

'Campaign 2000 has caused mass voter dyspepsia. It has left the rotten taste of the negative art of treating voters as consumers, running elections as exercises in marketing and advertising and packaging candidates as scripted entertainers.'

The end of an uninspiring campaign

Marlow, Joseph Conrad's world-weary seaman, compares civilization to light in the darkness. Our president-elect and his main rival would have used this simple image to soothe and woo us in the election campaign that now has had its Huntsville moment. But Marlow knows truths that most of us will only see if our leaders and would-be leaders lift us to levels of mature honesty about our lives and responsibilities as citizens.

Civilization is light. "Yes," says Marlow, "but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds." Civilization is evanescent. Our singular American experiment in democratic government is a momentary brush fire in world history. Take a look at the world as it flashes by, strobe-like, on CNN. We enjoy unparalleled freedoms. But we face overwhelming social problems that other countries — without our abundant resources or guiding humanistic principles — have somehow solved.

Our American experiment has now lasted 40 years longer than the original experiment in extended democracy, classical Athens. That first flame was extinguished by the shortsightedness and divisiveness of Athenian citizens and statesmen. We must realize how fragile our experiment is and believe unselfishly in its underlying ideals. We must also be aware that those ideals have never been made real for all who live in our society. Truth is essential. Lies are deadly. "There is . . . a flavour of mortality in lies . . . like biting something rotten."

Campaign 2000 has caused mass voter dyspepsia. It has left the rotten taste of the negative art of treating voters as consumers, running elections as exercises in marketing and advertising and packaging candidates as scripted entertainers. It focused on the selfish concerns of targeted groups of voters, dividing in the hopes of conquering, paying little attention to the negative consequences of such strategies.

Fifty million middle-class Americans were encouraged to vote dollar-wise for Gore. Everybody, countered Bush, should get in on the tax-cut gravy. There was no meaningful discussion of how the super-rich have become super-richer, why the poor have become poorer or what the ultimate social consequences of a top-heavy tax cut would be. Gore vilified the wealthy. Bush wrapped them up in the swaddling clothes of the American work ethic.

The second presidential debate took us off into foreign-policy cuckoo-land. Both candidates comforted us with fairy-tale visions of the United States as a super power and the happy willingness of countries worldwide to accept our cultural, economic and military influence or domination. We were told we should only fight wars that we can win and that other countries would gladly cede parts of their own sovereign territory in exchange for debt relief. These two statements were interpreted as proof of high competence in foreign affairs.

The sauce on this serving was Jim Lehrer's rapid quiz on U.S. military interventions. Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Haiti, Kosovo were tossed out in a jockey party-game spirit that trivialized the grim significance of these armed conflicts. Within 24 hours, terrorist bombing of the USS Cole, the lynching of Israeli soldiers and Israeli rocket strikes on Palestinian facilities gave us a truer vision of the nasty world out there. One Israeli spokesperson reminded us that Jerusalem is not the American Midwest, and that in the Holy Land bloodshed must be met with force. But he was not running for president. The menu could and should have been better. In mid-October, the honorable David M. Walker,

comptroller general of the United States, met with students of accounting at the University of Texas at Austin. Walker has been a partner of Arthur Andersen and an appointee of presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton. He spoke to many key issues in a factual and nonpartisan way.

He stressed that the federal government alone has the important task of seeing to the common good of the nation. He told us that both candidates were discussing budgetary problems for the next 10 years because the real problems would begin in the eleventh year, the year 2011, when the first baby boomers reach age 65. He then showed us in precise terms the staggering nature of those problems.

He told no lies or half-lies and used no fuzzy math. But he was not running for president.

The last week of Campaign 2000, the arrogantly impolitic and narcissistic image of the president of the United States sitting crotch-spread for Esquire with a love-smirk on his face was only the crowning course of a dinner of handler-orchestrated kisses on Oprah, masks on Jay and chicken-hypnotizing on Regis. Bob Dylan just told us, "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there." I wonder.

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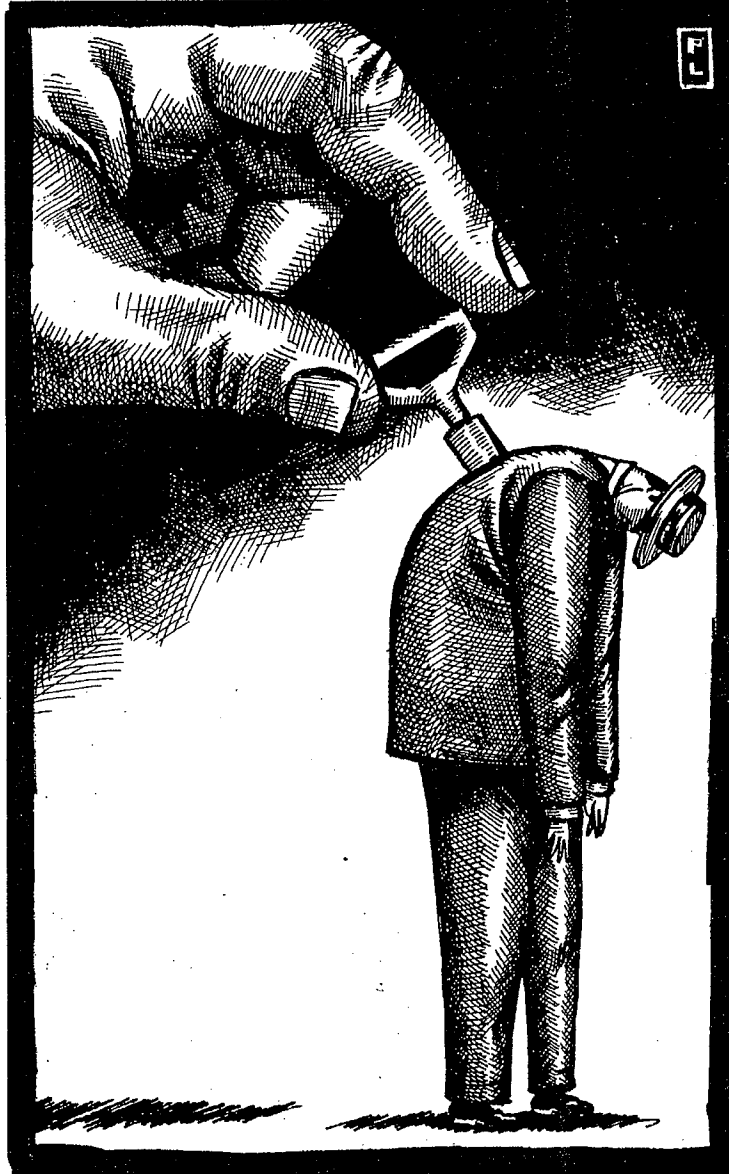


Illustration by Paul Lachine