

A MADRIGAL WITH A MORAL

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On the first day of Christmas, the spinner said to me, "Dick Cheney's really running the government ..."

On the second day, the spinner said to me, "Al Gore lost because of Ralph Nader ..."

On the third day: "There will be a bipartisan cabinet ..."

On the fourth day: "Bill Clinton will be the leader of the Democratic Party ..."

Fifth day: "There is a struggle for the soul of the president ..."

Sixth: "There is a struggle for the soul of the Democratic (or Republican) Party ..."

Seventh: "Bush only won because of a partisan Supreme Court ..."

Eighth: "Bush doesn't have a mandate ..."

Ninth: "African-Americans were disenfranchised ..."

Tenth: "Hilary Clinton will run for President in 2004 ..."

Vice president Dick Cheney is a very smart man, with wide government experience. Which is why he knows that they only play "Hail to the Chief" for the president. Cheney may well be influential -- I hope he is -- but the calls are the president's. Period.

And what goes for the vice president, who was at least elected, goes triply for all the cabinet members and aides who will surface as the true powers behind the

throne. They all serve at the pleasure of the president. If he wants to listen to any one of them, he will. If he chooses not to, they become glorified ribbon clerks, and may often find their pre-filed, accepted resignations in their in-box. The bipartisan cabinet idea is also oversold. The appointed Democrats will be Democrats friendly to Bush and his ideas; if not, they too will be irrelevant. So they have a "D" after their name. Big deal.

Did Al Gore lose because of Ralph Nader? Well, maybe, but perhaps not the way you think. By fearing the left-leaning antiestablishment appeal of Nader, Gore campaigned to and from the left, pushing centrist voters toward Bush. That's bad electoral arithmetic. (A Democrat going for Nader costs Gore one vote. A Democrat or Independent going for Bush costs him two votes -- one minus for Gore, one plus for Bush.)

And speaking of why Gore lost, weren't there three debates? Wasn't he supposed to be the master debater who could vanquish any man in the land? Didn't he embarrass himself in the first two debates and barely hold his own in the third? Didn't Bush, the alleged clunker, do pretty well?

There is a struggle for the soul of the president. There is a struggle for the soul of the Democratic (or Republican) Party. Of course there is. These are big, disparate parties, representing a huge, polyglot, continental nation. Something would be screwy if there weren't these sorts of struggles going on all the time.

Was the president picked by a partisan court? No. He may, or may not, have won because there is an ideological court, but not a party-line court. Seven of the nine Supremes were nominated by Republican presidents, but only five voted

for the no-recount position. If there was a fully partisan court, it was the Supreme Court of Florida. Six of the seven members were appointed by Democratic governors, while a seventh was jointly appointed by a Democratic governor and a Republican one. But even that crew eventually split 4 to 3.

Will Hilary Clinton run for president in 2004? Absolutely not. She promised she wouldn't.

Were African-Americans "disenfranchised?" Let us assume (for the moment) that there are indeed more rickety vote-rejecting machines in African-American precincts than in others. Let's say blacks are three times more likely to cast ballots that will be rejected, which is unfair. But, in fact African-American voters only make up about 10 percent of the vote. Do blacks or whites lose more votes because of bad equipment? In any event, we need better voting logistics.

Jesse Jackson has (as of this writing) refused to grant "legitimacy" to President-elect Bush, because (he says) the election was systematically rigged against blacks. Washington D.C.'s former Mayor Marion Barry once said "Jesse's good at running his mouth ..." He hasn't changed. He now even charges that Bill Clinton's Justice Department was part of the plot. The feeding and fertilizing of unproven, unlikely, late-blooming, conspiracy theories is both tragic and unproductive.

Bill Clinton as leader of the Democratic Party. Hmm ... Ex-presidents normally don't publicly criticize their successors, do they? Did President George H.W. Bush criticize Clinton? I don't think so. Does Clinton make up his own rules?

Bush's mandate comes from the Constitution of the United States. The Constitution, not spinners, politicians or pundits, grants the president substantial powers to use as skillfully as he can.

There is a moral to this madrigal:
Spinners, take a holiday!

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