

REMY BUMPPPO
think theatre

THE BEST MAN

by Gore Vidal

Remy Bumppo Theatre Company
September 20 – November 5, 2006

At Victory Gardens Greenhouse Theater

Study Guide

Written & Compiled by Company Dramaturg, Peter A. Davis
Underwritten by Don Stevens

06-07 Study Guide Print Sponsor: Screenz



Table of Contents

Biography of the Playwright
A Short History of Political Conventions
Gore Vidal Runs for Congress, 1960
McCarthy, HUAC, and the Smith Act
Mental Health and Homosexuality in the 1950s
Production History
Summary of Reviews
A Short Chronology of the 50s
U.S. Presidents of the 20th Century
Glossary
Bibliographies— for full bibliography, visit website
Websites

Biography of the Playwright



Photo © Gary Stager

Perhaps better known as a novelist and political essayist than a playwright, Gore Vidal is widely recognized as one America's best and most prolific writers. From an early age he quickly established himself at the forefront of progressive political and social commentary that often stirred up more than its share of controversy and reaction. It's a position he has yet to relinquish.

Born in 1925 while his father was an aviation instructor at West Point, Vidal was raised for much of his youth in Washington, D.C. He attended Philips Exeter Academy, graduating in 1943 and then joined the US Army at the age of 17. He served part of his time in Alaska—where the character Cantwell in *The Best Man* also served—and where his first novel, *Williwaw* (published when he was only 21) is set. During his extraordinary career he has written 21 other novels, seven stage plays, and countless essays, reviews and articles.

An early and articulate advocate of gay rights, he is renowned as an outspoken critic of American domestic and foreign policies, even going so far as to maintain that the US should have remained out of World War II. His interests range from fiction to history to biography to politics. Indeed his political interests included a run for Congress in 1960 from a staunchly Republican district in upstate New York. Though his bid for office failed, he received more votes than any Democrat from that district in fifty years. Curiously, it was during this time that he wrote his first Broadway hit, *The Best Man*. It ran for 520 performances and was nominated for six Tony Awards including Best Play for 1960. He ran once more in 1982 in the California Democratic primary for the US

Senate, finishing second behind Jerry Brown. While he resided for most of his adult life in Ravello, Italy, in 2003 he moved back to Los Angeles.

Synopsis of *The Best Man*

Set during a fictional 1960 national party convention in Philadelphia, the play focuses on former Secretary of State, William Russell, an intellectual man of great integrity, decency and wit (modeled to some extent on Adlai Stevenson) who is the leading candidate for the presidential nomination. With him are his secretly estranged but loyal wife, Alice, (who is putting up a brave front of marital unity), and Dick Jensen, Russell's tweedy campaign manager and confidant (who is doing his best to steer his candidate clear of political potholes as the balloting approaches). Russell's main rival is the youthful but unscrupulous Joe Cantwell (Vidal's fictionalized version of Richard Nixon).

As the play opens, the Russells have just arrived in their suite at the convention hotel, trailed by the press and excited by the prospect of the coming nomination. They are visited by Mrs. Sue-Ellen Gamadge, National Committee woman and influential leader of the female vote. She laments Russell's intellectual nature as unappealing to women and warns him that his rival is planning something sinister to undermine his campaign. Next to visit is former President Hockstader, a Truman-like plain-spoken character of the old school, who reveals to Russell that he is terminally ill. Hockstader's endorsement is crucial to lock up a first ballot win, but the ex-president seems to think Cantwell is the stronger, more decisive candidate.

Elsewhere in the hotel, Cantwell and his wife, Mabel, are settling in when Hockstader drops by. Cantwell reveals himself to be a ruthless player, something Hockstader does not entirely seem to mind. But Cantwell has gone one step too far. He tells Hockstader that he has a report taken from Russell's psychiatrist that appears to show that Russell had a nervous breakdown and suicidal tendencies. Cantwell intends to release the report to the public if Russell doesn't withdraw from the campaign. Hockstader decides not to back Cantwell after all.

The next day, after Cantwell threatens Russell with the stolen report, campaign manager Jensen confides to Russell that he has uncovered information that Cantwell was once prosecuted for homosexuality while stationed in Alaska during World War II. Jensen tries to convince Russell to use this information against Cantwell, but Russell refuses, declaring that that is not why he entered politics. When Russell attempts to persuade Cantwell not to succumb to the politics of personality and mudslinging, Cantwell rebuffs him and releases the psychiatrist's report to the delegates.

As the balloting begins, Cantwell takes the lead with Russell in second place and a relative unknown, Gov. Merwin, in third. But the convention is deadlocked with no clear winner. Cantwell comes to Russell's suite in an attempt to compromise. He tells Russell that Hockstader is dead. But Cantwell's cold-bloodedness convinces Russell that Cantwell should not be allowed to win the nomination. In a stunning act of selflessness, Russell tries one more bold political move in his hope that integrity will win the day.

Vidal Runs for Congress

It must be more than mere coincidence that while Gore Vidal was writing *The Best Man* in 1959, he was also considering a run for political office. In 1960, Vidal entered the race as a Democrat for a seat in the US Congress representing a staunchly conservative district in upstate New York. The vast 29th Congressional District in 1960 stretched from the wealthy estates along the Connecticut boarder in the east to the farmlands just south of Utica. For decades it had been a solidly Republican stronghold. But in the waning years of the Eisenhower administration, Democrats saw the opportunity to challenge some of the longtime Republican enclaves. New York's 29th District was not one of these. Any Democrat who ran was destined to lose. Nonetheless, a young local man—a writer named Gore Vidal—decided to give it a shot. Vidal was no political neophyte; his grandfather, after all, had been a prominent Senator from Oklahoma. Even his father had served in the Roosevelt Administration. But no one gave him much of a chance. He was running against a popular and long-serving Republican, a man nearly twice his age, J. Ernest Wharton, and about all Vidal had going for him was his energy, his wit, his recent fame as a Broadway playwright, and his relationship to the current Democratic candidate for President, John F. Kennedy. Vidal's mother had been briefly married (1935-1941) to Hugh D. Auchincloss, who would marry a few years later Janet Lee Bouvier, mother of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy. He ran a serious campaign and managed a strong challenge to the incumbent, espousing many of the “liberal” ideas that appear in *The Best Man*. In some ways, the play was a campaign piece, exposing both his political philosophies, and perhaps his inner fears. He lost. But he managed to win more votes than Kennedy in his district and more votes than any Democratic candidate had mustered in fifty years. He ran once again for Senator from California in 1982. Despite claims that his campaign was more personal promotion than a serious run for office, Vidal placed second in the Democratic primary, behind Jerry Brown.

A Short History of Political Conventions

Funny thing about American political conventions; at one time, not too long ago, they actually did real work, accomplished real things—established platforms, framed policies, set agendas and most importantly, chose presidential candidates. Unlike the highly predictable conventions of the last thirty years, where the principal purpose is marketing hype and media exposure, the traditional affair was contentious, combative, surprising, and the outcome uncertain. Decisions were often made after days of endless bargaining, brokering, balloting, and backroom deals. In some cases, the winners were relatively unknown to the general public, but survived the convention as compromise candidates. Others rode the crest of populist sentiment to the White House. But for much of American history, presidential candidates were picked by an elite few who held the reigns of power. Yet party conventions were initially held to give the general population some say in the selection of candidates.

The Constitution, of course, says nothing about political parties or conventions. The first presidential candidates were chosen by a caucus of Congressional leaders, invariably selecting one of their own. The populace had nothing to do with the decision.

This worked for the first few decades. But by the 1820s a populist wave swept the rapidly expanding country. People from the newer states and territories demanded an increasing say in national politics. And thus an effort was made to make presidential elections more transparent and accessible to the voting public. In 1831 the first national party convention was held in Baltimore where the Anti-Masonic Party chose candidates from a national slate, elected by conventioners from around the country. The next year, taking a cue from the Anti-masons, the Democratic Party met in Baltimore to re-elect Andrew Jackson as their candidate and to select a vice-president. The National Republicans (the immediate forerunners of the Whig Party) also met in a national convention and chose Henry Clay to run against Jackson. For the first time in US history presidential candidates were chosen not by Congressional caucus, but by citizens representing their respective parties in national conventions. Things would remain pretty much the same for another century, though it would not take long before party leaders and political bosses dominated the selection process in each party, through gentle persuasion, aggressive cajoling, ruthless cunning and outright intimidation.

Nonetheless, national party conventions became renowned for being public forums to debate and define the national political agendas. Issues like abolition, women's suffrage, and civil rights were placed in the spotlight at national conventions. The first African-American to be placed in nomination for president was Fredrick Douglass, who received a single vote at the 1888 Republican Convention. Victoria Claflin Woodhull became the first woman nominated to run for president when she received the party nod from the National Radical Reformers (a breakaway suffrage group) in May of 1872. Official party platforms were introduced at the Democratic National Convention in 1852, when the conventioners passed a "platform of resolutions" defining major issues and articulating the party line. The Republican Convention of 1856 issued a platform calling for the prohibition of the extension of slavery into the new territories. While these platforms were often debated on the floor of the convention and agreed to by consensus, today's conventions issue platforms written by committees and policy councils, based on polling and popular sentiment, and designed to attract voters and solidify their party base.

While this system certainly seemed to work for a time, a number of events eventually brought an end to the old-school politics. Among these, of course, was the spread of mass media in the 20th century and the increasing attention these conventions received from the general public, who began to distrust the decisions made in "smoked-filled rooms"—a phrase that came out of the infamous 1920 Republican Convention in Chicago in which the delegates were deadlocked after a lengthy and contentious series of ballots. Party leaders then retreated into smoke-filled back rooms and emerged some time later with a dark horse as their candidate, the relatively unknown Warren G. Harding, senator from Ohio. Four years later, the Democrats faced a similar deadlock and finally chose John Davis, a relative unknown, to run against an equally enigmatic Calvin Coolidge.

With such lackluster results, a change in the system was inevitable. Indeed, the last truly open convention was in 1956 when Adlai Stevenson allowed the delegates to select his running mate from a formidable list of contenders, eventually settling on Tennessee senator Estes Kefauver. It is interesting that Gore Vidal wrote his play *The Best Man* at a time when the national political convention was undergoing substantial

change. By the 1950s, states began holding primaries to select delegates. Though not all states held these at first, primaries became an essential tool in selecting candidates. Winning a number of primaries, while not required for a party's nomination, was cash in the bank for some presidential hopefuls. In fact, in 1960, a young senator from Massachusetts named John Kennedy entered only seven primaries, but won his party's nomination on the strength of his sweep in those states. Historian Michael Beschloss argues that in an earlier day, Kennedy would never have won the nomination—the party bosses would have rejected him. Kennedy had developed an unfortunate reputation, both as a Representative and Senator, for being a lightweight and an absentee Congressman. But on the strength of his public appeal, Kennedy ushered in a new era of the charismatic and publicity savvy-politician who appeals directly to the public and is chosen through a costly and elaborate primary machine designed to take advantage of the modern electronic media.

McCarthy, HUAC and the Smith Act

Televised images of Senator Joseph McCarthy grilling witnesses before his infamous subcommittee investigating communists in the US government, specifically the US Army and State Department, have become ingrained in modern American culture. The so-called Army-McCarthy hearings (1953-1954) represent the popular view of the dangers of political excesses and unrestrained power during the Cold War. While McCarthy and his hearings certainly took their toll on the accused and the innocent, and unintentionally brought to the public's attention the inherent unfairness of these proceedings, there was a much more powerful and sinister committee operating at the same time with a longer history and an even nastier reputation, popularly known as HUAC. Often confused with McCarthy's Senate subcommittee, the HUAC hearings (House Un-American Activities Committee), created in 1938 by the House of Representatives, was deliberately designed to expose subversives, anarchists and, inevitably, communists, who were bent on the internal destruction of the United States. And while HUAC may have served its purpose for a time, it too eventually degenerated into innuendoes, unwarranted accusations, government intrusion, and unconstitutional meddling—and ultimately proved to be a perversion of American judicial and Congressional power.

How these committees came about is a complex and multifaceted history, with roots in the rise of trade unionism in the late 19th century. The abuses of the Industrial Revolution were the seeds of the modern labor movement and formed the background for major philosophical and political changes sweeping Europe and America. Among the reactions to the brutalization of the industrial labor classes was Communism, a political and economic philosophy founded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels with the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Capital* (1867). As unionism spread in the last quarter of the 19th century so did Communism and other socialist variations. With the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917-18, Communism found a political home in the new Soviet Union. And as the horrors of World War I settled into the horrors of post-war European economies, communist philosophies grew. In some ways, fascism was a reaction to this rapid growth of Communism in Europe. In the US,

Communism was initially seen as a relatively benign political movement, popular among the educated and progressive laborites. During the so-called Roaring Twenties, the US had little to fear from Communism and its tenets, but once the Great Depression hit in the years following the collapse of the stock market in 1929, there was a renewed national interest in Communism as both a solution and a threat. Perhaps the greatest influence on the growth of American Communism was the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. The dramatic change on the political front in Washington D.C. led many to believe that socialist ideals were now ripe for America. Roosevelt's radical social agenda, intended to reverse the Depression and to put people back to work, also encouraged the political fringe and allowed Communism and communist sympathizers to flourish in the 1930s.

By 1940, Congress had had enough and passed the infamous "Smith Act" which in effect banned all activity that was aimed at the overthrow of the federal government. This was the legislative weapon needed to stop Communism and put an end to what was perceived as foreign influences undermining America. It was also intended as a political road-block to Roosevelt's runaway domestic agenda. The bill was terribly effective. Indeed, just the accusation of being a Communist was now enough to ruin a career. While World War II momentarily distracted the nation's attentions away from the Smith Act, its value returned in full force in 1946. HUAC picked up the effort with its investigation into the entertainment industry, fearful that communists and communist ideas were subverting Hollywood and, hence, American youth. Soon McCarthy geared his subcommittee into a powerful weapon as well, using the weight of the Smith Act as the legislative hammer to nail communists. Though McCarthy soon imploded on his own (with some notable help from Edward R. Murrow), HUAC remained in effect until it was finally disbanded in 1975. But curiously, the communist label soon faded as a threat. At some point, being a communist was no longer illegal, or at least apt to get you fired and blacklisted.

What happened to change the nation's view of Communism? Why was it soon no longer a career-ending event to admit to communist membership or sympathies? Perhaps in some ways it hasn't changed. Certainly the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War contributed too. But an essential and often overlooked aspect was a pivotal Supreme Court decision in 1957 that in essence overturned the Smith Act by declaring the burden was on the government to prove that the accused had taken concrete steps toward actually overthrowing the government. Citing the primacy of the First Amendment and the right to a free press and free speech, the Court concluded that merely espousing a radical or unpopular philosophy was no longer grounds for prosecution. It was a landmark decision that set the tone for the decade to follow.

Mental Health and Homosexuality in the 1950s

While it might be "don't ask, don't tell" in the US military ever since 1993, as late as the 1970s homosexuality was considered, at least in some official quarters, a form of mental illness. Not until 1973 did the American Psychiatric Association finally rescind its designation of homosexuality as a mental health disorder. Which means, for the purposes of this play set in 1960, a mental breakdown, like the one affecting Bill Russell, and homosexuality, as Cantwell stands accused, were lumped into roughly the same

category—at least as far as most people were concerned in the years immediately following the Second World War. In either case, such an accusation would have been utterly devastating to someone’s life and career in the 1950s, particularly, if that person was seeking public office. While such accusations might still disqualify a person from running for higher office in the public mind (Senator Thomas Eagleton was forced to step aside as George McGovern’s running mate in 1972 because it was revealed he had undergone electroshock therapy some years earlier and Michael Dukakis had to counter claims made against his mental health status in 1988), homosexuality and mental health issues, under most circumstances, are generally less damaging to someone today than 40 years ago.

Production History

The Best Man opened on March 31, 1960, at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway and ran for a total of 520 performances, closing July 8, 1961. It was nominated for six Tony Awards, including Best Play, Best Direction, Best Actor—for both Lee Tracy and Melvyn Douglas (who won), Best Scenic Design and Best Featured Actress. The cast included Douglas as Russell, Tracy as Hockstader, Frank Lovejoy as Cantwell, Karl Weber as Jensen, Leora Dana as Alice and Kathleen Maguire as Mabel. In 1964, it was produced as a film starring Henry Fonda (Russell), Cliff Robertson (Cantwell) and Lee Tracy reprising his role as Hockstader.

Vidal periodically rewrote and revised the work attempting to update it to current political circumstances, including editions in 1977, 1988 and 1996. But it was in 2000 when he went back to the original date of the 1960 and produced the present edition. It was produced on Broadway on September 17, 2000, and ran for 121 performances, closing December 31, 2000. Spalding Grey won acclaim for his portrayal of Russell. Also in the cast was Michael Learned (Alice), Charles Durning (Hockstader), Chris Noth (Cantwell), Jordan Lage (Blades), Mark Blum (Jensen), and Elizabeth Ashley (Mrs. Gamadge). The production was nominated for a Tony Award as Best Revival of a Play and won the 2001 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Revival of a Play.

Summary of Reviews

Excerpted from *The New York Times* Review by Brooks Atkinson, April 1, 1960

“...a political melodrama that comes close enough to the truth to be both comic and exciting...Mr. Vidal knows how to put together a plot that is both amusing and engrossing.”

“...*The Best Man* inevitably centers on the old razzle-dazzle of a political convention, Mr. Vidal keeps it fresh by having a mind of his own.”

“But one of the pleasures of *The Best Man* is the sardonic consistency with which it recalls characteristics of current politicians—the fastidiousness and wit of Adlai Stevenson, the belligerent political guile of Harry Truman, Richard Nixon’s soap-opera with wife and dog to convince the country of his honesty. There is even a line that includes Jack Kennedy.”

Excerpted from *Broadway Snap Shot* Review by Russell Bouthiller, Sept. 27, 2000

“The task of separating historical fact from dramatic fiction is a challenge handled by the playwright with deftness and aplomb. Characters resemble notable and familiar political figures from the period. Candidate Bill Russell (Spalding Gray), for example, comes off as something of an amalgam of Adlai E. Stevenson and John F. Kennedy. Both men were Ivy League and upper-crust. Stevenson was the eponymous grandson of Grover Cleveland’s Vice President, and JFK, the scion of a financier and ambassador Joseph Kennedy. In the year of the play’s Broadway debut, Kennedy was the Democratic nominee and, later, elected. Though a bit of a womanizer, Russell is written as an egg-headed leftist, a trait more attributable to Stevenson whom the author strongly supported in his two runs for the Oval Office.

Russell’s nemesis is the upstart Senator Joseph Cantwell (Chris Noth), a creation akin to Lyndon Johnson with Nixonian overtones thrown in for good measure. A Machiavellian operator of humble origins, Cantwell sees the ends as justifying the means. It’s the pulse of the electorate that dictates the beat of his political heart. Ideology is something of an afterthought”

Excerpted from *New York Times* review by Ben Brantley, Sept. 18, 2000

“...The production makes you wish that Mr. Vidal were writing the dialogue for the forthcoming, much-debated presidential debates.

Despite the notoriously short shelf life of satire in the theater, this morality tale of a national political convention still rings appealingly with the whip cracks of abiding wordly wisdom dispensed in quips.”

Excerpted from the *New York* review by Thomas Burke, Sept. 18, 2000

“What will strike you most about this revival is how much and how little things have changed in the last 40 years. Political mudslinging as a valid tactic during a heated campaign (to sling or not to sling, that is the question) is very much in the forefront. Accusations of homosexuality (yes, it still carries a punch) and mental instability, and the irony of how one man’s personal, private agenda to revenge an old wrong can ultimately change the course of a nation’s destiny are all surprising and extremely effective pieces in Vidal’s puzzle. Even the historical marginalization of women in the political process comes into play, though you suspect it’s much more a cause for comment in this production than it may have been in the original.”

A Short Chronology of the '50s

1950

- President Harry Truman approves production of the hydrogen bomb and sends air force and navy to Korea in June
- First modern credit card introduced
- First organ transplant
- First *Peanuts* cartoon strip
- Korean War begins
- Senator Joseph McCarthy begins communist witch hunt

1951

- Transcontinental television begins with a speech by President Truman
- Color TV introduced
- South Africans forced to carry ID cards identifying race
- Truman signs peace treaty with Japan, officially ending WWII
- Winston Churchill re-elected Prime Minister of Great Britain

1952

- The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 is signed, removing racial and ethnic barriers to becoming a U.S. citizen
- Car seat belts introduced
- Princess Elizabeth becomes Queen at age 25
- Democrats nominate Adlai Stevenson to run for president
- Richard M. Nixon, Eisenhower's running mate is forced to defend himself on national TV in what would become known as "The Checkers Speech"
- Eisenhower elected president (1952-1961)

1953

- Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are electrocuted for their part in WW II espionage
- DNA discovered
- Hillary and Norgay climb Mt. Everest
- Joseph Stalin dies
- Fighting ends in Korea

1954

- U. S. Senator Joseph McCarthy begins televised hearings into alleged Communists in the army
- Racial segregation is ruled unconstitutional in public schools by the U.S. Supreme Court
- Britain sponsors an expedition to search for the abominable snowman
- First atomic submarine launched
- Report says cigarettes may cause cancer
- Roger Bannister breaks the four-minute mile

1955

- Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama
- The American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations merge making the new AFL-CIO an organization with 15 million members
- Dr. Jonas Salk develops a vaccine for polio
- Disneyland opens
- James Dean dies in car accident
- McDonald's Corporation founded
- Warsaw Pact Signed

1956

- The Federal Highway Act is signed
- Elvis gyrates on Ed Sullivan's Show
- Grace Kelly marries Prince Rainier III of Monaco
- Hungarian Revolution
- Khrushchev denounces Stalin
- Suez Crisis
- TV remote control and velcro invented
- Stevenson is nominated a second time
- Eisenhower is re-elected

1957

- Dr. Seuss Publishes *The Cat in the Hat*
- European Economic Community established
- Soviet Satellite *Sputnik* launches space age
- Elvis tops the charts
- Laika, a dog, becomes the first living animal to orbit space

1958

- Explorer I, the first U.S. satellite, successfully orbits the earth
- The first domestic jet-airline passenger service is begun by National Airlines between New York City and Miami
- Elvis is drafted and sent to Germany
- Boris Pasternak refuses Nobel Prize
- Chinese Leader Mao Zedong launches the "Great Leap Forward"
- Hope Diamond is donated to the Smithsonian
- Hula hoops become popular
- Lego toy bricks first introduced
- NASA founded

1959

- Alaska and Hawaii become the forty-ninth and fiftieth states
- Castro and his rebels forces oust Batista and assume control of Cuba
- International treaty makes Antarctica scientific preserve

- Kitchen Debate between Nixon and Khrushchev
- *The Sound of Music* opens on Broadway
- Quiz shows found to be fixed

1960

- Jack Paar, host of NBC's "Tonight Show," quits for almost a month in protest over network censorship of his material
- Democrats nominate John F. Kennedy to run for president
- Republicans nominate Richard M. Nixon, Eisenhower's VP
- Elvis is honorably discharged from the service
- Kennedy wins. He is the first Catholic and at 43 the youngest man to be elected President of the U.S.

U.S. Presidents of the 20th Century

1901-1909 Theodore Roosevelt (R)
 1909-1913 William Howard Taft (R)
 1913-1921 Woodrow Wilson (D)
 1921-1923 William G. Harding (R)
 1923-1929 Calvin Coolidge (R)
 1929-1933 Herbert Hoover (R)
 1933-1945 Franklin D. Roosevelt (D)
 1945-1953 Harry S. Truman (D)
 1953-1960 Dwight D. Eisenhower (D)
 1960-1963 John F. Kennedy (D)
 1963-1969 Lyndon Johnson (D)
 1969-1974 Richard M. Nixon (R)
 1974-1977 Gerald Ford (R)
 1977-1981 Jimmy Carter (D)
 1981-1989 Ronald Reagan (R)
 1989-1993 George H. W. Bush (R)
 1993-2001 Bill Clinton (D)
 2001- George W. Bush (R)

Glossary

Act One, Scene 1

Jack Paar (1918-2004)

Host of NBC's "The Tonight Show" from 1957-1962. Famous for his urbane wit, he succeeded Steve Allen and preceded Johnny Carson. Renowned for his candor and emotional nature, he once walked off the show in 1960 after the network censored one of his jokes, returning a month later with the famous quip, "As I was saying before I was interrupted..."

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

One of the foremost philosophers, essayists, mathematicians and social critics of the 20th century and winner of the 1950 Nobel Prize for Literature. A British citizen and life-long pacifist, he also wrote at length about Victorian morality and its inherent hypocrisies. He was offered a teaching position in the late 1930s at the City College of New York, but following public protests and an infamous 1940 judicial decision that found him morally unfit largely because of his advocacy of sex before marriage, he was dismissed.

Kalorama Road

Heart of the Embassy district in Washington, D.C.

"Paint me as I am... warts and all..."

Paraphrasing of a quotation attributed to Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), Lord Protector of England (1653-58). The actual quotation comes from a conversation with the portrait painter Lely: "Mr Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint your picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughness, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me. Otherwise, I will never pay a farthing for it."

"I love eggheads in politics."

In contrast to Eisenhower, who was not perceived as being especially smart, the Democrats nominated Adlai Stevenson--both in 1952 and 1956--whom many considered to be an intellectual or an egghead.

Joe Alsop (1910-1992)

American political journalist and columnist. A member of the so-called "Georgetown set" in Washington D.C., he was both an advocate of the Cold War and an outspoken critic of McCarthy. While visiting the Soviet Union in 1957, he was caught by the KGB in a Moscow hotel room in a compromising position with another man. Photographs were taken, but never appeared. Though a conservative in foreign policy (he supported the Vietnam War, for instance), he was a liberal on domestic issues.

"...you are going to get the nomination on the first ballot."

Before polled primaries became the preferred method of selecting a presidential candidate in the 1970s, delegates to political conventions were free to vote their

conscience or sway at least to the influences of the convention. Often multiple votes (ballots) had to be taken before one candidate had enough to prevail.

Life

Founded in 1883 and reinvented by Henry Luce in 1936, Life Magazine was the most popular weekly in the US from 1940 to 1972. Luce became an influential “king-maker” in the Republican Party.

Canasta

A card game believed to have been invented in Uruguay in the early 20th century involving the collection of matching pairs; it became one of the most popular card games in the US in the post-WWII years.

Legion of Decency

From 1934 to 1975, the Catholic Decency League was a religiously-based organization aimed at cleaning up what it perceived was immorality in the movie industry through its own rating system.

Paresis

Partial loss of movement or impaired movement.

K Street

Street in Washington DC renowned as the home to lobbyists and advocacy groups. Clearly, “lobbying” conveys a much broader and more horizontal definition in Vidal’s lexicon.

Breakdown

“Nervous breakdown” is not a clinical term, but rather a colloquial phrase especially popular in the 1950s and 60s to describe an array of emotional or psychological afflictions, from anxiety to exhaustion to bipolar disorder.

Watch Hill

A quaint resort village located on Block Island Sound in the extreme southeast corner of Rhode Island famous for its 1856 lighthouse. Its relative seclusion made it a popular hideaway for the rich and famous, including Clark Gable, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Isadora Duncan, Andrew Mellon, Henry Ford, and JFK. Virtually destroyed in a 1938 hurricane that killed hundreds and flattened the town, it rebuilt steadily over the next decade eventually regaining its former status.

William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925)

His “Cross of Gold” speech was one of the most famous political speeches in America, originally delivered at the 1896 Democratic National Convention. It demonstrated Bryan’s affiliation with the working and agricultural classes, and derided the urban wealthy for their insistence on maintaining the gold standard. Though only 36 at the time, he was nominated for president largely on the strength of this speech. Bryan

recorded the speech in 1921. It can be heard online at:
<http://www.historicalvoices.org/earliest_voices/bryan.html>

Act One, Scene 2

Walter Cronkite (1916-) Journalist, reporter and anchor of the CBS Evening News. He covered virtually every political convention from the 1952 until his retirement in 1981.

“...State College...”

State College, Pennsylvania--home of Penn State University.

Organza

A sheer, lightweight fabric usually used as a base for more embellished garments. Its stiffness and crispness makes it useful for linings, facings and gathered styles.

Neiman Marcus

A Dallas-based retailer that at one time catered exclusively to fabulously wealthy oil tycoons. While it is now a popular high-end department store, in the 1950s and '60s, it was a one-of-a-kind retailer offering the ultimate in extravagance and elegance—available only to the very wealthy—famous for its annual catalog of exotic and high-priced Christmas gifts, like “his and her Lear jets.”

Walter Lippman (1889-1974)

Influential American writer, journalist, commentator, and co-founder of *The New Republic*. Brought the phrase “Cold War” into popular use with the publication of his book by the same name in 1947.

Senator McCarthy

Joseph McCarthy (1908-57), US Senator from Wisconsin from 1947-57, who conducted his infamous hearings into Communists in the US. As chairman of his own Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, McCarthy began a series of hearings in 1953—often characterized as “witch-hunts”—that were a part of the great “Red Scare” of the 1950s and that would ultimately lead to his downfall and disgrace.

J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972)

The first and longest serving director of the FBI, serving as its head from 1924 until his death in 1972. Renowned for his bulldog countenance and his bulldog demeanor, he was a tireless warrior against organized crime, espionage, and vice. Never married, he was rumored to have been a homosexual and a cross-dresser, though neither claim has ever been proven.

“Psychiatrist reports...”

Psychiatry in the 1950s, while still a nascent field, was emerging as a major medical option especially for the middle classes. But popular perception found it difficult to

distinguish mild emotion or mental conditions (anxiety, mild depression, stress, and exhaustion) from genuinely pathological psychosis like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression. Even the hint that someone had visited a psychiatrist implied madness and mental instability. It was often a stigma that stayed with a person for a lifetime. In 1972, Senator Thomas Eagleton, for instance, had to drop out as George McGovern's running mate after it was revealed that he had undergone electric shock therapy a few years earlier. Unfounded rumors were enough for many to question Michael Dukakis's mental health during his run for president. Only in the last 20 years or so has psychiatry and psychology become more popularly understood and accepted to the extent that it has become *de rigueur* to compare anti-depression and anxiety medications, treatments and diagnoses among the general population. Whether such admissions are now acceptable on a presidential level has yet to be seen.

Psychopathic

Vidal may be using this term in its more generic usage, meaning someone suffering from a psychosis in contrast to the more specific medical definition of a condition characterised by lack of empathy or conscience, poor impulse control and manipulative behaviors. Or maybe not...

Act One, Scene 3

Labor Plank

One of the main purposes of traditional party conventions was to articulate and publish a party platform that laid out the party's goals, objectives and philosophies for the election. Needless to say, the platform attempted to appeal to as many voters and special interests as possible as well as the standard party backers by adding "planks" to the platform that appealed to these various and often divergent groups. In this case, one of the key aspects in the Democratic platform became the Labor Plank. For instance, in the 1956 Convention, the labor plank included a pledge to raise the minimum wage to \$1.00/hour, a repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, as well as a call for "equal pay for equal work."

Red China

By the mid-1950s Communist China topped the list of international concerns as the Cold War escalated. Reflecting this concern, the 1960 Democratic Party Platform contained the following: "We pledge determined opposition to the admission of the Communist Chinese into the United Nations. They have proven their complete hostility to the purposes of this organization. We pledge continued support to Nationalist China." Additionally, "We urge a continuing effort to effect the release of all Americans detained by Communist China."

Why the concern? Upon the founding of the UN in 1945, China had been represented by the Republic of China and the followers of Chiang Kai-shek with a permanent seat on the Security Council. But, following Mao Zedong's communist revolution in 1949 and the ROC's subsequent retreat to the island of Taiwan, there was increasing pressure to recognize the People's Republic of China as the sole government of China. The US was opposed to this change since it would add another communist bloc country to the UN

Security Council. Further, there was growing fear that the PRC was actively developing atomic weapons. They succeeded in 1964. So, much of 1950s American politics was centered on the rising threat posed by a communist China both with regard to its diplomatic influence and to its military might.

Oil Depletion Allowance

"An oilman drills a well that costs \$100,000. He finds a reservoir containing \$10,000,000 worth of oil. The well produces \$1 million worth of oil per year for ten years. In the very first year, thanks to the depletion allowance, the oilman could deduct 27.5 per cent, or \$275,000, of that \$1 million in income from his taxable income. Thus, in just one year, he's deducted nearly three times his initial investment. But the depletion allowance continues to pay off. For each of the next nine years, he gets to continue taking the \$275,000 depletion deduction. By the end of the tenth year, the oilman has deducted \$2.75 million from his taxable income, even though his initial investment was only \$100,000."

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you...”

According to Vidal, it is the kiss of death spoken to a presidential candidate by a “supporter”—meaning “you haven’t a chance.” Vidal claims this was told to him by JFK in 1956.

“...after a heart attack and an ileitis operation...”

Eisenhower suffered a mild heart attack in Sept. of 1955 while in Colorado and underwent an operation to relieve a small bowel obstruction (ileitis) in June of 1956.

“...pull a Nixon.”

A reference to Nixon’s “Checkers” speech. During the 1952 campaign, Richard Nixon was accused of misusing \$18,000 in campaign contributions. To clear himself and get the campaign back on track he appealed to the public on national television in Sept. of 1952 in a studio designed to look like a home study. He denied any wrongdoing and produced evidence that he had not misused the money, that it was all accounted for and that it was not for personal use but as reimbursement. He also revealed his entire financial portfolio including mortgage, loans and bank accounts, demonstrating a rather frugal lifestyle. He claimed the only gift he ever received was the family cocker spaniel, “Checkers”. It was a heartwarming and successful ploy. Thus Nixon was among the first politicians to utilize (and some say manipulate) television.

Aleutians... Adak

In June of 1942, the Japanese landed unopposed on the two westernmost islands in the Aleutian chain – Kiska and Attu. From bases on Adak, it would take another ten months for US forces finally to overwhelm the isolated Japanese outposts on both islands. Adak remained as the primary base for defense of the Aleutians throughout the rest of the war.

Act Two, Scene 1

“...that committee you were on.”

A reference to the committee that helped form the forerunner to Planned Parenthood. In 1939, the American Birth Control League and the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau merged to form the Birth Control Federation of America. In 1942, it changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA). (BTW, birth control for married couples was not legalized until 1965.)

“...peaked...”

In other words, sickly.

Photostat

Precursor of the Xerox machine. Reproduced copies by directly photographing a b/w reversal onto a continuous roll of positive photo-sensitive paper.

Pro Bono Publico

Latin: For the public good. Usually shortened to just “pro bono.”

Act Two, Scene 2

“...branch water...”

Plain water. In this case plain plain water. A term more common in the South.

John Foster Dulles (1888-1959)

Secretary of State under Eisenhower (1953-59), advocate of building a massive “nuclear deterrent” against communism.

Act Two, Scene 3

Martin Luther

"Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." Diet of Worms, 1521

Groton (gr_t_n)

Prestigious prep school in Groton, Massachusetts. Famous for their line of Roosevelts.

Inflagrante delicto (Latin/legalese)

Adverb: 1. In the very act of committing an offense; red-handed. **2.** In the act of having sex.

Act Two, Scene 4

“...favorite sons...”

Candidates at a convention who are nominated by their home states' delegation, usually as a means to elicit some special favor or influence on the party, the platform or the ticket.

Bibliography

Gore Vidal: Primary Works

Messiah. NY: Dutton, 1954. PS3543.I26 M4

Visit to a Small Planet; a comedy akin to a vaudeville. Boston: Little, Brown 1957. PS3543.I26 V52

Rocking the Boat. NY: Dell Publishing, 1963, 1951. PS3543 .I26 R6

The Judgment of Paris. Boston: Little, Brown, 1965, 1952. PS3543.I26 J8

The City and the Pillar: including an essay, Sex and the Law, and an afterword. NY: New American Library, 1965. PS3543 .I26 C5

Romulus; the Broadway adaptation. NY: Grove Press 1966. PS3543.I26 R65

Washington, D. C.; a novel. Boston: Little, Brown 1967. PS3543.I26 W3

Myra Breckinridge. Boston: Little, Brown 1968. PS3543.I26 M88

Reflections upon a Sinking Ship. Boston: Little, Brown 1969. PS3543 I26 R4

Burr: a novel. NY: Random House 1973. PS3543 I26 B8

1876: a novel. NY: Random House, 1976. PS3543 .I26 E35

Matters of Fact and of Fiction: essays 1973-1976. NY: Random House, 1977. PS3543.I26 M3

Julian; Williwaw; The Judgment of Paris; Messiah; The City and the Pillar. NY: Heineman: Octopus, 1979. PS3543 .I26 A15

Views from a Window: conversations with Gore Vidal. selected, arr., and introduced by Robert J. Stanton; edited by Robert J. Stanton and Gore Vidal. Secaucus, N.J.: L. Stuart, 1980. PS3543.I26 Z476

A Thirsty Evil: seven short stories. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1981. PS3543.I26 T4

The Second American Revolution and other essays (1976-1982). NY: Random House, 1982. PS3543 .I26 S28

Lincoln: a novel. NY: Random House, 1984. PS3543 .I26 L5

Empire: a novel. NY: Random House, 1987. PS3543 .I26 E4

At Home: essays, 1982-1988. NY: Random House, 1988. PS3543 .I26 A89

Hollywood: a novel of America in the 1920s. NY: Random House, 1990. PS3543 .I26 H56

United States: essays: 1952-1992. NY: Random House, 1993. PS3543 .I26 U55

Palimpsest: a memoir. NY: Random House, 1995. PS3543 .I26 Z474

The Smithsonian Institution: a novel. NY: Random House, 1998. PS3543 .I26 S65

The Golden Age: a novel. NY: Doubleday, 2000. PS3543 .I26 G65

The Last Empire: essays 1992-2000. NY: Doubleday, 2001. PS3543 .I26 L37

Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: how we got to be so hated. NY: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002. HV6432 .V53x

Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003. E302.1 .V57

Selected Critical Studies

Baker, Susan, and Curtis S. Gibson. *Gore Vidal: a critical companion.* Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997. PS3543 .I26 Z53

Dick, Bernard F. *The apostate angel; a critical study of Gore Vidal.* NY: Random House 1974. PS3543 I26 Z65

Kiernan, Robert F. *Gore Vidal.* NY: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1982. PS3543.I26 Z75

White, Ray L. *Gore Vidal.* NY: Twayne, 1968. PS3543.I26 Z9

Bibliography of the 1950s

- Carter, Paul A. *Another Part of the Fifties*. Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Chafe, William. *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*. Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Goldman, Eric F. *The Crucial Decade -- And After: America, 1945-1960*. Vintage, 1960.
- Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*. Villard Books, 1993.
- Hodgson, Godfrey. *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon, What Happened and Why*. Vintage Books, 1976.
- Miller, Douglas T. and Marion Nowak. *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. Doubleday, 1975.
- O'Neill, William L. *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960*. Free Press, 1986.
- Patterson, James T. *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Samuelson, Robert J. *The Good Life and Its Discontents: The American Dream in the Age of Entitlement, 1945-1990*. Times Books, 1995.
- Siegel, Frederick F. *Troubled Journey: From Pearl Harbor to Ronald Reagan*. Hill and Wang, 1984.
- Zinn, Howard. *Postwar America: 1945-1971*. Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.

Bibliography of The Cold War

- Ambrose, Stephen E. *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy, 1938-1980*. New York: Penguin Books, 1980.
- _____. *Eisenhower*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983.
- _____. *Nixon: The Education of a Politician, 1913-1962*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.
- Aronson, James. *The Press and the Cold War*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.

Beschloss, Michael R. *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

Block, Herbert. *Here and Now*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955.

_____. *Herblock's Special for Today*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958.

_____. *Straight Herblock*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964.

Boorstin, Daniel S. *The Image: or, What Happened to the American Dream*. New York: Atheneum, 1962.

Divine, Robert A. *Eisenhower and the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Doctorow, E.L. *The Book of Daniel*. New York: Random House, 1971.

Galbraith, John Kenneth. *The Affluent Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958.

Halberstam, David. *The Powers That Be*. New York: Knopf, 1979.

Hart, Jeffrey. *When the Going Was Good!: American Life in the Fifties*. New York: Crown, 1982.

Kaplan, Fred. *The Wizards of Armageddon*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983.

Leuchtenburg, William E. *A Troubled Feast: American Society since 1945*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1973.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.

May, Larry. *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Muller, Herbert J. *Adlai Stevenson: A Study in Values*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

Nixon, Richard M. *Six Crises*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962.

Polenberg, Richard. *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*. New York: Viking Press, 1980.

Powers, Richard Gid. *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover*. New York: Free Press, 1987.

Roche, John P. *The Quest for the Dream: The Development of Civil Rights and Human Relations in Modern America*. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

Rogin, Michael Paul. *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949.

_____. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

Shils, Edward A. *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*. New York: Free Press, 1956.

Stone, I.F. *The Truman Era*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1953.

_____. *The Haunted Fifties*. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.

White, Theodore H. *The Making of the President 1960*. New York: Atheneum, 1961.

Wills, Garry. *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.

Zinn, Howard. *Postwar America: 1945-1971*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.

Bibliography on McCarthy and the Anti-Communist Movement

Bayley, Edwin R. *Joe McCarthy and the Press*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Bentley Eric, (ed.). *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*. New York: Viking Press, 1971.

Carter, Douglass. *The Fourth Branch of Government*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.

Caute, David. *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978.

Ceplair, Larry and Stephen Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1980.

Fried, Albert. *McCarthyism, The Great American Red Scare: A Documentary History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Goldstein, Robert J. *Political Repression in Modern America*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Books, 1978.

Hofstadter, Richard. *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Knopf, 1970.

_____. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

Hoover, J. Edgar. *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1958.

Howe, Irving and Lewis A. Coser. *The American Communist Party: A Critical History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.

Kutler, Stanley I. *The American Inquisition: Justice and Injustice in the Cold War*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1982.

Matusow, Allen J. (ed.). *Joseph R. McCarthy*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

McCarthy, Mary. "Naming Names: The Arthur Miller Case" (1957), reprinted in *On the Contrary: Articles of Belief, 1946-1961*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961.

Miles, Michael. *The Odyssey of the American Right*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Oshinsky, David M. *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy*. New York: Free Press, 1983.

Schrecker, Ellen W. *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.

Steinberg, Peter L. *The Great "Red Menace": United States Prosecution of American Communists, 1947-1952*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984.

Wechsler, James A. *The Age of Suspicion*. New York: Random House, 1953.

Bibliography of Mass Media and Popular Culture of the 50s

Aronson, James. *The Press and the Cold War*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.

Biskind, Peter. *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

Brode, Douglas. *The Films of the Fifties: "Sunset Boulevard" to "On the Beach"*. Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1976.

Christensen, Terry. *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from "Birth of a Nation" to "Platoon"*. New York: Blackwell, 1987.

Dowdy, Andrew. *The Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind*. New York: Morrow, 1973.

Friendly, Fred W. *Due to Circumstances beyond Our Control....* New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

Kauffmann, Stanley. *The World on Film: Criticism and Comment*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

MacDonald, J. Fred. *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam*. New York: Praeger, 1985.

Sperber, A.M. *Murrow: His Life and Times*. New York: Freundlich Books, 1986.

Swanberg, W.A. *Luce and His Empire*. New York: Scribner, 1972.

Trumbo, Dalton. ed. by Helen Manfull. *Additional Dialogue, 1942-1962*. New York: M. Evans, 1970.

Zolotow, Maurice. *Shooting Star: A Biography of John Wayne*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974.

Websites

Gore Vidal

<http://www.pitt.edu/~kloman/vidalframe.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gore_Vidal

<http://www.christinesmith.us/id33.html>

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/vidal_g.html

Political Conventions

<http://people.howstuffworks.com/political-convention.htm>

<http://people.howstuffworks.com/political-convention.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_convention

<http://hnn.us/articles/6168.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/july-dec00/conventions.html>

The 50s

<http://vlib.iue.it/history/USA/ERAS/20TH/1950s.html>

http://www.mrpophistory.com/1950s_popculture_index.htm

<http://kclibrary.nhmccd.edu/decade50.html>

<http://www.fiftiesweb.com/fifties.htm>

http://home.att.net/~boomers.fifties.teenmag/1950_history.html