

Making Your Bones

During the final debate of the 1988 presidential campaign, Bernard Shaw of Cable News Network asked Michael Dukakis, “Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?”

“I’ve opposed the death penalty all my life,” Mr. Dukakis replied, and then wandered off into a discussion of murder rates in Massachusetts. He became, on the spot, unelectable. Not only had he never made his bones; he didn’t even want to.

Down in Arkansas, Governor Bill Clinton was watching. During his own race for the presidency four years later, he flew home from New Hampshire in the middle of the primary to oversee in person the execution of a brain-damaged killer, Rickey Ray Rector. Governor Clinton, who knows everything about getting elected, was just doing the necessary.

In their fascinating book, *Homicide*, evolutionary psychologists Margo Wilson and Martin Daly write:

“Having killed is a decided social asset in many, perhaps most, prestate societies. The classic examples are such practices as head-hunting and coup-counting, customs whereby a young man might attain full adult status only by notching his first kill, and experienced killers might add to their honors by running up the list of their victims. Such practices are known from warring tribal societies in all parts of the world.”

In our own warring tribe★, notching that first kill has become an absolute requisite for the Presidency. Consider the record since President Roosevelt.

HARRY TRUMAN HAD KILLED as an artillery captain in World War I. Dwight D. Eisenhower killed on a massive scale in World War II. John F. Kennedy was presumably prepared to kill in the Pacific, although the Japanese sank his PT boat before he had the chance. With the Bay of Pigs, Mr. Kennedy removed all doubt. Lyndon B. Johnson engaged in no combat during his few months in the Navy, although he maneuvered a Silver Star for himself. By 1964, when Mr. Johnson came up for election in his own right, he had killed thousands of people in Vietnam. He used to wear the lapel device for his unearned decoration as he hung the Medal of Honor around the necks of real heroes.

Richard M. Nixon had killed no one by the time he got his party's presidential nomination in 1968, but he was a veteran who talked as if he were capable of manslaughter at the very least. And his opponent, Hubert H. Humphrey, was widely suspected of a private preference for peace over war.

The contrary suspicions about Mr. Nixon were correct. Once in the White House he set right to work on what would be four years of killing.

His opponent for reelection in 1972 was George S. McGovern, whose experience as a decorated combat pilot in World War II had not left him enthusiastic about dealing out death. Senator McGovern's plans for Vietnam were the same as candidate Nixon's secret plan to end the war—a quick surrender—but the senator admitted it. What's more, his party's platform called for an end to capital punishment. The electoral vote was 520 to 17, with the senator carrying only the District of Columbia and Massachusetts.

THE NEXT PRESIDENT, Gerald R. Ford, had won ten battle stars as a naval artillery officer in World War II. He was thus willing to kill, at least at long distance, and he quickly did so again when Pol Pot seized an American merchant ship, the *Mayaguez*. This gave Mr. Ford a welcome opportunity to wag the weenie. He and Mr. Kissinger proceeded to kill an unknown number of Cambodians

and 41 American soldiers during the “rescue” of the 39 crewmen. (They were not precisely rescued; as the White House knew, the crew was in the process of being freed before the attack.)

Then came Jimmy Carter, who couldn’t have killed anybody as governor of Georgia even if he wanted to, the Supreme Court having barred the death penalty at the time. But as he had been an officer on a nuclear submarine, voters could presume that he was comfortable with the idea of killing his fellow man in very large quantities.

The presumption was false. He was an odd duck, Mr. Carter, who turned out to believe that the sixth commandment applied even to presidents.

This curious belief cost him the presidency in 1980. If Mr. Carter had had the good sense to make war on Iran over the hostage crisis, Ronald Reagan would have remained a footnote in history, a Barry Goldwater or a Michael Dukakis.

Mr. Reagan spent World War II in Culver City, although he had often played at killing in the movies. As president he lost no time turning his warrior dreams into reality by sending Navy jets to shoot down Libyan pilots on maneuvers off their own coast. He found the role so stimulating that he continued to play it wherever he could find a suitably harmless opponent: Grenada, the smaller nations of Central America, Libya once more, and the waters of the Persian Gulf.

George Bush followed right along, with attitude corrections in Panama and Kuwait. Neither had a hope of achieving its principal long term goals—oil prices are going up again, and the drugs still flow through Panama—but that really didn’t matter from the political point of view. The medium was the message.

And no one is more sensitive than the draft-dodging Mr. Clinton to the thrilling message carried to the American heart by the medium of state violence. Even more quickly than his predecessors in the White House, he rushed to notch his gun overseas. Hearing of an unproven and highly dubious Iraqi plot to assassi-

nate his predecessor George Herbert Walker Bush in Kuwait, the new president took revenge on twenty civilians in Baghdad. Among those killed by his bombs was a prominent woman artist, Layla al-Attar.

THROUGHOUT I HAVE MADE SURE to ascribe all killings to the various presidents themselves, as if they were solo murderers like O.J. Simpson. But presidents do not act without accomplices. We are those accomplices. Let our leaders strap on the guns and we just wriggle with excitement. Overseas, the Gulf War made Mr. Bush more popular with us than Reagan. At home, seven out of ten of us support the death penalty. For most politicians, polling results like this represent a clear call to duty.

One such politician is George W. Bush, who as governor of Texas has found himself with no choice but to stand by as 115 convicted murderers somehow got dead. "The state of Texas did it," he says. Like a great many other moral simpletons in high office, he understands democracy to mean that he must obey all orders given by the voters. And if you don't like it, fella, why don't you go back to Russia?

More evolved political thinkers in the current presidential race, like Vice President Gore and Bill Bradley, back the death penalty for a different reason. They are cowards.

Senator McCain, supports the death penalty, too, but not because he is afraid of the polls. Like many of his stands, this one seems to be the product of his upbringing and his environment rather than of lengthy consideration. It is easy to imagine the senator, given actual power over life and death, doing as Governor George Ryan of Illinois has done. Senator McCain, too, might well conclude that the death penalty is badly broken in this country, and we had better back off for a while until we can figure out how to fix it.

But it is not easy to imagine Mr. Bradley or the Vice President doing any such thing. Far more likely that they would take Presi-

dent Clinton's Old Testament approach to such matters: rejecting all clemency appeals unless they happen to come from the right sort of folks. Puerto Ricans, say.

AS FAR AS I CAN DETERMINE, only one American president has ever carried out a state killing with his own hands. This was the estimable Grover Cleveland, who personally hanged two murderers while sheriff of Erie County, New York. It was customary for a deputy to spring the trap, but Mr. Cleveland's character was such as not to permit him to lay the burden off on a subordinate. Today we would be as astonished to find "character" of this sort in a president as to learn that he followed the Code of the Samurai or the teachings of Jesus.

And yet we can dream, can we not?

Lethal injection requires a certain modest skill, but no doubt Governor Clinton could have gotten the hang of it in time to execute Rickey Ray Rector during the New Hampshire primary. The governor could hardly have made a worse job of it than his subordinates, who took fifty minutes to find a suitable vein in their enormously obese victim. Think how morally instructive it would have been for the future president to jab needles into the mentally disabled killer for nearly an hour, perhaps from time to time even feeling his pain.

*Off the top of my head, I come up with more than a dozen acts of war in the last half-century: Korea, Panama, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Kosovo, Kuwait, Nicaragua, Lebanon twice, Somalia, Libya twice, the Mayaguez incident, Grenada...

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