

FILM REVIEW ESSAY: ELEGIES TO THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Elizabeth M. Boles

Best of Enemies. Directed by Morgan Neville and Robert Gordon. 2015.

Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia. Directed by Nicholas D. Wrathall. 2013.

Already well into the campaigns and debates for the November 2016 presidential election, it is easy to become nostalgic for more principled and disciplined candidates, and more thoughtful political and social commentary than are usually found in today's multi-media age. Robert Gordon's and Morgan Neville's documentary *Best of Enemies*—which focuses on the innovative decision by ABC News to pair two brilliant political commentators, Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley, Jr.—thrusts us back to the 1968 political conventions and a time when intellectual debate was “blood sport,” and the culture wars were represented by equally articulate and self-confident men who believed the other not only a rival but the enemy of the Republic, as each defined it.

The patrician upbringing of both Vidal and Buckley, their past successes as debaters, writers, and social commentators, made them two sides of a coin that both rivets our attention by their eloquence and passion, and repels for their insufferable condescension and pettiness. Classically educated in history, philosophy, and economics, these debaters commanded the attention of television viewers during the Republican National Convention in Miami and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in the hot summer of 1968. They changed the nature of political commentary that continues to inform what makes for a good show today. They raised their voices and the temperature in the room; they built excitement nightly and drama into the boredom of democratic procedures, and they embraced the celebrity that their insightful and venomous words afforded them.

The film traces how ABC News took a gamble on covering the 1968 conventions by shaking up the prevailing model. Instead of the gavel-to-gavel coverage that made the conventions interesting only to political scientists, the third place network decided to present 10 brief (15-minute)

Dr. Elizabeth M. Boles is an adjunct professor at American University's Washington College of Law, and an independent writer and consultant.

debates featuring Vidal and Buckley as protagonists for their worldviews that only circumstantially coincided with the platforms of the Democratic and Republican Parties. Vidal never became a creature of the Democratic Party the way Buckley became a kingmaker within the Republican, reaching his most prominent success with the election of Ronald Reagan, and giving intellectual heft to broadly Conservative values through founding and editing the *National Review* magazine and hosting television's *Firing Line*.



Image: film poster at www.magpictures.com/bestofenemies/

Both men were products of east coast American elite families, and with their prep school educations, military service, and unsuccessful forays into elective politics, had more in common than their hatred of the other would suggest. Their worldviews were so diametrically opposed and unforgiving that each took argument to a level normally witnessed on playing pitches. Each thought his concerns and societal views were of grave importance to every day society, and each spoke for people neither would willingly associate with—the common citizen. Even their upper-crust manner of speaking and odd accents that defied geography, almost a European Union mash of articulation and affectation, made them interesting spectacles and increasingly garnished an audience of viewers who were seduced by the nightly tension between the two that grew to a shrillness that still startles. Modern television was born, in part, when these two pedants were reduced to name calling of such ugliness that it

merits reconsideration. When Vidal's condemnation of Buckley as a "crypto-Nazi" was answered by Buckley calling Vidal a "queer" and threatening him with physical violence, antagonistic journalism made national news. The film covers the debates well but insufficiently places them in the broader turmoil of America in the late 1960s. The directors seem to have agreed with these media celebrities' self-importance by taking them as deadly seriously as they took themselves.

In a recent interview on *Day 6*, the CBC Radio show hosted by Brent Bambury, Robert Gordon (co-director of *Best of Enemies*) was asked to comment on how those televised debates have influenced today's media. He argued that the lesson the networks took from the experiment was that "shouting sells"—confrontational media that simplifies argument makes for good entertainment, even when the proponents aren't as thoughtful, well-informed, and invested as these two men.

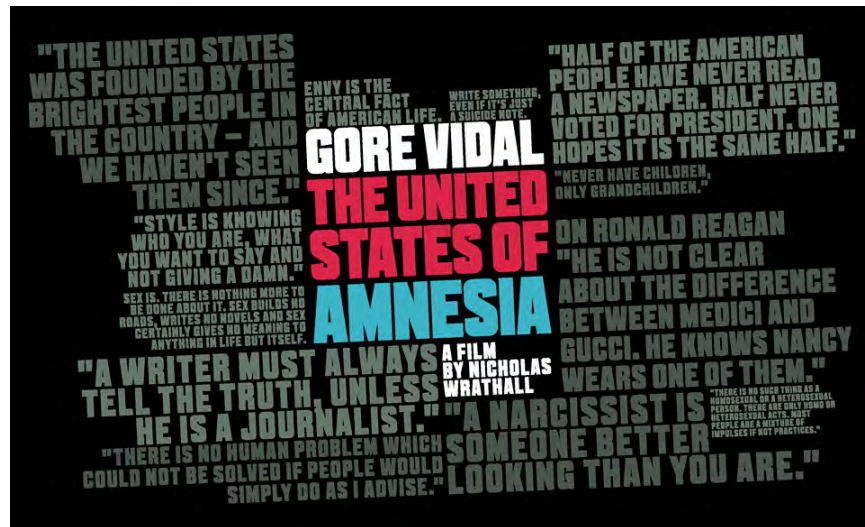


Image: film poster at www.gorevidaldocumentary.com

The superior documentary is the 2013 film, *Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia*, written, directed, and co-produced by Nicholas D. Wrathall. It covers much of the same ground as *Best of Enemies*, with a focus on the more interesting of the two men, Gore Vidal. Even Buckley admitted that Liberals were more entertaining than Conservatives, and this film certainly doesn't disappoint. Along with highlighting the 1968 televised debates between Vidal and Buckley, this film gives us the biography of its title character, and leaves us with pithy lines, facts, and images that remain long after the movie concludes. Late in Vidal's life, in answer to the question "What would you change?" he replied, without

flinching, “my mother,” whom he detested, and went on to say he would replace her with anyone else’s, including Whistler’s. To see him flying one of his father’s innovative airplanes at the age of 10, learning that his father had had a long-term affair with fellow aviator, Amelia Earhart, and to see his devotion to his blind, Anglo-Irish grandfather, a U.S. Senator from Oklahoma—all this gives texture to the fascinating man that is only hinted at in *Best of Enemies*. What cocktail party couldn’t be made more enjoyable by slipping in the reference that Gore’s grandfather was a very close friend of President Lincoln’s eldest son, Robert? When he utters “Never offend an enemy in a small way,” and “the four most beautiful words in the English language are ‘I told you so,’” one is well-prepared to view the 1968 debates.

Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia highlights Vidal’s contempt for the role of money in American politics (“We sell soap and presidents in the same fashion.”), and casts both major parties as prostitutes to the moneyed interests that care only for which candidate can best be bought and advance their interests. This film gives us the literary and political Vidal, the thoughtful, cynical, weary citizen who considered himself a biographer of an America he loved, but as with a selfish lover, was constantly disappointed. While *Best of Enemies* argues that both Buckley and Vidal were intellectuals eager to advance their ideas to compete in the marketplace and inform political action, one takes away from *Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia* more of a sense of loss over the place of debate and the role of public intellectuals in American society today.

Truth tellers who can sway an undecided voter or alter the terms of policy debates are in extremely short supply in the contemporary landscape where everyone seems to be entitled not only to his or her own opinions, but his or her own facts. It used to be the role of superb university presidents to comment on our national challenges and encourage re-direction of research and funding to new and old disciplines; now, the vast majority of college and university presidents enjoy none of the prestige that comes from telling hard truths and elevating new generations of learners. The majority of their time is spent the same way our elected officials spend the majority of their time, seeking dollars. Writers who could shake us from our complacency are old or dead. Who will follow in the footsteps of Vaclav Havel, Elie Wiesel, Homero Aridjis, Vartan Gregorian, or Edward O. Wilson, and command our attention and respect? While speech has become more democratic, it has also become cacophonous. Celebrity status shifts rapidly among reality television stars and pundits, and many shows are “countdowns” or competitions for survival. We are living in a time when three of the top contenders for the Republican presidential nomination

have run on their *lack* of political experience, as though the American presidency were an entry-level position.

While both Gore Vidal and William Buckley lived to see many of their worst nightmares as well as best hopes realized, one cannot help but wish they were alive today to make us smarter and more uncomfortable at the same time. This unsettling combination is often the hallmark of knowledge.