

Remembering Gore Vidal

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Many labels characterize him: distinguished author, essayist, playwright, historian, acerbic sociopolitical/cultural critic, freethinker, intellectual, and humanist.

In 2009, the American Humanist Association (AHA) named him honorary president.

On July 31, Gore Vidal died from complications of pneumonia at his Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles home.

He was 86. He'll be missed. [Los Angeles Times](#) writer Elaine Woo called him a "gadfly on the national conscience" and "literary juggernaut." He was that and much more.

[New York Times](#) writer Charles McGrath said he was "an Augustan figure who believed himself to be the last of a breed, and he was probably right. Few American writers have been more versatile or gotten more mileage from their talent."

Random House editor Jason Epstein called him "an American version of Montaigne."

As an essayist, New York Time Book Review writer RWB Lewis said he was "so good that we cannot do without him. He (was) a treasure of state."

[London Guardian](#) writer Richard Lea called him "one of the towering figures of American cultural and political life for more than six decades."

[AHA](#) said he was "a masterful humanist voice." He "added an enthusiastic, progressive and dynamic voice" to AHA's humanist movement.

AHA president David Niose said:

"The progressive and humanist values Gore Vidal repeatedly espoused moved the culture in a positive direction."

“He spent his life pointing out the places in society that needed the most attention without worrying who might be embarrassed or upset by his opinions.”

Humanist magazine editor Jennifer Bardi added:

“He’s been called an iconoclast, a provocateur, and a misanthrope. And of course Gore occasionally said things that gave humanists pause. But he was forever dedicated to the cause of enlightenment and exposed injustice and hypocrisy at every turn.”

On August 1, Bardi headlined [“Goodbye, Mr. Honorary President,”](#) saying:

“It’s too hard to list all the appropriate adjectives and accolades that could proceed Gore Vidal’s name. Gore Vidal died tonight and the enlightened world mourns. But what a life he lived!”

He spent decades criticizing the religious right, US imperialism, perpetual wars, political extremism in the name of national security, America’s military/industrial complex, and other political, social and economic injustices.

He succeeded Kurt Vonnegut as honorary AHA president. He accepted at the time, saying he would be “most honored to succeed my old friend as honorary president of the Association.”

“Although he himself is hardly easy to replace, I will do my best to fill the great gap.”

His [official web site](#) listed his accomplishments. They include 24 novels, five plays, many screenplays, over 200 essays, his memoir Palimpsest, his National Book Award winning “United States (Essays 1952 - 92),” and numerous other political books. They include:

- “Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated”
- “Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta”
- “Imperial America”
- “The Decline and Fall of the American Empire”
- “Reflections Upon a Sinking Ship”

- “Rocking the Boat”
- “The Last Empire: Essays 1992 – 2000”

In 2003, PBS featured Vidal in its [American Masters](#) series. His career spanned six decades, it said. He reflected “uncanny unity, a tone of easy familiarity with the world of politics and letters, an urbane wit, and supreme self-confidence as a writer” and sociopolitical critic.

Born in 1925, his web site called his maternal roots “thoroughly political.” As a boy, he lived with his grandfather, Senator TP Gore. His father, Eugene Vidal, served as FDR’s Bureau of Air Commerce director.

His mother, Nina Gore Vidal, divorced when Vidal was 10. She married Hugh Auchincloss. He divorced her and married Jackie Kennedy’s mother. It established a connection between Vidal and the Kennedy clan. It lasted through JFK’s presidency.

In 1943, he enlisted in the Army at age 17. At age 19, he became a warrant officer JG and first mate of the army ship FS 35. On night watch in port, he wrote his first novel, *Williwaw*.

Colombian novelist/journalist/Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez praised Vidal’s “magnificent series of historical novels or novelized histories.” They cover American life from the 18th to the 21st century.

New York Times literary critic Harold Bloom called him “a masterly American historical novelist, now wholly matured, who has found his truest subject, which is our national political history during precisely those years when our political and military histories were as one, one thing and one thing only: the unwavering will of Abraham Lincoln to keep the states united.”

He added he “demonstrates that his narrative achievement is vastly underestimated by American academic criticism, an injustice that has been repaid amply in his essayist attacks upon the academy....”

Vidal’s interest in politics wasn’t limited to novels, essays, other writing, and commentaries. In 1960, he ran for Congress as a liberal Democrat in New York’s Republican 29th district.

Publicly he supported recognizing Red China, cutting the Pentagon’s budget, and spending more on education. He lost but won more votes in his district than JFK. He headed the 1960 Democrat ticket.

In 1982, he placed second in California’s Democrat senatorial primary. He lost to current

governor Jerry Brown.

Reflecting on Watergate, he called America “a nation of ongoing hustlers from the prisons and disaster areas of old Europe.”

“I do not think that the America System in its present state of decadence is worth preserving.”

“The initial success of the United States was largely accidental. A rich empty continent was....exploited by rapacious Europeans who made slaves of Africans and corpses of Indians in the process.”

In his 1973 New Statesman essay titled “Political Melodramas,” he said:

“In 1959 when I wrote (“The Best Man”)....the character of the wicked candidate in the play on Richard Nixon, I thought it would be amusing if liberal politicians were to smear unjustly that uxorious man as a homosexual.”

He was condemned for suggesting a “man could rise to any height in American politics if” so labeled. Ronald Reagan was one of the actors he auditioned for the lead role.

At the time, his film career was over. Vidal rejected him. He thought he couldn’t play a credible president. He was right. In office, he faked it for eight years.

Obama’s worse but hides it better.

At age 81, he visited [Cuba](#). He headed a delegation of US intellectuals, historians and politicians. He suggested Bush could end up like Nixon. “We hope he will end up like Nixon, resigning the presidency,” he said.

Comparing the two men, he added:

“When a building begins to fall to pieces, it is very difficult to stop its collapse.”

“Everyone who listens to (Bush) knows he is a liar. It is frightening to have to constantly listen to a man repeating and repeating I am a” wartime president.

“Of all the human vices, the worst is to lie.”

“When the people do not understand what the emperor is saying, what the government is saying, there is no communication” or trust.

He accused Bush of stealing the 2000 election and “high crimes against the Constitution of the United States.”

“It gives me pleasure to be in a place full of hope,” he told a University of Havana audience. In America, “people do not have the basic understanding of what they have lost. There has been a coup and the republic has died.”

In September 2009, he was asked how Obama was doing. He was unsparing, saying:

“Dreadfully. I was hopeful. He was the most intelligent person we’ve had in that position for a long time. But he’s inexperienced. He has a total inability to understand military matters.”

“He’s acting as if Afghanistan is the magic talisman: Solve that and you solve terrorism....we’ve failed in every other aspect of our effort of conquering the Middle East or whatever you want to call it.”

On healthcare reform, he added:

“He f..ked it up. I don’t know how because the country wanted it. We’ll never see it happen.”

On US politics, he said:

“There is only one party in the United States, the Property Party....and it has two right wings: Republican and Democrat.”

“Republicans are a bit stupider, more rigid, more doctrinaire in their laissez-faire capitalism than the Democrats, who are cuter, prettier, a bit more corrupt – until recently....and more willing than the Republicans to make small adjustments when the poor, the black, the anti-imperialists get out of hand.”

“But, essentially, there is no difference between the two parties.”

He called democracy a system “where numerous elections are held at great cost without

issues and with interchangeable candidates” no different from each other.

“By the time a man gets to be presidential material, he’s been bought ten times over.”

On America’s Middle East wars, he said “I don’t see us winning. We have made enemies of one billion Muslims.”

He called himself “a born-again atheist. “Once people get hung up on theology, they’ve lost sanity forever,” he said. “More people have been killed in the name of Jesus Christ than any other name in the history of the world.”

He called monotheism “the greatest disaster ever to befall the human race.”

He said most people misunderstand the First Amendment’s “free exercise of religion” clause. “Yes, everyone has a right to worship any god he chooses,” but he does not have the right to impose his beliefs on others who do not happen to share” his views.

“This separation was absolute in our original republic.” It’s been misinterpreted and distorted. Extremists “got the phrase In God We Trust onto the currency, in direct violation of the First Amendment.”

In his essay titled “Shredding the Bill of Rights,” he wrote:

“It has always been a mark of American freedom that unlike countries under constant Napoleonic surveillance, we are not obliged to carry identification to show to curious officials and pushy police.”

“But now, due to Terrorism, every one of us is stopped at airports and obliged to show an ID which must include a mug shot (something, as Allah knows, no terrorist would ever dare fake).”

He said what too few others dared. He followed in the tradition of Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and Mark Twain, among others. He was one of America’s most astute chroniclers.

Friends said he combined an old-fashioned sense of honor and stubborn will to live as he pleased.

He said George Bush had advance knowledge of 9/11. Roosevelt knew about Japan’s planned Pearl Harbor attack.

Both men took full advantage. Timothy McVeigh was no more killer than Dwight Eisenhower, and America one day will be subservient to China. Characteristically he framed it as “The Yellow Man’s Burden.”

He was mainly self-educated. Classrooms bored him. He skipped college. He acquired wisdom on his own. He admired Montaigne, Italo Calvino, Henry James and Edith Wharton.

He called his conservative rival, William Buckley, a “cryptofascist.” He described The New York Times as the “Typhoid Mary of American journalism.”

He labeled Ronald Reagan “The Acting President.” He called his wife Nancy a social climber “born with a silver ladder in her hand.”

He openly criticized Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. He once called pro-Israeli ideologue/Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz and his journalist wife Midge Decter “Israeli Fifth Columnists.”

At the end, he was wheelchair bound. His mind and wit stayed sharp. He called style “knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn.”

In 2009, he said America is “rotting away at a funereal pace. We’ll have a military dictatorship pretty soon, on the basis that nobody else can hold everything together.”

Reflecting on his accomplishments, he said “I just played the game harder.” He hoped to be remembered as “the person who wrote the best sentences of his time.” He thought of himself as a modern-day Voltaire.

He’s survived by his half-sister Nina Straight and half-brother Tommy Auchincloss. He’ll be sorely missed.

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His new book is titled “How Wall Street Fleeces America: Privatized Banking, Government Collusion and Class War”

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