

## THE NEW YORKER

## FACT

## PROFILES

## THE WILDERNESS CAMPAIGN

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Al Gore lives on a street in Nashville.

Issue of 2004-09-13

Posted 2004-09-06

"Hey, Dwayne? . . . Dwayne?" "Yes, Mr. Vice-President?"

"Could I have some more coffee?"

"Yes, Mr. Vice-President. Coming . . ."

"Thanks, Dwayne."

It was ten in the morning in Nashville, a quiet weekday, with most of the neighbors off to work, and Albert Gore, Jr., sat at the head of his dining-room table eating breakfast. His plate was crowded with scrambled eggs, bacon, toast. His pond-size mug had, in a flash, been refilled by Dwayne Kemp, his cook, a skilled and graceful man who had been employed by the Gores when, as his boss often puts it, "we were still working in the White House." Freshly showered and shaved, Gore was wearing a midnight-blue shirt and gray wool trousers. In the months after losing the battle for Florida's electoral votes and conceding the Presidency to George W. Bush, on December 13, 2000, Gore seemed to let himself go, dropping out of sight, travelling around Spain, Italy, and Greece for six weeks with his wife, Tipper. He wore dark glasses and a baseball cap tugged down low. He grew a mountain-man beard and gained weight. When he began appearing in public again, mainly in classrooms, he took to introducing himself by saying, "Hi, I'm Al Gore. I used to be the next President of the United States." People looked at this rather bulky and hirsute man—a politician who had only recently won 50,999,897 votes for the Presidency, more than any Democrat in history, more than any candidate in history except Ronald Reagan in 1984, and more than half a million more votes than the man who assumed the office—and did not know quite what to feel or how to behave, and so they cooperated in his elaborate self-deprecations. They laughed at his jokes, as if to help him erase what everyone understood to be a disappointment of historic proportions—"the heartbreak of a lifetime," as Karena, the eldest of his four children, put it.

"You know the old saying," Gore told one audience after another. "You win some, you lose some—and then there's that little-known third category."

Gore has since dispensed with the beard but not the weight. He is still thick around the middle. He eats quickly and thoroughly, and with a determined relish, precisely like a man who no longer has to care that he might look heavy on "Larry King Live." "You want some eggs?" he asked. "Dwayne's the best."

This has been the first election season in a generation in which Al Gore has not pursued national office. He ran for President in 1988, when he was thirty-nine; for Vice-President, on Bill Clinton's ticket, in 1992 and 1996; and then again for President in 2000. Having decided that a rematch against Bush would be too divisive (or, perhaps, too difficult), Gore has made an effort not to brood on the sidelines. Instead, he used words like "liberated" and "free" with a determined conviction to describe his inner condition. He was free of the burden, free of the pressure, free of the camera's eye. At home in Nashville, the phone barely rang. There were no advance people at the door, no aides at his shoulder. He could say what he wanted and it hardly made a ripple in the media. If he felt like calling George Bush a "moral coward," if he felt like comparing Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib to islands in an "American gulag" or the President's media operatives to "digital Brown Shirts," well, he just went ahead and did it. No worries, no hesitation. True, at noon at the Belcourt Theatre, he was to deliver a speech to a group called the Music Row Democrats, but the only cameras were likely to be local. He jokingly outlined the speech on a small notepad with just two words: "war" and "economy."

When Al and Tipper Gore had recovered from the initial shock of the 2000 election, they spent \$2.3 million on the house they live in now: a hundred-year-old Colonial on Lynwood Boulevard, in the Belle Meade section of Nashville. They still own a place in Arlington, Virginia—a house that was built by Tipper's grandfather—and a ninety-acre cattle farm in the Gore family seat of Carthage, Tennessee; but Arlington was perilously close to Washington, and Carthage was too remote for a full-time residence, especially for Tipper. Belle Meade, which resembles Buckhead, in Atlanta, or Mountain Brook, near Birmingham, is a prosperous redoubt for businessmen and country-music stars; it encompasses a neighborhood of broad, sloping lawns, and houses with magnolia trees and "estate" driveways up front and glassy modern additions and swimming pools out back. Chet Atkins used to be a neighbor; Leon Russell still is. Some of the features of the house, which the couple expanded with the help of an architect, are distinctly Gore-ish: Tipper's full drum set, in the living room (complete with congas); Al's grip-and-grin photographs with the Clintons and world leaders, along the walls. There are fewer books

and more televisions than you might expect. When the architect was designing the rear addition to the house, Gore asked him to curve the walls inward in two places in order to save several trees. “The trees weren’t anything special, nothing rare or anything,” he said. “I just couldn’t bear to bring ’em down.” In the back yard, around the patio and the extra-long pool, where Al and Tipper do laps, Gore also installed an anti-bug system that sprays a fine mist of ground chrysanthemums from various discreet sources: a tree trunk, a patio wall. “The mosquitoes just hate it,” he said. Other features of the house are less environmentally correct. A 2004 black Cadillac, which Gore drives, was parked in the driveway. A ’65 Mustang—a Valentine’s Day gift from Al to Tipper—was parked in the garage.

Gore finished his eggs. He walked to a covered patio on the side of the house and settled into a soft chair. Dwayne brought his coffee cup and refilled it.

Gore has hardly been a recluse since deciding, in late 2002, not to run again. In the past year, he has delivered a series of speeches in New York and Washington sharply criticizing the Bush Administration, but he has answered few questions. “It’s better that way for a while,” he said. He has given speeches for money all around the world. And he is teaching courses, mainly about the intersection of community and the American family, at Middle Tennessee State University, in Murfreesboro, and Fisk University, in Nashville.

“We’ve got about forty hours of lectures and classes on tape,” Gore said, deadpan. “Now’s your chance to watch them.”

Gore is beginning to make serious money. He is a board member for Apple and a senior adviser to Google, which just went through its I.P.O. He has also been working on creating a cable-television station and developing a financial enterprise.

“I’m having a blast,” he said.

In a parliamentary system, a candidate for Prime Minister, after losing an election, often returns to the party leadership or at least to a prominent seat in parliament. It doesn’t work that way in the United States. Here, you make your own way: you give speeches, write memoirs, accumulate a fortune, find a righteous cause. Sometimes a reporter might come calling, but not often. In any case, Donna Brazile, Gore’s campaign manager in 2000, said, “When it was over, the Democratic Party kicked him to the curb,” preferring to forget not only the Florida catastrophe but also Gore’s own misplays: his mutating personality in the three debates with Bush; his reliance on political consultants; his inability to exploit Bill Clinton’s enduring popularity and his failure to win Clinton’s Arkansas, much less Tennessee; his decision not to press immediately for a statewide recount in Florida. Now, everywhere he goes, Gore is faced with crowds who despair of the Bush Administration and see in him all that might have been, all the what-ifs. *The heartbreak of a lifetime*. Sometimes people approach him and address him as “Mr. President.” Some try to cheer him up and tell him, “We know you really won.” Some tilt their heads, affecting a look of grave sympathy, as if he had just lost a family member. He has to face not only his own regrets; he is forever the mirror of others’. A lesser man would have done far worse than grow a beard and put on a few pounds.

Consider the expectations: more than Franklin Roosevelt, or even John F. Kennedy, Gore was raised to be President. His father, Albert Gore, Sr., a senator who was known to look as noble as a Roman statesman, expected it of him. When Gore’s mother was pregnant with Al, Gore, Sr., told the editors of the Nashville *Tennessean* that if his wife gave birth to a boy he didn’t want to see the story tucked deep in the paper. After Al was born, the headline read, “WELL, MR. GORE, HERE HE IS, ON PAGE 1.” Six years later, the Senator planted a story in the Knoxville *News-Sentinel* about how young Al had coaxed his father into buying him a more expensive bow-and-arrow set than they had planned to get. “There may be another Gore on the way toward the political pinnacle,” the story said. “He’s just six years old now. But with his experiences to date, who knows what may happen.” By the time Gore made it to Harvard (the only school he applied to), he was informing his class of his ultimate ambition. His first run, in 1988, after he had spent just a few years in the Senate, was less an act of youthful presumption than a hurried attempt to win the White House in his father’s lifetime.

Gore is fifty-six years old. After the 2000 race was finally resolved, some of the people around him consoled him by telling him to “remember Richard Nixon,” how Nixon lost the Presidential race in 1960, lost the California governorship in 1962—informing the press that it would no longer have him to “kick around anymore”—and then came back to win the White House in 1968. Somehow, when that advice is mentioned to Gore today, it is neither consoling nor enticing. If John Kerry wins in November, that would likely spell the end of Gore’s career in national politics; if Kerry loses, there would still be strong figures in a prospective field for 2008, not least John Edwards and Hillary Clinton.

“Basically, the answer is, I do not expect to ever be a candidate again,” Gore said. “I really don’t. The second part of the answer is, I haven’t ruled it out completely. And the third qualifier is, I don’t add the second part as a way of signalling coyness. It’s merely to complete an honest answer to the question and it in no way changes the principal part of the answer. Which is, I really do not expect that I will be a candidate. If I did expect to be a candidate again, I would probably not feel the same freedom to let it rip in these speeches the way I am. And I enjoy that. It feels”—and there was that word again—“it feels liberating to me.” Running again for the Senate or accepting a Cabinet position, he said, was also out of the question.

Gore, along with no small part of the country, is convinced that had things turned out differently in Florida in 2000, had the conservatives on the Supreme Court not outnumbered the liberals by a single vote, the United States would not be in the condition it’s in: the front page would not be describing chaos in Iraq, record budget deficits, the rollback of numerous environmental initiatives, a diminishment of civil liberties, a curtailment of stem-cell research, an erosion of American prestige abroad. Gore does not admit to any bitterness, but it is plain in nearly every speech he gives; and while the feeling may be partly personal—who could blame him?—it runs to a deeper, more public-minded sentiment than the disappointment of his own, or his father’s, ambitions.

“Here you have a guy who worked all his life to achieve the one thing he wanted—to be President of the United States, and it was there, in his grasp,” Tony Coelho, Gore’s campaign chairman in 2000, said. “He felt Clinton hurt him, but nevertheless he worked his butt off and brought it off. He won the most votes, by half a million, but then the Supreme Court steps in and it’s gone. It is hard for any of us to understand what that means or how it feels. The truth is that Gore is really a policy guy, not a political guy, and for him to feel that he was on the cusp of the ultimate policy job, that he could affect policy and the world like no one else, and then nothing—well, imagine that!”

In a little while, a new friend of Gore’s, an eccentric musician and visual artist named Robert Ellis Orrall, was going to swing by to take him and Tipper to the Belcourt.

“You’ll like Bob,” Gore said, smiling. “But I’m warning you: he does his own thing. He’s a crazy kinda guy.”

Gore delivered that last sentence in what I came to think of as his Mr. Goofy voice. When he wants to undercut something he is saying, to indicate that he knows he is speaking in a cliché or taking on a stentorian or pompous tone, he uses the Mr. Goofy voice, stretching his face into a kind of clownish expression and affecting a tone more suited to a television dinosaur. Then, there is the Herr Professor voice, Gore as lecturer. Gore didn’t really want to talk politics at first, but when the subject of the press came up he seized on it and gave, at my best estimation, a twenty-minute discourse on the degradation of “the public sphere,” a phrase coined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in the nineteen-sixties. (One tries, and fails, to imagine the current President alluding to the author of “Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action.”) “He’s a *ve-rrry* interesting guy,” Gore said. “Why am I just finding out about him?”

It’s easy to see that Gore, lacking public office, likes to teach. In his uninterrupted answer, he mentioned the brain-imaging center at New York University; “The Alphabet Versus the Goddess,” by Leonard Shlain; “Broca’s Brain,” by Carl Sagan; an Op-Ed piece in the *Times* about the decline of reading in America, by Andrew Solomon; the lack of research on the relation between the brain and television—“There is just *nothing* on the dendrite level about watching television”; Gutenberg and the rise of print; the sovereign rule of reason in the Enlightenment; individualism—“a term first used by de Tocqueville to describe America in the eighteen-thirties”; Thomas Paine; Benjamin Franklin. “O.K., now fast-forward through the telegraph, the phonograph.” O.K., but we *didn’t* fast-forward: first, there was Samuel Morse, who failed to hear the news of his wife’s dying while he was painting a portrait—“You know, he has a painting in the White House, if I remember correctly”—and therefore went out and invented a faster means of communication. “Now fast-forward again to Marconi . . . now that’s an interesting story”; the sinking of the Titanic; David Sarnoff; the agricultural origin of the term “broadcast”; moving right along to “the nineteen visual centers of the brain”; an article on “flow” in *Scientific American*; the “orienting reflex” in vertebrates; the poignancy and “ultimate failure” of political demonstrations as a means of engaging the aforementioned public sphere—“I mean, what do you really have? A crowd of people holding posters with five words on them at *most* hoping for a TV camera to come along for a few seconds of airtime?”—and, finally, Gore’s own 1969 Harvard thesis, on the effect of television on the Presidency and the rise, at about that time, of image over print as a means of transmitting news. This was all a way to talk about the cable-television station that he is developing.

“What kind of station will it be?” I asked.

“Well, I really can’t talk about it,” he said. “Not yet.”

What Gore does care to talk about, and what he has talked about openly and in language shocking in its contrast with his old stilted caution, are the failures of the man who prevailed in 2000.

“You’re free to speak clearly,” I offered.

“I’m unplugged,” he said.

A few minutes later, Robert Ellis Orrall arrived. A charming man in his late forties with close-cropped hair and an earring, Orrall has a vibrant sense of performance, insofar as he is always performing. He began telling jokes the moment he arrived, and Gore seemed to relax completely in his presence.

Tipper Gore, wearing a cotton sweater and hot-pink pants, came out on the patio to greet Orrall.

“How *are* you, Bob?”

“Just fine, Tipper, but a little nervous. They asked me to introduce Al at this thing, so I’ve got this little speech . . .”

A slight breeze of anxiety ruffled Gore’s features. Orrall gave every indication of being an unpredictable stage presence. It was one thing to clown around on the patio, quite another when you’re introducing the former Vice-President in front of a few hundred supporters.

“I hope you, um, wrote it down, Bob,” Gore said.

“I got it right here,” Orrall said, patting his pocket.

The four of us walked out to the driveway and climbed into Orrall’s car, an incommodious Volkswagen Golf. The former Vice-President

opened the front door, fastidiously folded in half, and inserted himself through the narrow space available, as if through a mail slot. Once inside, he shifted his legs, zigging them up and to the right, forming with them what seemed to be an especially complicated letter in the Cyrillic alphabet. Then he very slowly closed the door on himself. There were no major injuries. Tipper climbed in back.

Orrall steered out of the driveway and headed toward the theatre. There were no sirens, no trail cars besides the normal run of traffic.

Gore smiled and said, “Bob, you could pretend like you’re Secret Service, but you’d have to be wearing an earpiece instead of an earring.”

“I’ll do my best,” Orrall said.

“Please do!” Mr. Goofy said.

Orrall is a performer of parts, and one of them is as “Bob Something,” the chief songwriter and singer for a farcical band called Monkey Bowl. In Northern terms, Monkey Bowl might be described as a cross between the Fugs and Ali G.

As we drove, Orrall produced a Monkey Bowl CD titled “Plastic Three-Fifty,” which listed such songs as “Stupid Man Things,” “Hip Hop the Bunny,” and “Books Suck.” The second cut on the disk was called, simply, “Al Gore.”

Not long after they met, through a mutual friend, Orrall played an early version of the song for Gore. Gore liked it so much that he added a touch of his own.

“Let’s play it,” Orrall said, and he slipped it into his CD player. After an infectious string of guitar chords and back beat, Orrall started singing:

(Listen to the song here.)

Al Gore lives on my street,  
Three-twenty-something, Lynwood Boulevard.  
And, he doesn’t know me  
but I voted for him. Yeah, I punched the card!  
I don’t know how he lives with knowing,  
That even though he won the popular vote  
He still lives on my street, right down the street  
From me.

Soon, everyone in the car started laughing, maybe Gore most of all, and Tipper was whacking her palm against her knee in time with the drums:

One time, I had a bike  
And I was a kid, and someone stole it from me  
And still I’m mad about that,  
Carrying anger, I just can’t let it be.  
I need to be more forgiving, I know it,  
'Cause even with the popular vote,  
Al Gore lives on my street, right down the street,  
From me.

After another chorus comically contrasting Orrall’s childhood defeat and self-pity to Gore’s historical disappointment and recovery, the chorus takes its climactic turn:

Life isn’t fair, don’t tell me, I know it  
'Cause even with the popular vote,  
Al Gore lives on my street, right down the street from me [repeats]  
President Gore lives on my street, right down the street from me.

Finally, the song seemed to be ending, but then came the voice of Gore himself: “Hey, man, I like your song, but you need to get over all that stuff. Hey, this is a great neighborhood!”

Everyone applauded, and Orrall kept driving.

After a while, we started talking about Michael Moore’s movie “Fahrenheit 9/11,” and the opening scenes, which show perhaps the most painful scene in Gore’s political life—the day he had to preside over a joint session of Congress in his role as President of the Senate as it certified the votes of the Electoral College, a process that was repeatedly interrupted by various African-American members of the House who tried, and failed, to gain the floor and object to the proceedings. It was Gore, of course, who had to follow the rules of order and send them to their seats, all the while knowing that his defense of decorum and law would be seen as a kind of self-flagellation, a defense of a man he disdained, or would come to disdain.

“It’s unbelievable, that scene,” Orrall said.

There was a long pause, and then Gore said, “We haven’t had a chance to see it yet. We were on vacation when it came out.” Gore made it sound as if he had missed an opportunity to see “Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle,” but Tipper said, “I’m not sure I could watch it.”

Gore remarked that he had been on Al Franken’s radio show not long ago. “I called in from Nashville,” he said. The guest was Michael

Moore. Franken went into his New Age therapist Stuart Smalley routine, and, with both Gore and Moore on the line, said, “Now, Michael, is there something you’d like to say to the Vice-President?”

In 2000, Moore and others on the left gave support to the third-party candidacy of Ralph Nader, who was campaigning on the notion that there was no difference between Gore and Bush. Without Nader in the race, Gore would likely have won the Presidency, even excluding Florida.

“We’re really sorry, Al,” Moore said.

Gore laughed as he recalled the story: “I gave it a big pause and said, ‘For what, Michael?’ And then he gave a whole complicated explanation about how he was voting in New York State, which wasn’t in play, and how Nader had promised not to campaign in any swing states, and blah-blah-blah. So I said, ‘That sounds *aw-fully* complicated, Michael.’” (Afterward, I listened to the exchange on the Internet. Franken remarked that it was really “not a full-on apology” and Moore made sure to tell Gore, “You’re more liberal than you were four years ago.”) Later, Gore told me, “I did see ‘Bowling for Columbine.’ I really appreciate what he’s trying to do, but I wouldn’t have thought before seeing the movie that anyone could have aroused any sympathy in me for Charlton Heston. And yet he did. . . . I’m sure there is some of that in ‘Fahrenheit 9/11.’”

Orrall pulled the VW into the parking lot of the Belcourt Theatre. Someone pointed him in the direction of a space that had been saved with an orange traffic cone.

“Hey!” Gore said. “We’ve got an orange cone!”

As the Gores went through a side door, they met Bob Titley, one of the co-founders of the Music Row Democrats. Nashville is a center of the music industry, and the area around Sixteenth Avenue, where all the main recording and publishing companies have their offices, is called Music Row. For the most part, the country-music business is Republican. But there have always been exceptions, as when one of the Dixie Chicks said, last year, that she was ashamed of having Bush as President. When the Dixie Chicks were roundly denounced, a number of executives and songwriters in Nashville decided to start the new group.

“Is there any reason you haven’t invited me to one of your Kerry-oke nights?” Gore asked Titley.

“We were saving you for a really big night,” he said.

Orrall took the stage, plugged a performance he was making that evening at a local club, the Bluebird Café, and efficiently introduced the day’s speaker. “He won the popular vote . . . and he lives down the street from me!” Gore, who was now wearing a jacket and tie, came out to a standing ovation, and he was smiling broadly and waving and doing that mouthing-gratitude-delightedly-pointing-out-friends-in-the-crowd thing that politicians do. He had torn into the Bush Administration quite often lately, and he knew well the particulars of his indictment.

When the crowd finally quieted down, he thanked a few people and said, “Hello. I’m Al Gore, and I used to be the next President of the United States.”

Everyone laughed. He kept his practiced deadpan. “I don’t find that particularly funny,” he said.

Everyone laughed again. “Put yourself in my position. I flew on Air Force Two for eight years. Now I have to take off my shoes to get on an airplane.

“Not long ago, I was on Interstate 40 going from here to Carthage. We were driving ourselves. I looked in the rearview mirror. There was no motorcade. You heard of phantom-limb pain?” At around dinnertime, at the Lebanon exit, he went on, the Gores found a Shoney’s—“a low-cost family restaurant”—and the waitress made a fuss over Tipper and then went to the next booth and said, “He’s come down a long way, hasn’t he?” Not long afterward, Gore said, he flew to Nigeria on a Gulfstream V to give a speech on energy. In that speech, he told the story about what had happened at dinner back in Tennessee, carefully explaining what a Shoney’s was. On the way home from Africa, the plane stopped to refuel in the Azores. While Gore was waiting on the tarmac, a man came running with an urgent message, “Mr. Vice-President! You have to call Washington!” and handed him some wire copy.

“I wondered what could be wrong in Washington,” Gore said. “Then I realized—a whole *bunch* of things.”

It turned out that a reporter in Lagos had mixed things up and written a story saying that Gore had “opened a low-cost family restaurant called Shoney’s.”

Well, Gore said, “Later, I got a letter from Bill Clinton saying, ‘Congratulations on the new restaurant.’ See, we like to celebrate each other’s successes.”

**T**here is something about the postmodern way that Gore has masked his outrage about the 2000 election with a distinct blend of uncomplaining poise and media-age irony which keeps him separate in our minds from the three men in American history who have

shared his peculiar fate: Andrew Jackson, Grover Cleveland, and Samuel Tilden.

When Jackson lost the election in 1824 to John Quincy Adams despite winning the popular vote, he never ceased charging fraud and raging against the “cheating and corruption and bribery” of the system, to say nothing of the treachery of Henry Clay, who traded his own electors to Adams for the office of Secretary of State. Four years later, Jackson ran again and won.

Cleveland, running for reelection in 1888, lost the electoral vote to Benjamin Harrison but quickly assured his supporters that he would be redeemed. Take care of the furnishings in the White House, his wife, Frances, told staffers—we’ll be back. Cleveland gained his second term, and his revenge, four years later.

Tilden was different. A New York Democrat, Samuel Tilden was a reform-minded governor who made a high-minded challenge to Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876. Tilden seemed the clear winner of the popular vote, but when disputed returns came in from four states, particularly Florida, Congress appointed a special electoral commission, which was controlled, in the main, by the Republican Party. The commission voted on partisan lines to give Hayes the electoral votes in question, and Tilden lost. He was viewed as intelligent but awkward and remote; he was criticized for being too weak, too hesitant to challenge the commission with the necessary ferocity. Instead of pressing the case politically, he decamped to Europe, and eventually retreated to Graystone, his estate in Yonkers. Faced with the decision of whether to run in 1880, Tilden wrote a letter declining: “I desire nothing so much as an honorable discharge.” He rarely left Graystone, and died in 1886. Tilden’s tombstone was engraved, “I Still Trust the People.”

Al Gore handled his defeat and, ultimately, his decision to stay out of the 2004 Presidential race in ways that echoed Tilden’s. After the Supreme Court decision, and after Gore decided not to pursue a “scorched earth” strategy of undermining Bush’s legitimacy in the press and in the courts, he gave a concession speech on December 13, 2000, that will be remembered as one with nearly perfect equanimity and pitch, a speech that exalted the rule of law and seemed to go a long way toward cooling the public war and his own inner rage. To write that speech, Gore drew on the bitter defeat in 1970 of Al Gore, Sr., at the hands of a race-baiting opponent. “As for the battle that ends tonight,” he said, “I do believe, as my father once said, that no matter how hard the loss, defeat might serve as well as victory to shape the soul and let the glory out.”

Gore’s tone was elegiac, but, like Tilden, he still faced a decision, and it was solely within the Gore family that the decision would be made. Even during the campaign, Gore was surrounded mainly by paid professionals, not loyalists. And, afterward, his circle, such as it was, fractured and went its own way. Unlike Clinton, who could draw on a huge pool of friends for advice, Gore lacked the gift, or the patience, for showing gratitude, for keeping in close touch. Donna Brazile complained that she had never got so much as a thank-you note for her service in 2000, and many who had worked for Gore or who had given serious money to the campaign felt the same. “He treated people poorly,” Robert Bauer, one of Gore’s aides during the Florida battle, said. “He was cold, aloof, condescending, ungrateful. There were legendary stories about how he treated people with a lack of gratitude. There is a strange character in Gore. . . . He is an isolated man.” Other aides were less harsh, saying that Gore was brusque and demanding but not unkind. Yet, once freed of the apparatus and the requirements of a political campaign, Gore really did savor his time alone, thinking, reading, writing speeches, surfing the Internet. “One thing about Gore personally is that he is an introvert,” another former aide said. “Politics was a horrible career choice for him. He should have been a college professor or a scientist or an engineer. He would have been happier. He finds dealing with other people draining. And so he has trouble keeping up his relations with people. The classical difference between an introvert and an extrovert is that if you send an introvert into a reception or an event with a hundred other people he will emerge with less energy than he had going in; an extrovert will come out of that event energized, with more energy than he had going in. Gore needs a rest after an event; Clinton would leave invigorated, because dealing with people came naturally to him.”

Gore ran for President in the shadow of Clinton: in the shadow of Clinton’s talents and his mistakes—most of all, the affair with Monica Lewinsky, the supreme gift to the Republican opposition. After it became clear that Clinton had lied to his wife, to Gore, to everyone, that he had, in fact, carried on the affair, the Clinton-Gore relationship, which had been more formal than advertised, collapsed nearly into silence. Gore’s choice for his running mate, Joe Lieberman, was heavily influenced by Lieberman’s moral denunciations of Clinton.

“I could not persuade Gore to use Clinton,” Tony Coelho, the campaign chairman, said. “Gore felt strongly that there were people who wouldn’t support him if he did. To a great extent, Clinton was dismissive of his own errors. So, to him, infidelity was not that big of an issue. To Al Gore, it meant something. Al is a loyal and committed husband to Tipper. They are like teen-agers in love, so the act was not to be dismissed. For him, it was real. He felt that Clinton had never publicly owned up to it. They would meet—Clinton and Gore—because we would schedule things. It was strained, even hostile at times. Al is a guy who would rather deal head on than pretend, and he tried that with Clinton. Clinton would just as soon laugh it off and move on.”

Not long after September 11, 2001, Gore, who had been travelling, visited Clinton in Chappaqua, New York. Their fallen relationship now seemed repaired. Nearly everyone in the Gore camp still believes that Clinton dearly wanted to see his Vice-President succeed him, but some suspect that he was not entirely displeased that the defeat left more room on the political stage for Hillary. The relationship between Gore and Hillary had long been complicated, sometimes cool.

In the summer of 2001, Gore had ended his silence and launched a public critique of the Bush Administration with a speech in Florida. However, after the terror attacks, he declared Bush “my Commander-in-Chief,” a gesture meant to promote unity and not offend the national mood. But by September, 2002, as the Bush Administration started its march toward a war in Iraq, Gore ended his discretion with a withering speech at the Commonwealth Club, in San Francisco, aimed at the Administration’s foreign policy. Gore, who was one of the

few Democrats to vote in favor of the 1991 resolution in Congress endorsing the first Gulf War, now said that an American-led invasion of Iraq would undermine the attempt to dismantle Al Qaeda and damage the multilateral ties necessary to combat terrorism:

If we quickly succeed in a war against the weakened and depleted fourth-rate military of Iraq, and then quickly abandon that nation, as President Bush has quickly abandoned almost all of Afghanistan after defeating a fifth-rate military power there, then the resulting chaos in the aftermath of a military victory in Iraq could easily pose a far greater danger to the United States than we presently face from Saddam.

Gore's challenge to the Bush White House to present real evidence of a link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11 was, in both tone and substance, more critical than any speech yet delivered by the candidates in the Democratic field. Suddenly, the prospect of a Gore candidacy hit the media in a wave.

"I wasn't surprised by Bush's economic policies, but I was surprised by the foreign policy, and I think he was, too," Gore told me. "The real distinction of this Presidency is that, at its core, he is a very weak man. He projects himself as incredibly strong, but behind closed doors he is incapable of saying no to his biggest financial supporters and his coalition in the Oval Office. He's been shockingly malleable to Cheney and Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz and the whole New American Century bunch. He was rolled in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. He was too weak to resist it.

"I'm not of the school that questions his intelligence," Gore went on. "There are different kinds of intelligence, and it's arrogant for a person with one kind of intelligence to question someone with another kind. He certainly is a master at some things, and he has a following. He seeks strength in simplicity. But, in today's world, that's often a problem. I don't think that he's weak intellectually. I think that he is incurious. It's astonishing to me that he'd spend an hour with his incoming Secretary of the Treasury and not ask him a single question. But I think his weakness is a moral weakness. I think he is a bully, and, like all bullies, he's a coward when confronted with a force that he's fearful of. His reaction to the extravagant and unbelievably selfish wish list of the wealthy interest groups that put him in the White House is obsequious. The degree of obsequiousness that is involved in saying 'yes, yes, yes, yes, yes' to whatever these people want, no matter the damage and harm done to the nation as a whole—that can come only from genuine moral cowardice. I don't see any other explanation for it, because it's not a question of principle. The only common denominator is each of the groups has a lot of money that they're willing to put in service to his political fortunes and their ferocious and unyielding pursuit of public policies that benefit them at the expense of the nation."

The rumors were that Gore would choose whether or not he would challenge Bush before the end of 2002. History will record that he declared his non-candidacy not on December 15th, on "60 Minutes," but, rather, a day earlier, when he appeared as the guest host of "Saturday Night Live." In the opening monologue, Gore said, "The good news about not being President is that I have my weekends free. The bad news is that my weekdays are also free. But I just want to say at the outset, tonight is not about rehashing things from the past. I mean, we all know there are things I should have done differently in the 2000 campaign. Maybe at times I was too wooden and stiff and I sighed too much and people said I was too patronizing. Patronizing, of course, means talking to people like they're stupid."

In a sketch that parodied his selection process for a Vice-Presidential candidate, Gore was soaking in a hot tub with "Joe Lieberman." Al Franken, playing a self-help therapist in another sketch, told Gore that, when he was in his bearded phase, "I think it's pretty clear that you were in a humongous shame spiral." And, later, with Martin Sheen showing him around the soundstage of "The West Wing," Gore settled dreamily into the President's chair on the Oval Office set.

"Say, John," Gore asked John Spencer, who plays the chief of staff. "Could you do me a small favor?"

"Of course."

"I'm going to stand here at the window with my back to you and I'd like you to step up to the desk and say, 'Mr. President, the Joint Chiefs want an answer.'"

These were not the stunts of a man preparing to run for national office.

The next night, dressed in a proper suit and wearing a properly sober expression, Gore made it official. He told Lesley Stahl, "I've come to closure on this." A rematch with Bush, Gore felt, would be counterproductive; it would focus too much on 2000. Others around Gore accepted that but also said that Bush seemed popular, even unbeatable at the time. In the *Times* the next morning, Katharine Seelye, a reporter who had tormented Gore during the campaign with what he thought was her endless sniping at his gaffes, real and imagined, declared Al Gore "liberated."

At the Belcourt Theatre, after the opening volley of self-deflations, Gore moved on from praise of the "Clinton-Gore Administration" to a scathing critique of the Bush Administration. He rehearsed all the themes that have obsessed him for many months: the headlong rush to war, the manipulation of intelligence, the rollback of civil liberties, the "shame" and "betrayal" of Abu Ghraib, the exploitation of the war to manipulate the election campaign. ("He's . . . using the war! Using the division! Fostering the fear!") The one new spice of the day was a denunciation of Bush's nominee to head the C.I.A., Porter Goss, who had attacked John Kerry on the floor of the House of Representatives. Goss, Gore declared, was an inadmissibly partisan choice.

Gore's main policy speeches, which have been organized by MoveOn.org and the American Constitution Society for Law and Policy, are

stripped of the sort of pedantry that sometimes wanders into his conversation. For the most part, they are cogent presentations of the anti-Bush critique familiar to readers of the more liberal editorial pages and columnists. What gives them their added force is the speaker himself, the authority of his having won the popular vote, and his Senate and White House credentials on foreign policy, the environment, and nuclear proliferation.

When I saw Gore deliver one of these speeches in Washington, and when I watched the others on tape, he was far less formal and awkward than he had been during the 2000 campaign. The shadow of Clinton's preternatural performance skills hangs over Gore (just as it does now over Kerry), and here and there, in an effort to show passion, Gore turns his volume dial a little into the feverish zone. He begins to shout, to sweat, to meander past the borderline of passion into the wilderness of hysteria. But only rarely. Those overheated moments, of course, were the ones featured most prominently not only on Fox but on CNN, where Soledad O'Brien informed viewers with all due objectivity that Gore had indulged himself in a public "rant."

Gore's Republican and conservative critics were both ferocious and mocking. The news outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch were especially quick to show Gore at his sweatiest, and quoted his most incendiary language. Writing in the *Post*, John Podhoretz declared, "It is now clear that Al Gore is insane. . . . A man who was very, very nearly President of the United States has been reduced to sounding like one of those people in Times Square with a megaphone screaming about God's justice." David Frum, a former speechwriter for Bush, wrote of Gore's "emotional deterioration" and suggested that he "ought to seek out for his own good a cool and quiet darkened room." And Charles Krauthammer, a columnist for the Washington *Post* who was once a practicing psychiatrist, went on Fox News Channel's "Special Report" and delivered a diagnosis: "It looks as if Al Gore has gone off his lithium again."

Among Gore's allies, the reaction was mainly positive, but not purely so. One said that Gore was "playing both ends of the game," combining the "MoveOn.org shtick" and a new life in big banking. "The speeches make me sick," the friend said, pointing especially to the use of "gulag" to describe American-run prisons. "I can't imagine a scenario of return. He's linked himself to the extreme left wing of the Party with these speeches. He'd say it's not true, but it is." That tends to be the view of some who put faith in Gore's New Democrat half, the Gore who was tough on deficit spending and ready to use the big stick in Bosnia and Kosovo. But most of his allies, the more liberal and the more forgiving ones, endorsed the tone of the attack as precisely what his speeches four years ago lacked: clarity, conviction, even fearlessness. Eli Attie, a speechwriter for Gore who now writes scripts for "The West Wing," said, "These are fierce times, and Gore's responding to them with fierce, passionate language. What's he got to lose, really?" Lisa Brown, who was counsel to Gore in the White House, said that, while Gore has moved left, "I don't think he's crossed the line into conspiracy thinking."

When Gore finished his speech at the Belcourt, he won another standing ovation. Offstage, he posed for pictures. His collar was saturated, his face was reddened. It had not been particularly hot onstage.

On the ride back to Belle Meade, Gore started theorizing about the November election. "Twenty-eight elected Presidents have run for a second term and almost none of those elections were close," he said. "Ten were defeated, and there were eighteen victories. Of the ten defeats, they include one who won the popular vote. The exceptions are Ford and Truman, but neither one of them was elected in the first place. And Truman's election has the memory of closeness because of that incorrect newspaper headline, but it was actually about three or four points, if memory serves. This all implies that the election is a referendum on the incumbent. In information-theory terms, the voters have so much more information on the incumbent because they have had four years to watch him, and the opponent is a subsidiary question: Will the challenger be reasonably O.K.?"

Gore, of course, believes that Kerry is more than reasonably O.K. The two men went to the Senate together in 1984 and shared some of the same qualities: intellectual seriousness, aloofness, a background of privilege and high expectations. They were hardy friends.

When I asked Gore about their relationship, he said, "In the first year, it started off as . . . um . . . competitive. We worked on some of the same issues in the same way, and that can be a formula for a difficult relationship. But he took the initiative to reach out to me and to identify the fact that he felt the relationship was not what it could be and should be and asked to sit down and talk about it and jointly create a basis for a much better working relationship. I appreciated that and was impressed by that. In the aftermath of that, we almost always worked together extremely well."

Five years ago, Kerry was wondering aloud whether he, and not Gore, should be the Party's nominee to succeed Clinton.

"He did make noise about it, to me," Gore said. "He was straightforward with me about it. He told me why, exactly what his thinking was. He thought he'd be a good candidate, it might be his last shot, he might well do it, and blah-blah-blah. I told him why I thought it would be a mistake to do it and obviously I had a self-interest in saying it."

Did Kerry feel that Gore was damaged-goods-by-association after the impeachment? I asked.

"He didn't couch it in terms of criticism of me or my prospects but, rather, in his belief that he could do a better job or be a better candidate." Gore smiled. Then he un-smiled and spoke . . . very . . . carefully. "I wasn't angry. If he had thought those things and pursued those options and didn't talk to me about it, well, that might have made me angry." When it came time for Gore to choose a Vice-Presidential nominee, his shortlist included Kerry and John Edwards.



Back at the house, Gore took off his jacket and tie and sat down at the dining-room table. Dwayne served a lunch of lamb chops fanned out over a bed of seasoned greens. Another servant set down large pitchers of water and iced tea.

As Gore tucked into his chops, he said he was quite convinced that Kerry would win in November.

“Bush’s failures have been spectacular,” he said. “The evidence of deceit, miscalculation have combined to produce in the minds of a lot of people a growing conviction that it’s really not good for America.”

Then why were the polls showing the race as being so tight?

“I always try to tell people that it’s going to be very close and it’s extremely important that everybody do their part, but my own prediction is that in the end it’s probably not going to be that close. I think it’s in the process of tipping right now. Also, the Republican right wing has launched a kind of civil cold war in a very ruthless fashion.”

Gore kept an open laptop at hand as we ate. (He and Tipper have matching Apple G4s. “What did you expect?” she said. “I live with the man who *invented* the Internet.”) He bookmarks the Internet to some of the more expected outlets—the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, Google News—but also to left-leaning sites like mediawhoresonline.com and truthout.com. From his reading, online and elsewhere, he has grown more convinced that, in the wake of the Goldwater collapse, in 1964, and the anti-Vietnam War movement, American conservatives were determined to “play a long game” and organize themselves, ideologically, financially, and intellectually, to win national elections and carry out a conservative revolution. Gore is interested in a memorandum written at the request of a committee chairman of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce by a Virginia attorney named Lewis F. Powell, Jr., and dated August 23, 1971, just two months before Nixon nominated Powell to the Supreme Court. The Powell memorandum portrays the American economic system as “under broad attack” by well-funded leftists, who dominate the media, academia, and even some corners of the political world. The memo describes a battle for the survival of free enterprise, and calls for less “hesitation” and “a more aggressive attitude” on all fronts. The memo was marked “confidential” and was distributed to chambers of commerce and leading executives around the nation.

As a Supreme Court Justice, Powell turned out to be a moderate, but the conservative movement did help its favored candidates, not least Ronald Reagan. I asked Gore if he thought that Hillary Clinton, in the midst of the Lewinsky period, had been right to raise the spectre of a “vast right-wing conspiracy.”

“It’s hard to separate the phrase from all the dicta that have grown up around it,” he said. “It stands for something it wasn’t originally intended to mean. The word ‘vast’ is accurate; the phrase ‘right-wing’ is accurate; it’s the word ‘conspiracy’ that people want to modify, because it implies to many who hear it something that I don’t think Hillary intended when she used it. I’m sure my phrase ‘civil cold war’ is vulnerable to even worse misinterpretations.”

Gore was quick to distinguish the Bush Administration from any predecessor. Things were “much worse” now, in his view, than in the nineteen-eighties. “The experience of the Reagan Administration was in many ways disappointing to the right wing,” he said. “It was satisfying to have a champion who won the hearts of so many Americans and was so eloquent as a presenter of many of their ideas, but it was deeply disappointing to them that he bowed to reason far more than they would have wanted. The largest tax increase in history was not the Clinton-Gore increase in ’93 but what Reagan did in ’82. That was really disturbing to them. His arms-control initiatives, which I was a big part of, were very troubling to people like Richard Perle, who is very prominent in the genesis of the Iraq policy. There was a determination, in the aftermath of the Reagan experience, to prepare themselves for the next opportunity they had. So that they would be comprehensive and uncompromising across the board. Then, when Gingrich and his crew succeeded, in ’94, they laid the foundation for the identification of all the discrete levers of power and particular programs, policies, offices, agencies that needed, in their view, to be transformed. . . . Bush, as a candidate, basically shook hands with this collection of groups that were bound together to respect each other’s respective self-interest. What they had in common was that they were all powerful and had a set of objectives that were counter to the public interest.”

Gore refreshed himself with a long sip of tea. The chops and the greens had been dispatched and a fruity granita, served in tall crystal cups, had been placed before us. He polished off the ice and checked his laptop. Then he began talking about the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the old “bipolar” world.

“One consequence is that there is an emergent triumphalism among market fundamentalists that has assumed an attitude of infallibility and arrogance that has led its adherents to be dismissive and contemptuous of values that are not monetized if they don’t fit into their ideology.”

What’s missing? I asked.

“Families, the environment, communities, the beauty of life, the arts. Abraham Maslow, best known for his hierarchy of needs, had a dictum that if the only tool you use is a hammer, then every problem begins to look like a nail. Translating that into this discussion: If the only tool you use for measuring value is a price tag or monetization, then those values that are not easily monetized begin to look like they have no value. And so there’s an easy contempt, which they summon on a moment’s notice for tree-huggers or people concerned about global warming.”

And yet the Bush ideology is tinged with religious belief, I said. Not everything comes with a price tag attached.

Gore's mouth tightened. A Southern Baptist, he, too, had declared himself born again, but he clearly had disdain for Bush's public kind of faith. "It's a particular kind of religiosity," he said. "It's the American version of the same fundamentalist impulse that we see in Saudi Arabia, in Kashmir, in religions around the world: Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim. They all have certain features in common. In a world of disconcerting change, when large and complex forces threaten familiar and comfortable guideposts, the natural impulse is to grab hold of the tree trunk that seems to have the deepest roots and hold on for dear life and never question the possibility that it's not going to be the source of your salvation. And the deepest roots are in philosophical and religious traditions that go way back. You don't hear very much from them about the Sermon on the Mount, you don't hear very much about the teachings of Jesus on giving to the poor, or the beatitudes. It's the vengeance, the brimstone."

Tipper had gone out to lunch with Bob Orrall's wife, Christine, and now they were back.

Recently, Tipper had bought three designer flyswatters and wanted to show them off.

"Flyswatters?"

"You can catch them with your hand, Al, but check these out."

Tipper produced three extraordinarily artful flyswatters and laid them out on the dining-room table.

"Hey, Christine," Gore said, "how do I call up Bob's paintings on the Internet? I want to show . . ."

Christine, a woman far less theatrical than her husband, told him.

Gore typed in the correct URL and the right thing happened. He had not looked so delighted all day.

"Bob does these paintings about all these childhood traumas of his and then he writes about it on the canvas."

"We were in marriage counselling," Christine said, "and then he started doing these things about childhood memories instead."

"That must have been cheaper than therapy," Gore said.

"Well, we're still married!"

Gore swung his laptop around and started calling the paintings up on the screen and reading the captions. One of them showed a group of people gathered around a child at an amusement park. The writing on it said, "Don't throw up at Disneyland. Everyone acts like you broke the law or something, and your parents try to pretend you're someone else's kid. Then they mark off the area like it's a crime scene and these guys who clean it up are wearing radiation suits. I'm not kidding. Then it's 'Well I think we've had enough for one day,' and back to sharing a bed with your brothers at the Howard Johnson Motor Lodge."

Gore was laughing very loudly. "That was traumatic, wasn't it?" he said. Then he started clicking again on the laptop. "Where's the one where he was so fat he was hiding pencils in the rolls of his belly?"

Then Gore said, "Now this has become a profit center for your family, hasn't it?"

"Lucinda Williams bought five of them," Christine said. "You know, she really—"

Gore interrupted. There was real excitement in his voice, half sincere, half Mr. Goofy.

"Look, honey, I committed news!"

Gore had Googled his speech at the Belcourt, and there was a story on the wires about it. The first paragraphs were about his criticism of Porter Goss.

Before Christine left, she and Tipper and Al made plans for the weekend. They might have dinner, go hear some music at the Bluebird or somewhere.

Gore kept looking at the computer screen.

"As a general rule, where news is concerned, if you are the President you have a travelling press corps, and if you are the Party's nominee you do, too," he said. "But with those two exceptions, outside of the Scott Peterson trial, nothing—a speech, a proposal, something in the democratic discourse—nothing will be national news unless it occurs within a ten-minute cab ride of downtown Manhattan or downtown Washington, D.C. Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Louis—they don't exist. This thing here about the speech? It'll just be a little A.P. storylet. That's about it."

ore's one moment to transcend the storylets of the wire service this year was his appearance at the Democratic National Convention, in Boston, in late July. Gore had not intended to stay long. The Party, now led by people who were putting their hopes in John Kerry's prospects, was, by all appearances, willing to give Gore only a tertiary role at the Convention. Rather than remind Democrats of what could have been, rather than arouse any sense of anger or regret, they seemed intent on hiding him. Donna Brazile was right: he had been cast to the curb. The Convention began on a Monday, and that evening was designated "formers" night, with Gore, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton all speaking. But, with the broadcast networks shaving their schedules to minimal coverage, they were giving airtime only to Clinton. The winner of the 2000 popular vote would be the stuff of MSNBC, CNN, and ABC's digital operation. "We're only in town for Al's speech and then we're all getting out of here," said Carter Eskew, who was Gore's strategist in the last campaign. "We've been here, done that, if you know what I mean. This is someone else's party."

"This is a pretty emotional time," Gore's aide, an ex-fund-raiser for the Democrats in his mid-twenties named Josh Cherwin, said. "This should have been a moment of glory, Gore's renomination. Instead, it's pretty damn painful."

I met Gore early on Monday at the Four Seasons Hotel. On the way over, I'd read a story in the *Times* on Gore's Boston appearance, by Katharine Seelye. Gore was made, once more, to look slightly ridiculous.

Gore had promised to do a video greeting for all the state delegations that were having "kickoff" breakfasts in hotel ballrooms around town. He and Cherwin arrived at the room for the bargain-basement broadcast looking bleary-eyed. The Convention speech was especially important for him to get right, even if it was not terribly important to anyone else. This could be his last time at the podium.

Now all Gore had to do was take a seat, look into a camera, and say a few nice words to the delegates—about as routine a political task as can be imagined. And yet the makeup woman worked on him as if she were preparing him for the opening closeup in "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly." After around twenty minutes of having his pores detailed, Gore smiled gamely and said, "This may be the most professional makeup job for a Webcam ever."

"It's actually not a Webcam, sir," someone said. "It's videoconferencing."

"Ah. And that's not just a mute button," Gore said, fumbling with a switch in front of him. "It's an *activation device*."

Everyone else was quiet in that it's-too-early-no-coffee sort of way. Gore, however, seemed desperate to be cheerful. When a technician, who was waiting for his cue, talked about "killing" some noise or another, Gore smiled and said, "I'll try not to say 'kill.' I was upset about the election, but I'll try not to use the word 'kill.'"

The director asked Gore to test the sound level on his microphone.

Gore nodded and began to speak in the husky whisper of Ronald Reagan: "Ladies and gentlemen, in one minute we will begin . . ."

None of the young technicians seemed to get the reference. The makeup woman did and she smiled.

Then something strange happened—strange if you have never been in the presence of Al Gore. At the instant he was asked to perform, to speak into the camera, his whole body straightened. He smiled a little . . . too much. The smile seemed a form of pain, almost. His voice started into that up-and-down Southern rhythm he used to do, which was meant to be charming and soothing but so often seemed patronizing and irritating. (One kept hearing the echoes of an old "Saturday Night Live" debate parody: ". . . and then ahm gonna put it in a . . . lockbox.")

Finally, he said, "My heart is full and extremely grateful for the opportunity to serve that you gave me." It was over. Gore got up from his seat and, all around town, delegates were free to eat breakfast.

Gore and Cherwin thanked everyone and went back to Gore's suite. The place looked like the workroom for a hurried college thesis, assuming that the student had a thousand dollars a night to spend for a room with a view of the Public Garden. The garbage cans were overflowing with shredded paper. One wall was covered with sheets of paper containing hastily written outline points for the speech.

"I've been up pretty much all night," Gore said. "It's a bad habit I've always had, but I just can't seem to shake it."

The Convention speech, he knew, could not resemble the anti-Bush speeches that he had been delivering around the country. The language had to be tamer, he had to deliver a concise *politic* address, making sure to thank Bill Clinton, pay extensive tribute to John Kerry, and, above all, give no ammunition to the Republican response teams. To make excessive reference to the 2000 election was simply not permissible.

"They look at these speeches pretty closely," he said. "They don't want any Bush-bashing in there." He smiled at the ludicrous idea of it. "No Bush-bashing at the Democratic Convention! It reminds me of the time Steve Martin was giving a speech in honor of Paul Simon at the Kennedy Center Honors a couple of years ago, and he said, 'It would be easy to stand here and talk about Paul Simon's intelligence and skill, but this is neither the time *nor* the place.'"

Gore spent another hour at the Four Seasons greeting old friends—the hotel was the omphalos of the Convention, its center for major politicians, Party bureaucrats, and money people. Gore went down in the elevator with his daughter Kristin, who worked in Los Angeles as

a writer for the animated series “Futurama” and had lately finished a comic novel about political Washington. Like her father, Kristin Gore healed her wounds, at least in part, under a comic bandage. Before publication, one interviewer had asked Kristin why she hadn’t written the novel sooner after the election, and she said that she wanted to avoid a book that sounded like “Sylvia Plath Does D.C.”

Gore, who was wearing a dark suit, and Kristin, who was wearing a T-shirt and running shorts, climbed into the back seat of a Cadillac, the staff got into a minivan, and the mini-motorcade headed for the Fleet Center. After clearing security, the Gores went through a series of back hallways and tunnels heading toward the locker rooms that were serving as greenrooms. As we were walking, Kristin took a sharp breath and said, “This is going to be a strange week.” Gore had to stop every minute or so to greet people. Some seemed delighted to see him, others did that tilted-head sympathy thing.

“It’s old-home week here!” Gore said as someone kissed him on the cheek.

Jim King, who has been a stage manager for Democratic Conventions for years, accompanied Gore to the stairway that led to the stage.

“Hey, Jim! Where’s the rest of you?” Gore said.

We walked up the stairs and onto the stage. The Convention activities would not start for four or five hours. The seats were nearly empty. The vast ceiling of the Fleet Center was crammed with red, white, and blue balloons, all held back with netting. They were John Kerry’s balloons. While Gore was looking at the ceiling, King was telling him to watch out for the cables and various other hazards that could cause embarrassment and a broken ankle.

“Is this the OSHA part of the briefing?” Gore said.

**T**hat night, at a few minutes to eight, more than two hours before the network broadcasts, Governor Bill Richardson, of New Mexico, introduced the former Vice-President: “a visionary . . . a fighter . . . one of this country’s greatest leaders and patriots, and on Election Day 2000 the man who the people chose to be the President of the United States.”

Gore came out waving and smiling, and said, “My friends, fellow-Democrats, fellow-Americans: I’m going to be candid with you. I had hoped to be back here this week under different circumstances, running for reelection. But you know the old saying”—here it came—“You win some, you lose some. And then there’s that little-known third category.”

Big laugh in the hall.

“I didn’t come here tonight to talk about the past. After all, I don’t want you to think I lie awake at night counting and recounting sheep. I prefer to focus on the future, because I know from my own experience that America is a land of opportunity, where every little boy and girl has a chance to grow up and win the popular vote. In all seriousness . . .”

Gore received an ovation of just over a minute before his speech and about thirty seconds after it. The initial self-deprecation, then the direct, yet restrained, indictment of the sitting President, then the gestures of support for Kerry and gratitude for Clinton, were all well marshalled, well written, and inoffensive to the barons of the Convention. The politician known in 2000 for his dramatic exasperation, his awkward self-presentation, had been modest, intelligent, and poised.

No matter. By night’s end, all anyone talked about was Bill Clinton’s dazzling performance. The networks had ignored Gore, and most papers gave him only storylets. By the time John Kerry arrived in Boston to accept the nomination, Gore was gone, watching it all in his living room with friends in Nashville.

**A**I Gore will not bleed for public consumption. He will not rehearse his old resentments—against the Clintons, against the press, against Katharine Harris and Jeb Bush, against the Supreme Court, against Ralph Nader, against Bob Woodward (“Don’t get me started”). We spoke for hours, and at the first mention of the 2000 election Gore stopped everything. He wasn’t going there—not with any specificity, anyway. He said, “Let me pause for a moment. When I called you and invited you to come to the speech and the Convention, I told you that the reason I made an exception to not doing interviews now is because I’ve had so many experiences where the initial premise of the story becomes the leading edge of a wedge to open up a much broader discourse.” Gore now spoke with many pauses, which is the measure he takes when he wants to get something just right for print. “I don’t mean to convey any distrust . . . but just to convey my sense of caution—there’s an element of self-soothing here—I don’t really want to get into a full dialogue on the 2000 campaign, because at another time and in another venue I may want to treat that fully. I use a different standard in deciding what to say and not to say about the 2000 campaign, because I think more time needs to pass both for me and for most of the people who would read what I have to say about that. I think it’s still a very . . . Forty-nine per cent of the people are still not ready to hear what I have to say about it without assuming it’s not distorted by partisan motives on my part. . . . At the right time, I’ll have a lot to say about it. I myself need more perspective on it.” The language was formal, the voice as pained as it was cautious. “There is so much inside of me related to the election of 2000 that, even though I know pretty much what I want to say, it takes more time. It’s taken more time for me to feel that it is in a form that it can make the maximum contribution that I can make to extruding deeper meanings out of that election. Now, that may be a banality on stilts . . .”

Among the columnists and political professionals, Gore squandered no small amount of his remaining political capital last year when he endorsed Howard Dean for the Democratic nomination. At the time, pre-Scream, Dean seemed the likely nominee, and Gore appeared to add an establishment credential. But soon, post-Scream, post-free fall, even Dean himself admitted that his candidacy had begun to plummet at the precise moment of the endorsement, making it seem the ultimate kiss of death.

Many of Gore's former aides told me that they thought he endorsed Dean because the Vermont governor was running the sort of campaign—grass-roots, Internet-generated, hellbent—that he wishes he had run in 2000. That “psychoanalytic” interpretation, Gore said, was nonsense. The real reason was that, above all, Dean was the one candidate who, like Gore himself, was speaking out in unalloyed opposition to the war in Iraq.

“I think Bush put forward a counterfeit large vision,” Gore said. “The war in Iraq was postured as a big idea. Well, it was a big dumb idea. And, again, I don't think he's dumb, but I think that idea is dumb.”

Gore remains engaged, serious, credentialled. It is still easy to imagine him as a good, if unloved, President. And yet one trait persists—and it is a trait that he shares with George W. Bush. He is extremely reluctant to admit a mistake, even a small one. Midway through our talks in Nashville, I asked him what was the biggest mistake he had ever made in politics. He paused, made false starts, paused again, and recalled that in the campaign four years ago he had a prepared response for just such a question. But he couldn't remember what it was.

“Maybe it was my sugar-subsidies vote?” he ventured.

I asked him about his failure to alert his former running mate, Joe Lieberman, that he was endorsing Dean.

“I, uh, consider Joe a friend,” Gore began. “I feel badly that his feelings were hurt. And, uh, I think that some people in his campaign convinced him that this might be a positive by trying to use it. I actually tried many times to call him before the public announcement, and could not.”

Did he think that the Lieberman campaign had tried deliberately to gain political advantage from the incident?

“I, uh, don't know that for certain, so I won't say it. The only important thing is that I failed to personally tell him before the announcement.”

Just before dinner, Gore checked his Treo.

“Hey,” he said as we were walking near the pool. “I just got an e-mail about Jim McGreevey. He's gonna resign as governor in New Jersey. Can you guess why? Let's play multiple choice.”

I guessed “C”—the right answer—and Gore did a Mack Sennett double take.

“Whoa! How'd you know that?”

Dwayne laid out an early dinner for three outside: blackened salmon, greens, good white wine. We had to leave soon. Norah Jones and her band were giving a concert that night at the Grand Ole Opry House, about half an hour away. Before eating, we had talked about the two Bush Administration figures who had also been in the Clinton-Gore circle: Colin Powell and George Tenet.

Gore said that he still considered Powell a friend, “but it's transparent to everybody that he was marginalized. Because the right wing distrusted his values and instincts, he was made a figurehead, largely. . . . We've seen them”—Powell and his wife—“socially and I like him and respect him a lot, but I think he has been (a) badly treated by this Administration and (b) allowed himself to be used in ways that have been harmful to him—more important, harmful to the country. He should have resigned, in my opinion. Absolutely. I winced quite a few times when I watched him during his presentation to the United Nations. That was a very painful experience to watch. . . . I am not accusing him of knowingly cooking the books. I think it's far more complex and nuanced than that.

“I think that one thing that both Powell and Tenet share is a feeling of personal debt to President Bush and the Bush family. In both cases, the personal debt came to play a larger role in determining their decisions on when they should draw the line and say, ‘Enough. I can't go along with this.’”

We ate quickly and headed for the Cadillac. Gore drove; Tipper, with directions on her lap, showed the way. Gore told a very funny story about a secret meeting with the former Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin (“the sober one”) which he declared “off the record for national-security reasons.”

Tipper's directions were flawless and Gore followed them—a rarity in the history of the marital institution.

When we arrived at Opryland, a parking spot had been saved for the Gores.

“There's no more motorcade,” Tipper said as we got out of the car. “It's just me.”

We'd arrived five or ten minutes before the opening act came out, and Gore preferred to wait in the shadows rather than take his seat and have to be himself, say hello, perform.

When the lights went down, we scurried to our seats.

The Gores enjoyed the concert—they both know a lot about the rock and roll of their generation and the current country-music scene—but in between acts a few people came over wanting time, wanting to connect.

“Norah Jones *and* Al Gore . . . in one night!” someone said.

Another man came over and he and Gore started talking, in great detail, about some schoolchildren in Whitwell, Tennessee, who had made a Holocaust memorial out of more than eleven million paper clips.

After the concert, the Gores were in a good mood and offered to drive me around Nashville before dropping me at my hotel. Gore was even thinking about stopping by the Bluebird if there was time to catch Bob Orrall's show.

We passed by the music offices on Sixteenth Avenue, the clubs downtown, the waterfront, the Ryman Auditorium, the Ernest Tubb record store.

Tipper squirted some amber goo on her hands and rubbed them together and squirted some on her husband's hands when we were waiting at a red light.

“Hand cleanser,” she said in a professional tone, turning toward the back seat. “Want some? We've been shaking a lot of hands.”

We were talking about whether Gore was going to write a book, and I asked him if he had read the then-No. 1 best-seller on the nonfiction lists. Gore laughed and said, “I haven't read Clinton's book.”

We passed the Southern Baptist Convention building. Earlier in the day, Gore had made a point of telling me that he and Clinton used to pray together in the White House. I asked him which church in Nashville he and Tipper attended now.

There was a pause in the front seat.

“We're ecumenical now,” Gore said, finally.

Tipper said with a laugh, “I think I follow Baba Ram Dass.”

“The influx of fundamentalist preachers have pretty much chased us out with their right-wing politics,” Gore added.

This was obviously a detail in a broadly painful subject. Tennessee, which was never particularly liberal, had rejected Al Gore in 2000, a loss that led to the loss of his dream.

“It makes you wonder how you ever got elected to Congress in the first place,” I said.

Gore didn't deny it. “Sometimes I wonder that myself,” he said. ♦