



“Born To Be Wild”: Postmodern Decadence at the 1996 Republican Convention’

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‘Born To Be Wild’:

Postmodern Decadence at the 1996 Republican Convention

Dr. Stephen Newton

This article examines the entrance to the 1996 Republican National Convention of Senator Trent Lott, who was riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle with a gray pony-tail stapled to his helmet. The Star Bangled Banner at the convention was the version performed by Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock. This article examines the surrealistic dimensions and potential sociopolitical ramifications of such a cartoonlike juxtaposition of the complexities of class identity, cultural hegemony, and the military-industrial unconscious.

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In a couple of 12 August 1996 *New York Times* articles covering the opening of the Republican Party’s national convention in San Diego, there were two indicators of just how malleable, and bizarre, the protean forms of contemporary politics can be. For an opening salvo, a real bang-up beginning, the gathering revellers used Jimi Hendrix’s version of the Star Spangled Banner, recorded live at the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival in August 1969, to open the convention festivities. Mentioned in *The New York Times*, this musical selection was followed by a description of Senator Trent Lott from Mississippi entering the Convention Center at the head of a phalanx of Republican bikers on Harley Davidsons. Senator Lott’s helmet was festooned with a gray ponytail stapled to the back.¹ Picture the gray tack-on ponytail as a symbol of what Senator Lott could have been doing with his life had he not been serving the great state of Mississippi in the United States Senate. Biker Trent, outlaw heathen scourge, barbarian tattooed leather scum blasting down Main Street, unwashed, unmuffled, unshorn, and unchained, an illicit bad boy terrorizing old maid schoolmarms peeking out tremulously from behind lace curtains as the iron horses thunder past.² Knowing Senator Lott as we do, a rough, barely sketched out, kind of very

¹ ‘Of all the delegates, none arrived making a louder statement than Sen. Trent Lott, who made his Harley-Davidson motorcycle growl and bark as he led a vanguard of hundreds of bikers cresting down from the freeway upon the convention scene. Police cleared their path and wrote not one ticket for the many helmetless bikers riding imperiously beyond the law. Far from the Brando-esque sociopathy of *The Wild One*, the bikers were solid middle-class Republicans proffering PAC money and fealty to the ticket for all the throbbing pistons, flowing beards and overhanging bellies. “We’re the party of harmony -- all the way from the bikers to the corporate world of America,” said Lott, a conventioneer who thoughtfully stroked the gray pony-tail stapled to his bad-looking helmet.’ Francis X. Clines, ‘A Safe Bet: Reagan Will Again Be a Smash’ *The New York Times*, 12 August 1996 <<https://www.nytimes.com/library/convention/0812/gop-diary.html>> [accessed 1 May 2019]

² ‘San Diego--The wine supply was bottomless, the Star Spangled Banner was the wild Jimi Hendrix version and the fireworks exploded in such wild chrysanthemums of light that one young, T-shirted Republican, high-fiving his friends, was simply overcome by what a great party his party could inspire. “If that doesn’t make you feel like a Republican, I don’t know what does!” he declared, punching the air as the fireworks faded. It was that kind of feel-

approximate causality becomes clear out of the murk, as one starts to tease out the complex nuances and contradictions in the description of this weird, anomalous performance. The aging biker image was not—it would seem, at least—meant to be presented as an actual fantasy, as this would contradict the good senator’s image somewhat too severely.

But this is not merely clowning around either, especially considering the august setting and the portentous, serious business that was going to take place there. So it seems clear that, at the very least, there was more here than met the eye, and the insidious, deranged truth at the center of this ideological kaleidoscope might have been—and it’s an important qualification—that the Southern Senator knew very well what kind of powerful symbol-blurring he was mucking around with. Any ascription of motives, though, especially 23 years after the fact, here in February 2019, is bound to be pure speculation—and that, of course, could also be part of the appeal.

Keep the rubes guessing. Step right up! Only one-dollar American for the thrill of a lifetime! She shimmies, she shakes, and she crawls on her belly like a reptile! Step right up! Senator Lott may, of course, on the other hand, have been completely naive as to the effect his biker costume was having, oblivious to the complicated messages he was sending. In this case his ignorance of the potential consequences of his actions would be a story in itself, one where there wasn’t necessarily any conscious effort to be manipulative, or to have a—God Forbid!—conspiracy to deceive the electorate into thinking something, by consciously acting in ways that would elicit a malevolently preordained response.

Given, however, the plethora of spin doctors and media experts who shape contemporary campaigns, it stretches—at least what I might consider to be—the outer boundaries of credibility to imagine that there was not at least a little bit of a conscious design in such a charged, theatrical entrance. But what on earth, we might ask, looking back, lo those many years ago, might the purpose have been?

Why, for example, this image and not another one? Why not a minivan and a pack of Boy Scouts? Must there be oily smoke and an outlaw roar, glistening with a hint of corruption, a

good weekend in convention-time San Diego. From the soak zone at the Sea World dolphin show to the dance floor at Planet Hollywood, from the racetrack reception for \$100,000 donors to the line for free tequila punch at the waterfront fireworks sponsored by The San Diego Union-Tribune, Republican convention-goers engaged in a filibuster of fun this weekend. By convention’s end, the social sideshows are expected to total nearly 1,000. The schedule was so crammed that California Gov. Pete Wilson told a stadium of supporters in the dolphin show stands, “If you can survive a week of all these parties, you’re hardy folk.” Of course, not everyone was invited to everything. The champagne-sipping do at the Del Mar racetrack, where the blue-blazer men and heels-and-hat women watched Cigar miss out on his chance to win \$1 million, was held for the 50 or so corporate and individual donors who contributed \$100,000 or more to sponsor convention events, along with about 25 more who had given \$25,000.” Carey Goldberg, ‘In Rockets’ Red Glare, It’s Party, Party, Party.’ *The New York Times*, 12 August 1996 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/12/us/in-rockets-red-glare-it-s-party-party-party.html>> [accessed 1 May 2019]

shade, however small, of the Satanic? Even the faintest gloss of biker sympathies— notwithstanding the broadest of winks to the audience—tends to cast an unsavory light on everything the Republican senator from Dixie stood for. Or so it would seem. But what if Lott's actual sympathies were, in fact, hiding in plain sight?

What if the seemingly harmless aging desperado role was merely a clever way to subliminally advertise a deeper darkness, one too repellent to even utter its own name in the brassy ballyhoo of a convention? Consider an unholy alliance, or at least an unspoken affinity, between the swastika/prison tattoo/house-plant IQ/white-supremacist crowd, on the one hand, and the straight-arrow/church going/fuchsia plaid pants/country club lawyers on the other. Picture Bow Tie Daddy star chamber habitués, the power dudes who make laws in Washington for the benefit of Yuppie investment bankers and multinational corporations, covertly passing greasy, blood-soaked money to Harley scum with bugs in their few remaining teeth.

Nah. Impossible. Too far fetched. Sounds like Oliver Stone after too much Peruvian marching powder. But then again....hmmm.

For example, there certainly are issues in the Republican convention planks that might link conservative, right-wing agendas to biker sympathies—they both are anti-immigrant, anti-affirmative action, and anti-big government, after all. There are some small differences, but we can ignore them, at least for the moment, and can turn a blind eye to the meth labs, gang rape, and business-as-usual murder (just for the record I was referring here to the bikers, not the Republicans).

The main idea informing the Senatorial biker entrance, it would seem—as much as any of this convoluted mishmash can ever really be understandable—is to join seemingly divergent, but not quite oppositional, positions—i.e. bikers and Republican politicians. Style and ideology frequently become unified, however, on some almost entirely unconscious level, and here, as is almost always the case, the tacit message was cloaked, hidden within a surface absurdity, which in this case was a manic carnival of tawdry burlesque posing as innocent fun.

When it's done right, ideology—biker sympathies meeting up with right wing politics—winds up effacing itself, creating an interweaving matrix of buried complexities and resonances. At this point fashion almost inevitably winds up being a potpourri of watered-down, wispy flavors, which are, of course, seemingly innocuous. This is precisely how it winds up being perfectly suited, ironically, to enforcing power and control. The exercise of hegemony is most efficient through a studied banality, which never reveals its own hidden machinery, and this only adds to the scornful “Oh, come on. Lighten up. Can't you relax a bit?” tone when one suggests that there might be more to the L.L. Bean or Orvis or J. Crew or Ralph Lauren catalogues—oh, the heresy!!—than simply selling functional outdoor clothing through the mail.

Iconographic images—cowboy, biker, soldier, fireman, and cop—are frequently used as intensely compact carriers and transmitters of cultural code. Of course, there are also The Village People, but that was a powerful cultural code of a different sort. I think.

Each sartorial choice becomes a concentrated, refined distillation, a kind of cultural hologram, where each minute, discrete part carries an entire corpus of information. Fashion—in this case biker chic—becomes so intricately interwoven with ideology—with conservative Republican politics—that the consumer is, in fact, unwittingly consumed. We are eaten alive from the inside, as it were, by the very ideas we think we are harmlessly ingesting as entertainment. Once the Trojan horse idea virus enters our intellect, or the biker enters our convention, a kind of aesthetic and ideological colonization, an infestation, if you will, takes place.

And if someone gets offended, why, they're just a repressed, lifeless, politically correct prig, a finger-pointing repressed librarian hushing up the kids who are just trying to have some fun. Maybe Mr. Lott really did smear on a fake tattoo for the convention to complete his raffish outfit. It certainly would have fit in with the rest of his fashion statement.

Welcome to the future, all those years ago. Hey, it's all in the spirit of having a good time, right? Wink wink. Picture your favorite politician in a jaunty little black and silver visor cap, with a faded denim vest and rhinestone studded leather chaps, and riding a big old Harley Davidson Electroglide, while the cosmic combat interstellar roar of Jimi Hendrix playing the Star Spangled Banner blares from the loudspeakers. But wait! Trent Lott is already there, replete with a little gray ponytail. I can almost hear him and the other convention planners: "Let's go completely over the top, dish out some pure, undiluted cracker-barrel surrealism, and see if the Big Mac eating rubes out in TV land will notice." The mind-stretching decadence at the heart of the decay of the empire had never been so clear, and it was in plain sight, for the whole world to see. Go Trent, go. You were born to be wild.

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