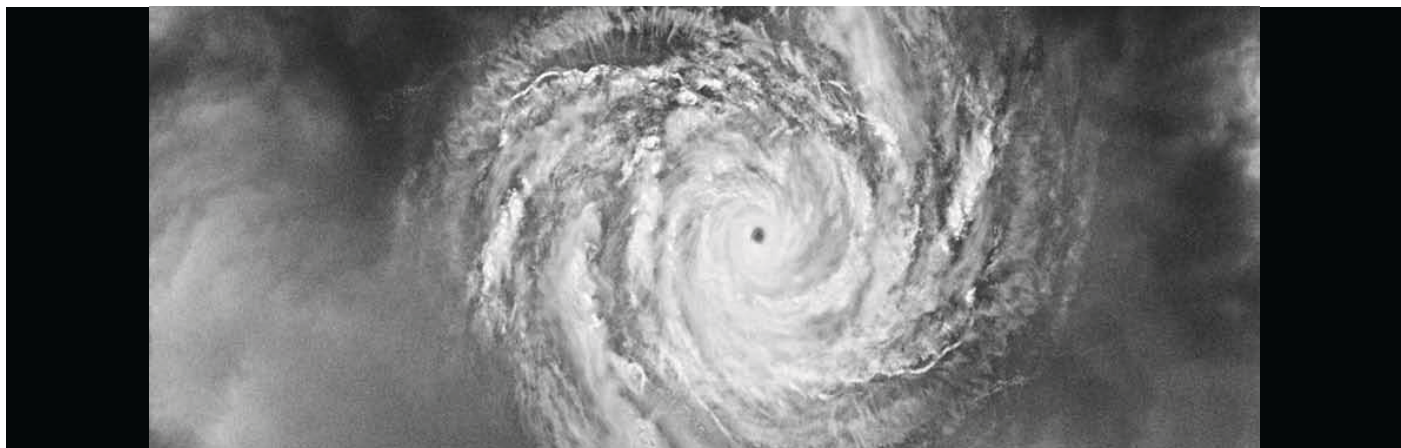


DROWNING IN LIBERAL PORN

Ruaridh Nicoll



LAST MONTH, I found myself in a state of total liberal ease. My feet were on the coffee table and I was watching Bill Clinton being interviewed on the *Jon Stewart Show*. Stewart, as you may pretend not to know, presented last year's Oscars, and came out with a very good joke: 'Bjork couldn't be here tonight. She was trying on her dress and Dick Cheney shot her.'

Besides telling gags to 1,000 Hollywood stars, Stewart hosts *The Daily Show*, a spoof current affairs programme on America's Comedy Central channel which is repeated here on Freeview. Such is the *Daily Show's* reach that the day after Clinton was on, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf turned up. After he announced this, Stewart looked at the camera and shared all our thoughts when he asked: 'Why?' I settled further into my seat, happily sucking on my beer.

While Musharraf's appearance on the comedy show did seem a little odd – 'If there was an election in Pakistan today and George W Bush was up against Osama bin Laden who would win?' Stewart asked him – Clinton was just right. He and Stewart clearly knew each other well, and Stewart allowed Clinton the platitudes the audience wanted. 'Now as you know I have my disagreements with the current administration,' he said, ducking Stewart's cheeky asides, and generally exuding statesmanlike appeal.

My sense of contentment came from being among my own. It was a place where people like Clinton – empathetic, occasionally weak, but nonetheless good – did what they could to make the world a better place. Watching him was like experiencing a feeling distilled from 45 episodes of Aaron Sorkin's multi-award winning drama, *The West Wing*. There's a moment in *The West Wing* when a member of the presidential staff

is being a little hard. 'Why are you doing this?' another character says. 'You are supposed to be the good guys.'

A Republican described *The West Wing* as 'liberal porn' and he wasn't wrong.

I HAD BARELY started shaving when Clinton was running for president in '92, but I was in there, writing stories for a Scottish newspaper. Out of New Hampshire, the first state of the union to vote in the presidential primaries, emerged this glowing ball of Arkansas charisma. As the weeks went on that ball grew larger, until, with victory, it exploded to envelope the world in its liberal warmth. There were a few bimbo eruptions, but a little bit of sexual sleaze comes with power; this was the era of the good guys.

Having covered the election, I couldn't wait for Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker's *The War Room*. It was the documentary which told the story of that victory. It had two stars, the young idealistic George Stephanopoulos and the older, slightly scary, slightly insane Cajun, James Carville, the man who made the phrase 'It's the economy, stupid' sexy. Which was quite an achievement.

I can't remember much about the film now, but there was a lot of fast walking, and sharp-witted discussions, all aimed at bringing higher ideals to the White House. They started off as innocents, the odds stacked up against them, and then ended with a great party on the streets of Little Rock. The film must have been the model Sorkin used when he began to write *The West Wing*. I remember watching Carville, hooked on his liberal fury. He was the original liberal porn star.



THE REALITY proved a little more disappointing, as we all know. There were the ugly little scandals like that of the Whitewater property deals in which the Clinton's friends got dragged off to jail. There was the great effort to reform America's health care system, which Hillary, the other part of the 'two-for-one' that Bill had promised, screwed up. There were the endless, irritating compromises, including Clinton's willingness to listen to the enemy.

Nonetheless, they were my champions against the nasties. By the time the '96 election arrived I was covering it for the *Observer* and could see it up close. Newt Gingrich was there, representing the awful future of a narrow-minded America. Was there anything so beautiful as the little shit's downfall after he overextended himself, shutting down the government in a hissy fit because he had to leave by Air Force One's back door after returning from Yitzhak Rabin's funeral? That was a wonderful victory.

It was all a beautiful soap opera, or at least that's what it appears to be as I look back. Carefree days when shiny happy people tried to make the world a better place to a soundtrack by Michael Stipe. It was never going to be easy but we, the watchers, understood that, knowing it was worth doing anyway. Great things happen to those who believe.

Then came Monica and the attack on Afghanistan, the bombing of the pharmaceutical factory in the Sudan. There was a pulling back. It seemed we had been sold something flawed. It's funny to think that Clinton was right to go after bin Laden.

The clouds eventually turned to rain when it proved that Clinton's defeat of Gingrich was temporary. George W Bush arrived on the badly pressed tickets of the Florida voters and a manipulated decision of the United States Supreme Court. Here was horror. Here was the semiliterate ne'er-do-well son of a former CIA chief, run by the bad brains of the Nixon/Ford White House in the form of Dick Cheney. Bush was the very opposite of Clinton; ineloquent, broad brush and struggling to eat Pretzels and watch football at the same time.

The Clintonites spilled out of the West Wing, staggered about for a bit, and then began creating an alternative universe. That is when it all went really weird. This is how I found myself on the sofa.

APPARENTLY IT IS not uncommon for failed presidential hopefuls to grow beards and this is what Al Gore, Clinton's deputy, did on leaving office. The beard seemed to be part of a 12-step programme back. Another step is going to teach at a university – he went to Columbia – and until this summer I had

occasionally wondered what had become of him, but never so much that I typed his name into Google.

The fate of the other players from *The War Room* had been revealed last year. They had appeared on the big screen at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in a disturbing documentary called *Our Brand is Crisis*. In it, a small plane took off from an airfield somewhere near Washington carrying several of the earlier film's dodgy-looking, quick-witted, wisecracking politicians to La Paz in Bolivia.

These were the men of GCS, the political consulting firm James Carville formed with pollster Stan Greenberg; shock troops for hire in a battle to promote progressive market-based liberalism in a globalised world. Or so they said. The man who hired them was 72-year-old Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada better known as 'Goni' to his small group of supporters. Old Goni had been in power before, and was blamed by Bolivians for selling off the country's assets.

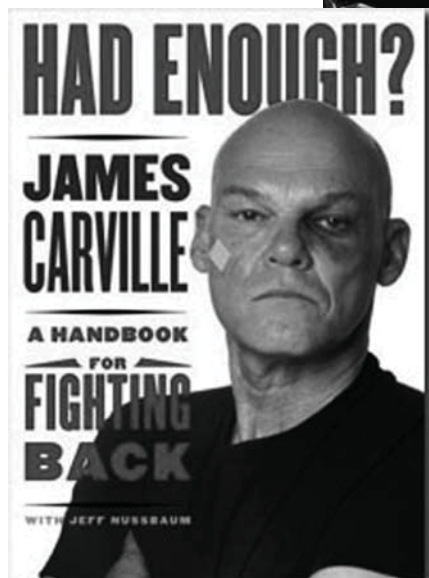
'There are conditions that democracy ultimately can't deal with,' says an exhausted looking Jeremy Rosner in the film. What I found most troubling about this terrifying film is that GCS succeed. They take Goni – arrogant and incapable of seeing that he has some responsibility to his people (he calls them a 'blunt instrument') – and they brand him.





As the title suggests, the brand they give him is 'crisis'. The way they win is by fighting a brutally negative campaign against his main opponent, the mayor of a Bolivian town, while telling the people that only Goni can solve the economic crisis. Meanwhile, the real story passes them by – although it isn't lost on the astute director, Rachel Boynton. It is the relentless approach of the indigenous Evo Morales leading his coca-growing people through the country in a grand, heartbreaking march. He is a 'populist', sneers Carville.

The men from GCS come across as latter day Pyles, unquiet Americans carrying their wonderfully efficient ideas on winning elections to the people of countries they don't understand. If the candidate roughly fits their mindset and has the cash they are there. And as I said, they won. Oh yes, Goni took 22 percent of the vote which was enough to win. And less than a year later Boynton shows footage of a young man surrounded by a pool



of viscous blood, shot through the head.

The riots in Bolivia were horrible. Many died, and ultimately, Morales would take power. Rosner puts his hands up. 'I feel frustrated and I feel responsible,' he says. 'I think the Bolivian people are being taken for a joyride by a bunch of irresponsible populists.' But is this enough? These were my dreams he was carrying, and I felt my beliefs bleeding as I watched.

ALL THIS HAPPENED after September 11. I was living in Dumfriesshire then and the summer had seen the landscape exuding the dark smoke of pyres, of cattle burning, and disinfectant roadblocks and foot-and-mouth's strange corollary, an incredible explosion in wildlife, in birds, bees, bats and bloody nearly everything else. My wife listens to the radio as she works and called me through so I was watching as the second plane went in and I felt the seeping chill.

It



spread outwards through my body, for it was as clear as that New York September morning that the world was going to get worse, and that fear would begin to win against freedom and cause the enlightenment flame to gutter. This was when the fiction truly began to replace fact. This was when I began to cling to programmes like *The West Wing*, when I truly began to buy into the liberal porn.

There is a scene in *The West Wing* in which CJ Craig is describing the annual 'thanksgiving pardon'. This is when the president picks a turkey, a scene you may remember from a doctored photograph of George



Bush being attacked by one of the large chooks. 'The more photo-friendly of the two turkeys gets a Presidential pardon and a full life at a children's petting zoo; the other one gets eaten,' explains Craig. 'If the Oscars were like that, I'd watch,' replies the fictional president.

So I watched the Oscars too. This is why I understood Stewart's joke. I had seen Bjork turn up in a 'swan dress'. I had seen her lay an egg on the red carpet.

WELL LO AND BEHOLD, this summer Al Gore turns up again, stripped of his beard, wearing a reasonable blue suit, and having memorised a comedy routine. And low and behold, I got off the sofa, which is where I'm beginning to see I've been hiding. I went to see him at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. 'Hi, I'm Al Gore,' he said. 'And I used to be the next president of the United States.' Everybody laughed. 'I don't find that funny.' Everybody laughed again.

I remembered having read a review of a speech he gave in New York with those very words and I recall laughing then. A week or two later I saw his hugely successful documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and it begins with him using the same routine on a bunch of students. It's part of the GCS credo that a politician should stay on message, repeating their central point over and over again. 'The media will want to talk about cheeseburgers but you must stick to spinach,' one of the consultants said in an annoying metaphor. 'It's good for them.' But I'm not so sure it works as well with jokes as it does with the future of the economy.

An Inconvenient Truth is a very seductive and very good film. It presents the facts clearly, is suitably terrifying, keeps repeating the central point – that all independent scientists agree global warning is happening – and remakes Gore as engaging, smart, committed to saving the world, and pal of some very clever scientists.

He was also a pleasure to watch on stage. He exuded a charisma that I don't remember from his years in government. During the introduction, his expressions cheered the crowd as he was asked what the world might have been like if the Supreme Court had decided another way in 2000. 'Would there have been a war in Iraq?' asked the chair. Gore's face said it all. For an hour the audience bathed in this dream world.

Afterwards I heard a few complaints, for it's a tough crowd at the book festival. 'He didn't tell us anything new,' said one. Well sure, he didn't. If you wanted anything new you should have gone to see Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel prize-winning economist. The point wasn't Gore teaching us anything, but whether he was teaching America anything. I was there to see if it was true, to see if a big mainstream politician was actually trying to make the greater mass of Americans understand that they were poisoning the planet.

And it was true. That felt good. So, I went to see the film. And felt better.

IT'S A WORRY. I'm coming to see this. My laudanum has been liberal porn. I read the papers about the freakish religious zealots who have taken over the White House, I read the books, and then I crawled off to watch the television. Finally, just the other day, I watched a film called *Death of a President* which envisioned the assassination of George W Bush. If you haven't seen it I'm going to enjoy spoiling it for you now. It turns out that the assassin isn't a Muslim extremist. No, he is an embittered ex-soldier. Well I never.

This is the limit. Not because it is so unoriginal – this was the plotline of the very real Oklahoma bombing – but because liberal porn has now turned to liberal snuff. I'm turning off. It's not doing me any good.

INSTEAD, I HAVE been thinking about Bill Clinton on the *Jon Stewart Show*. We know what he's been up to since he left office. He has played some golf. He has almost died from a heart attack. He has set up the *Clinton Global Initiative*. He has been travelling round the world with George HW Bush, as goodwill ambassadors



to Katrina and the regions affected by the tsunami.

On the Stewart show he was boasting about getting Rupert Murdoch and Barbra Streisand together. 'They never did anything together before,' Clinton said. 'It's unrealistic to think there is never anything we can agree on, or get up in the morning and make things better.'

It was the reason Clinton was so battered by the left during his terms of office, that triangulation that allowed him deep into the middle ground of American politics. I was sitting there watching, astounded. How could he? Murdoch? The man who had stolen cricket from terrestrial television! Whatever else Clinton thinks of Republicans he clearly believes – truly believes – that they also want what's best for America. He doesn't think they are evil men and women, only wrong (although even he struggles when it comes to the *Fox News*).

As I watched, I tried to imagine that Bush actually does want to make the world a safer place. I imagined that Tony Blair truly believed that the best chance of seeing the world through its troubles with fundamentalist terror was to stick beside America. That Rumsfeld and Cheney truly believe that democratising Iraq might lead to a democratisation of the Middle East.

They were wrong, woefully wrong but the lack of paranoia in this vision allows me to sigh a little, and breathe out, and feel a faint sense of relief. We're all arguing in great, hugely imperfect democracies but we can still make a difference. The situation may be bleak, but I can live without those television programmes, without the liberal porn, and look forward with a sense of hope.

