New Mexico, whose governor was a good friend of my grandfather's; I would have been put on the ballot as a presidential elector in the 1948 election, and, as I have an Hispanic name—although my family is from the Alps—plus help of the governor and his machine, I was all set to start out and have a conventional political career. But I'd written *The City and the Pillar*, which described the life of a young man who was gay.

Now I must make a decision: am I going to publish this book and get into a lot of trouble, or, shall I suppress the book and go out to New Mexico and settle in Santa Fe and, in due course, go to the House and the Senate and whatever might happen. I made a decision. I think that is what we call a radicalizing decision.

**Q.** Then you would say sexual politics played a part in your radicalization?

**A.** It played a crucial part. You see, my first two books had been greatly admired; the New York Times thought I was wonderful.

**Q.** So you were not prepared for the response to *The City and the Pillar*.

**A.** I knew it was going to be rough. Luckily, being brought up in a public family I could handle that rather more easily, I think, than somebody who is shy.

**Q.** What do you mean, it was "rough?"

**A.** You must remember I was highly praised at 19 and 20 for the first two books,

particularly the first one [*Williwaw*]. That was one of the first war novels. There were four or five of us young war lions, and we were the toast of the country. Then I published *The City and the Pillar* and I hardly get a good review in the United States. I'm totally blacked out for my next five books by the New York Times. The daily reviewer said he would never read, much less review me again, and five books went unnoticed by him, by Time, by Newsweek. I had been demonized. Once you're a demon in our society you are ignored until you, somehow, become unavoidable. Then you are trivialized.

I had taken on the whole establishment of a pretty rustic country and said "Fuck you, you've got sex all wrong." Thus, I found my role. I exist to say, "No, that isn't the way it is," or "What you believe to be true is not true for the following reasons." I am a master of the obvious. I mean, if there's a hole in the road, I will, viciously, outrageously, say there's a hole in the road and if you don't fill it in you'll break the axle of your car. One is not loved for being helpful. So my radicalization begins with *The City and the Pillar*.

When I was blacked out, I saw the powers of censorship in a free land and that made me a little cynical about freedom. I was told by Harvey Breit of the New York Times—a good friend of mine, he was number two at the book section—that "anything you publish will not be reviewed in the daily and you'll get a bad review on Sunday. Why don't you do something else or write under a pseudonym." So I did both. I wrote Edgar Box books in '52, published them over the next years.

**Q.** What is this?

**A.** Edgar Box: three mystery stories that were very successful, published in every language. One of them is out again in Italy this month. Rave reviews in the New York Times. Twenty years later I brought them out under my own name and the Times slammed them.

But that wasn't enough to live on. Then in 1954 *Messiah*, the best of my early books, came out; it was barely reviewed here. I was getting a fine press in England, and other countries, but nothing in freedom's land. So I went into television. Although the New York Times still didn't like me, they didn't take television very seriously and it doesn't make much difference whether you got a good review or not. From '54 to '64, I wrote television; I wrote movies; I had two hit plays back-to-back on Broadway, which is fairly rare. Lester Markel, who ran the Sunday section at the Times, was so affronted by the success of my play *The Best Man* that he called up four different writers to write an axe job. One of them was Richard Rovere; Murray Kempton was another, and finally, Douglass Cater wrote a tepid piece. From '54 to '64 I made enough money for the rest of my life, which gave me an independence that the John Updike Chair of Quality Lit at

Rutgers would not. In my busy decade I wrote, I think, 100 television plays, about 12 movies, three Broadway plays, and started writing essays.

In my long, roundabout way, I'm answering your question. After *The City and the Pillar*, the next radicalizing thing was Joe McCarthy, watching the blacklist in operation. I wasn't directly affected because I almost never joined anything. I was also the wrong age to have been a Communist, and probably the wrong class as well. If I had been ten years older I might have been a Communist, but I wasn't. But I was horrified to see friends in television—writers, actors—not be allowed to work. With every play, the producer would have to submit every name of those involved to the network for approval. The process was inscrutable, more suitable to an Eastern Paradise than bravery's home.

I was deeply pissed off. So I decided that I would do an anti-McCarthy play on Philco-Goodyear Playhouse: something called "A Sense of Justice." The plot concerned a boss of a state played by E.G. Marshall. A young man decides to kill him out of a sense of justice. He's never met him, has nothing personal against him, but the young man sees him as a figure of great evil. He comes to kill him; and so on. It was very effective television. It caused quite a stir. Everyone got the McCarthy analogy. NBC was going to redo it the next summer; then—what else?—it was cancelled. So now we have two steps towards radicalization.

In 1960, I ran for Congress in upstate New York. By then I didn't have to worry about money anymore and it was partly a lark. A friend of mine, Kennedy, was running for President.

**Q.** You did a lot better than JFK in your district.

**A.** I ran 20,000 votes ahead of him, yes. And I carried every town. I carried Poughkeepsie, Kingston, Catskill, and Hudson. But the countryside made the difference in those days. The problem was Jack at the head of the ticket. If he hadn't been running, I would have been elected. That was old-fashioned politics. I quite enjoyed myself, but then I went back to novel-writing with Julian.

**Q.** You ran as a liberal Democrat?

**A.** I was the nominee of the Democratic and Liberal parties, yes. But there was no such thing as a real liberal Democrat. Jack was a very conservative politician, and I was much the same, as Al Lowenstein discovered. I think my campaign was the first he worked on. The 29th was the biggest district in the state. I had been working at it for five years before I ran. Judge Hawkins, the Democratic chairman of Dutchess County, and I had put together a little organization. We had a hand in picking candidates here and there. There was not much in the way of liberal politics then. I wanted to clean up the Hudson River. I was premature with that. I

also wanted recognition of Red China. Eleanor Roosevelt said, “For God’s sake don’t say that because there will be nothing but trouble from the China Lobby.” I said, “I don’t think anybody will mind,” and she said, “At least say ‘If they conform to the United Nations rules,’” so I used that dim formula.

I came up with the idea of the Peace Corps instead of military service. Of course it never occurred to me to ask what in the name of God we’re doing with universal military conscription in peacetime. I hadn’t thought that through. But I did think there should be alternatives to military service. So I came up with that idea and it was passed on to Jack by Harrison Williams, Senator from New Jersey. Jack then put it in a speech at San Francisco and that’s how it got started. That was about all I did.

**Q.** Was there any gay-baiting in this campaign?

**A.** Even then it was considered bad karma to fuck around with old Gore. But just to be safe I had something on every politician and publisher in the district. There was one old newspaper publisher up in Columbia County, the most conservative of the five counties. He was making some giggly hints about me, and he was also having an affair with his son’s wife. So after he took one particular swipe at me, I went on the radio in Hudson, the county seat, and I was asked, “Are you getting any ideas for any novels while you’re doing this?” I said “Well, every now and then I do get an idea. I thought of a funny one the other day. A father and a son. The son marries this woman who’s very good-looking and the father has an affair with her.” The whole county burst into laughter, and I never heard another word from the Chatham Bee, I think it was called. Do that sort of thing once or twice and you don’t have to worry. In fact, the only real trouble I had was the New York Times. They ordinarily don’t handle campaigns that far north. But they sent a special guy up to do an axe job on me for the Sunday section. It was too badly written to hurt, but it was the thought that touched me. Like the attack on *Lincoln*, the Times never sees a well that it doesn’t want to poison.

In terms of radicalizing experiences, nothing much happened in that campaign except that I understood how the country worked politically. Also, by then favoring the recognition of Red China means I’m moving out of the pragmatic zone of politics. But I turned down a sure-thing election in ‘64 to go back to novel writing, with Julian, on the origins of Christianity. I’ve always been anti-Christian, but I wanted to know why. So I investigated the cult, a radicalizing thing to do since I come from that tradition. Then, from there to here, I don’t know what happened.