

Howdy-Doody Time

By Crispin Sartwell
Capital Times Advisor

I'm writing this on Tuesday night, March 7. It is evident as of tonight that George W. Bush or Albert Gore will carry us into the thrilling new millennium. I tell you this as seriously as I can: I am likelier to clean Route 83 with my tongue than vote for either of those people. Voting is a right, not an obligation.

That's why we're founding a new social movement, Nation Against Participation. Together, we can sleep happily through the general election. Our group doesn't have an 800 number, a mailing list, or a web site. There's only one thing you need to do to belong: fail to vote in November.

There are many kinds of moral failure. Some folks are thieves. Some are adulterers. Al Gore and George Bush are deeply, pervasively, obviously inauthentic. They're fakes. I don't believe anything these people say, and I think that there is

no conviction that either man holds so firmly that he would not compromise it to be president.

You know exactly what I mean. Watch Al Gore respond to a question: he's mechanically muttering a collage of focus-grouped catch phrases: "this risky scheme," etc. Even the inflection has been tested. His words have no content, not because Gore doesn't take a definite position but because in some sense the candidate is not saying it at all. He might believe it; he might not. He's muttering someone else's script. It's Howdy-Doody time.

Both Bush and Gore had crises in their campaigns this year, and their response was to retire into a hotel room for a weekend with their pollsters and emerge with a different set of beliefs and a different personality. No human being can actually do that (really, try it yourself), and so I conclude either that Bush and Gore are not human beings or that what they're say-

ing about who they are is false.

After New Hampshire, Bush retreated with advisors and they figured out that McCain's "reform" message was striking a chord. Duh. So Bush emerged on Monday as "Reformer with Results." That didn't actually mean anything about his conduct: Bush was still the candidate of the Republican party establishment and of the big-money donors and had no plans to disturb them in their fat happy control of the United States government and in particular of himself.

When Republican donors and elected officials lined up like geese behind Bush before the campaign even began, they demonstrated their rejection of plain-spokenness and honesty, their deep contempt for truth. That was predictable, because in a political system that valued truth, neither political party could exist.

Henry David Thoreau once said that "as a snow-drift is formed where there is a lull in

the wind, so, one would say, where there is a lull in the truth, an institution springs up. But the truth blows right over it, nonetheless, and at length blows it down." Nation Against Participation: We are the wind.

Now let me make the case for joining us in our NAP. You often hear that it is a civic duty to vote, and that if you don't vote you can't complain about what happens. But I, and I daresay many other folks, simply do not care who wins the election. There's no point in trying to figure out who's the lesser of two evils, especially given that we do not have the slightest idea what these people believe or who they are, if indeed there is anything that they believe or anything that they are.

The system that nominated these two people is profoundly corrupt. As it stands, the party picks a candidate early on the basis of how well that candidate will serve their contributors, then showers that candidate with money, organization, and rules

that ease his way to the nomination.

If you participate in that system by voting for one of the selected candidates, you are implicitly approving of the process by which that person was nominated. You are to some small extent responsible for the process and its results. If you couldn't actually stand behind a Gore administration or Gore himself as president, I suggest that it's your civic duty not to vote for Gore.

Let's say that only 10% of eligible voters cast ballots on November 7. Then everyone will be saying what we at NAP have known for years: that our democracy is in crisis. Something will change.

NAP will focus the amazing power of our collective pent-up apathy into a positive statement about the state of American politics. And I predict that we will win, that more Americans will not vote than will vote for both candidates combined.

Letters to the Editor



Humanities Major Submits Opinion

Dear Editor,

I submitted to Tarnhelm. That's right. On Feb. 15, 2000, the Tuesday after the Friday that I saw the poster, "You Must Submit," I handed in my literary work. As of this writing I do not know whether the work has been accepted, but that is beside the point. The point is when and why I submitted the work.

Let me backtrack a little. Over the Christmas vacation I tried to decide what I wanted to submit: whether to rework an old poem, write a new one, hand in an expository piece, or try again with a short story that had been rejected elsewhere. Christmas vacation came and went. So did the rest of January and part of February. Then I saw that the first deadline of February 7th had been extended. Reprieve. OK, I still had time. Into the second week of February, I still had made no decision. The reworked poem

did not work. I did not like the new one. My expository piece on Woodstock '99 seemed to have lost its relevance. That left the short story. You know what, I thought to myself, maybe I'll just forget the whole thing this year. Then I saw the poster, "You must . . . Submit . . . to Tarnhelm," with that woman with the bullwhip.

My very first thought was, this is a higher directive ordering me to get my act together and submit something, anything, to Tarnhelm. OK, OK, I'll do it. My second thought, following closely on the heels of the first, was, what kind of slutty display of twisted humor was this? Am I submitting something to Tarnhelm because I have been so conditioned as a female member of society to submit? Was I submitting something despite the message of the ad, or because of it? It's a joke dummy.

The ad worked. I fell for it. I got caught up in the double

entendre of the meaning of the word. So maybe Katie Eye and Patsy Bauer have a future in advertising. But at what cost? Is anything fair game as long as it sells? I have to admit Eye and Bauer opened up a panoply of issues here, I suspect unintended, and certainly not malicious. What makes the issue of the posters especially challenging is that given freedom of expression, they have engaged many people with varying viewpoints in a dialogue impossible had they not been allowed to express themselves. Still, I found the ads insulting.

This semester I have been especially aware of the messages people send out in the way they dress because I am taking Dr. Margaret Jaster's Clothes and Culture class. One of the major insights I have gained in the class is how, historically, women have been depicted to be controlled through the use of clothing in a male dominated society. Those

images have been, and still are reaffirmed in the society in everything from billboards of beer ads to garden supplies, even if there is no specific intent to demean women.

It matters little whether the person in the poster in the short whatever and high heel shoes was in fact a woman. It could have been a man, dressed as a woman, but what matters is that the image is one of a sexualized, objectified woman.

One thing I do feel encouraged about is that Bauer and Eye feel so far removed from any real threat of oppression that they are free to joke about it. In fact, the joke is funny because they have taken the woman as object of oppression and made her into woman as object of humor. And, judging by the response of the survey taken by The Capital Times, most people saw the humor in the posters. The trouble is some women and abused males are just newly emerging from

being victimized and the humor is not so funny. Others, mostly women, are still enmeshed in the power struggle, so for them, the posters reinforce negative stereotypes and are actually hurtful.

No one wants humorless, serious advertising all the time. And sometimes literary journals take themselves too seriously, so I applaud Eye's and Bauer's attempt to shake things up a bit. But I do wish they had been a little fairer and refrained from objectifying only women. How about a poster with a man. In chains. Yes, that's it. Now where did I put my handcuffs?

Ilene Rosenberg
Humanities

