

(January 20, 1953) so we could watch the Inauguration. Ike looked like Uncle Merrill, who travelled the Midwest aboard the North Coast Limited and the Hiawatha and other crack trains, extending the domain of Northrup King seed corn. Ike's benign rule saw me through puberty and high school, and I started college the fall Kennedy was elected. I decided I was a Democrat, and admired him feverishly, and—except for an afternoon during the Cuban-missile blockade when I was afraid the world was about to end—I was as patriotic as a person could possibly be, right up to November 22, 1963, that cold cave of a day, when poor Lyndon Johnson was ushered in, and then my admiration of Presidents abruptly ended, never to resume.

Johnson was the first President I voted for and the first who threatened my life, the first I devoutly hoped would be toppled from power. I was married during Johnson. My son was born at the beginning of Nixon, who resigned in 1974, missing my thirty-second birthday by a day, and ending the epic of Watergate, since which newspaper reading hasn't been a quarter as much fun. I was divorced in Ford, our Bicentennial President, who otherwise didn't register on me, and Carter only proved that I didn't know beans about politics. I thought he was a decent, hardworking, God-fearing President, and I never did come to understand how Republicans could get elected simply by saying his name out loud, the way Democrats ran against Herbert Hoover all those years. Everybody except me seemed to get this joke, and everybody except me seemed to appreciate Reagan and think him amiable and charming. I had to respect the old masseur as he pled his craft, but his charm eluded me completely, and now here is George Bush. I must admit I miss John F. Kennedy, all that sweet fervor and purposefulness and idealism of November, 1960: that was partly Kennedy, partly the times, and partly the fact that I was eighteen years old. You can never regain the President of your youth. You get older and Presidents get younger, and then, one day, instead of the giants who used to bestride the Republic there's a President who's just a mortal human being, perspiring, overeager, a little cynical, no smarter than a few million other people. You can find six things wrong

with him and only three right, which is just about how I feel about myself. I hope three are enough.

*Election '88*

ON the corner of Forty-third and Vanderbilt, right outside Grand Central, a long line of ragged men starts to form every evening around seven-thirty in anticipation of a truck full of sandwiches which will arrive at around nine. On Election Night, talk in the line naturally turned to politics. As the men tipped from one foot to the other, shaking off the November wind, the atmosphere was one of gallows humor. The favorite election joke among the homeless goes: "If Bush and Dukakis were on a boat and the boat sank, who would be saved?" Answer: "The country."

Until recently, the Board of Elections would not allow people to register without a fixed address, but in response to a 1984 lawsuit filed by the Coalition for the Homeless a federal judge ruled that one could list Grand Central, or even a favorite park bench, as one's home and vote in the appropriate district. This fall, volunteers, taking advantage of the ruling, signed up about a hundred and fifty people in the line. "A lot of these guys may look dirty and bummy, but they're intelligent people," one homeless man said to us. "Ask them. It will surprise you."

The men in the line were surprising in a number of ways. They don't fit the stereotypes of the homeless: they're neither former mental patients muttering to themselves nor grizzled winos from the Bowery. Most are young, male, able-bodied, and black: people who lost their grip on the bottom rung of the economic ladder, often through some series of misfortunes or mis-

takes—the loss of a job or an apartment, the breakup of a marriage, a drinking or a drug problem. Although many had decided to register and vote, their attitude toward politics remained one of extreme skepticism. "Actually, I don't really think it matters much who wins," said Eddie Willis, a tall, athletic-looking black man in a blue windbreaker. "They all promise you this and promise you that, but once they get in the White House they all do what they want. It's proved year after year. Something just doesn't seem right. I don't believe the President runs the country anyway."

Next to him in line, Greg Moore, a white man with long brown hair and a lilting Southern accent, chimed in, saying, "The fact that we have an actor for a President suggests to me that the real power in the country is not in the White House—that the Presidency is a drama for public consumption, and that the machinery of power has more to do with organizations and corporations than it does with individuals. I voted for Dukakis, not because I think it will make a difference but because it makes a difference to me psychologically to feel I'm participating."

For most of the men, the choice was between Dukakis and not voting at all. No one we spoke with supported the Republicans. "Bush is Vice-President already, so I don't believe he'll do much to change the conditions," said a man who calls himself Jay Universal.

The men at Forty-third and Vanderbilt nevertheless had plenty of suggestions for the next President. "Number One, you have to have a federal housing program for the homeless," said Lenny Washington, a former postal worker. "And then there's gotta be some type of decent minimum wage. Seventy per cent of the people out here are doing some type of work—being a messenger, or whatever. The going rate for a room is eighty dollars a week; at minimum wage, you bring home a hundred and eight dollars a week, so how are you going to live? Number Three, you have to have support systems for these people out here who are on drugs, things like that."

By nine o'clock, the sandwich line numbered two hundred and fifty. With the returns already favoring Bush, some of the men felt that the race had to have been fixed, since no one they knew had voted for the winner. But most were philosophical about the re-



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suits. Wayne Bradley, a middle-aged black man wearing a ski cap, said he believed that poor white people and working white people vote their race, and not their pocketbook. "They're in the same bag with us, but because their skin is white they don't want to identify with us."

Elmer Ricks, a young black man who moved here from North Carolina a year ago, said that people at home might have voted differently if they'd been in his shoes. "This past year has been a hell of an experience," he went on. "Most people down South, if they'd seen what I've seen, their eyes would get this big." With his fingers he made a circle the size of a silver dollar.

Many in the line preferred not to dwell on the election, however. Steve Riley, a young black man with a blue beret and a goatee, was signing up people for membership in the United Homeless Organization. "Since the election was today, it's already passé," he said. "We're trying to organize homeless people to help homeless people. Even the sociologists will tell you that the greatest authorities on homelessness are the people living on the streets of New York. We're trying to raise some funds so we can buy a building and fix it up. Our objective is to get away from institutionalized homelessness. It's become a business. Most of these people here, their breakfast is on one side of town, their lunch is on the other side of town, the shower is somewhere else, so their whole day is spent just chasing food. You're so tired by the end of the day you couldn't look for a job if you wanted one."

By nine-twenty, the sandwiches were gone, the new members of the United Homeless Organization had scattered for the night, and the television networks had declared George Bush the winner.

**A** FRIEND in Paris has sent us this: There was a straw vote for two weeks in Harry's Bar, and afterward everybody knew for sure that Bush had won—the vote in the bar was Bush, six to five, just like the vote at home—and had to decide what to do on Tuesday. Some of my neighbors



"Mrs. Hammond! I'd know you anywhere from little Billy's portrait of you."

read in *Libération* about a party given by the *International Herald Tribune*, and thought it would be nice to drive over and watch the American reporters drinking breakfast. (American reporters are much romanticized in France, and election coverage on the local channels always includes a lot of clips of Hepburn and Tracy in the newsroom.) But then they saw that the guests would include Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and various "patrons de grandes entreprises," and since that was nobody's idea of a thrilling shirt-sleeves scene they settled down at parties close to home. It seemed to be obligatory in Paris on Election Night to give a party or to go to someone else's party—though most Parisians pronounced the election boring and claimed to have a hard time (no matter what you said) telling the candidates apart. That is, except for Quayle. This fall, Quayle became a Paris catchword. The name, or the Senator's face on the nightly news, sent ordinarily solemn and austere Frenchmen into hoots of laughter.

The party I went to was thrown by a writer and his wife whose apartment stands eye to eye with the Tour Eiffel, and is thus known for getting ten

European channels, and also CNN, from America. Friends came for the television and stayed for the scene, which was cosmopolitan, the wine being French, the host and hostess Italian, and the guests a little bit of everything. When I got there, about twenty people were sitting around bowls of fresh pink shrimp and bottles of Chablis, talking to each other in various combinations of French, German, English, and Italian, and every now and then acknowledging the countdown banter on CNN, which was delivered by a man and woman of such extraordinary blandness that they appeared—at least, from this side of the ocean—to be either cardboard cutouts or pop versions of those flat metal people who used to serve as fireplace screens in the eighteenth century. Occasionally, someone switched to the French channel Antenne 2, which was broadcasting from New York: five minutes of conversation with friendly local intellectuals, followed by five minutes of music from black jazz pianists playing for the intellectuals, followed by five minutes of Americana consisting mainly of footage of people buying drugs or selling drugs or shooting up drugs. The theme of the evening was