

San Francisco Chronicle May 1997

AMERICAN NOMAD

By Steve Erickson

Henry Holt; 253 pp.

"America wearies of democracy," Steve Erickson laments in his spirited, polemical report of the 1996 presidential campaign. Three decades after the agony of Vietnam, two after the shame of Watergate, one after the moral bankruptcy of Reaganomics, "America feels at the end of its power... [and] democracy appears as a spectacle of impotence and corruption."

Writing for *Rolling Stone* until its capricious editor fires him, a jaded Erickson crisscrosses a nation asleep at the wheel of its own destiny. With the colorful iconoclasm of a latter-day Paul Krassner, but without Krassner's giddy sanctimoniousness, Erickson surveys the field of aspirants and finds each either already debased or becoming debased by campaigning.

Beginning with the Republican hopefuls at the first key primary--"New Hampshire's mad passionate coitus with history"--Erickson describes America's bleak prospects. Challenging favorite Bob Dole are "the irrepressibly berserk" Robert Dornan, the "inspired sociopath" Pat Buchanan, the "interesting and articulate maniac" Alan Keyes, that one-note flake from the upper crust Steve Forbes ("a constipated presence on the campaign trail") and, most despicable to Erickson of all, Phil Gramm, "a legend even among his own Senate colleagues for his venality and viciousness ... [with] a hole where his soul should be."

In New Hampshire, "snarling Republicans called each other liars, crooks, extremists, opportunists, and socialists, and passed around baby pictures and photos of the family dog."

Amid these early calumnious days of whine and ruses, as the media-driven figures snipe at each other then rush to their respective emergency roomsful of spin doctors, only one figure climbs the ladder of his principles above Erickson's contempt: Buchanan. Yes, he had a fascist's love of authority and had called for a cultural jihad to ward off "the ethnic dilution of America's natural white European identity," but Erickson cannot help admiring Buchanan for the very reason his rivals hated him: "These men despised Buchanan for accomplishing the superhuman feat of actually believing in something." While they're mired in platitude and sound bite, "Buchanan remained the candidate speaking to the persistent nag of a question, the Meaning of America, and in a more narrow sense the meaning of the Republican Party."

But as was once observed of Spiro Agnew, when small men cast giant shadows it is a sure sign the sun is setting. Knowing it's far too early to write the party's epitaph, Erickson describes Republican fragmentation, similar to what befell Democrats a generation before. Repeatedly and ironically calling Republicans "the party of Lincoln,"

which he knows fits as aptly as calling the Christian Right "the religion of Jesus" (the Christian Coalition, he observes, "believes Jesus was the first Republican"), Erickson notes that the party's power structure had moved so far right that patriarch Barry Goldwater could tell Dole, "You know, Bob, we're the liberals now."

Incumbent opponent Bill Clinton takes his lumps too. To Erickson, he is "the chameleon who brilliantly lent himself to the shape of our imaginations, even though his own imagination was so prosaic." Yet it is Clinton who rises from the disaster of the 1994 Republican Congressional triumph on the strength of sound instincts and political courage, Clinton who "took more politically risky positions in three years than Reagan did in eight."

The most sympathetic figure here is Dole, for whose pre-1996 integrity Erickson voices glowing admiration. Facing Clinton and Ross Perot ("the phoniest 'authentic' figure in American culture since Art Linkletter"), Dole is now merely "a man of all experience and almost no ideas, and a personality more tortured than winning." Dole spends 1996 plummeting from honor to disingenuousness, reversing former positions on assault weapons, affirmative action, taxes and support from gay Republicans. Offering a baldly pandering tax cut and running with a Jack Kemp who swallowed "virtually all of his more courageous and independent principles by mid-convention week" Dole sleepwalks through "a year of sustained political whoring."

Readers will find any number of things to quarrel with here. Confessing a dangerous love of metaphor, Erickson can be guilty of wild overstatement and even florid b.s. ("Orlando is a city where the air is perfumed as though by a decadent synthetic flower, and the water in the hotel fountains smells like a menthol cigarette"). His math raises questions ("1996 would be the first [presidential election] of the Twenty-First" century). He indulges in digressive set pieces on topics ranging from Bruce Springsteen to Frank Sinatra. And he has that falsifying love of labels common to journalists and academics.

Yet his book is more than redeemed by its perceptive appraisal of political America, its nimble prose and, for all its strength of conviction, its dispassionate logic and fairness. While apparently liberal-leaning, Erickson notes the "intellectual bankruptcy" of the pro-choice suggestion that the government "guarantees" poor women the constitutional right to abortion "an argument not unlike suggesting that because the First Amendment recognizes a man's right to a free press, the government is obligated to buy him a newspaper." He concedes that opposition to funding the NEA isn't "a decision to repress art but rather not to finance it."

This book bears kinship with the tradition of deTocqueville, Pirsig and Heat Moon, aliens applying their touring eye to America, for the artist--even if American--is always an alien; if he weren't at least a bit alienated from his culture he would be no artist but a hack. And every page here shows Steve Erickson is far more than that.