

## Speaker Moonbeam: Newt's Futurist Brain Trust

At some point in his presidency Richard Nixon posed for a photograph in which he can be seen holding a copy of the Modern Library edition of *The Sound and the Fury*. The moment I saw it, I thought: "Nixon? Faulkner? Not very likely."

But Newt Gingrich might just get away with striking such a pose. Here is a politician who actually does read books; who has said "ideas matter"; who even draws up lists of required reading for his fellow legislators. OK, *The Federalist Papers* is on the list, which is a bit like including the Holy Bible. More significant is the presence on Gingrich's list of two popular futurologists, Alvin Toffler and John Naisbitt, writers who had not till now been identified with a particular political agenda.

More significant still—though not included on the reading list or much noted—has been Gingrich's connection with another, less celebrated school of futurology, the writers of sci-fi and high-tech, gung-ho military romance, who have been and continue to be his collaborators on both nonfiction and fiction projects. Of them, anon.

Gingrich's most noticed and commendable co-optation has been his enlistment of Toffler, the author of *Future Shock* and now a spokesman for the Progress and Freedom Foundation, a Gingrich franchise. *Future Shock* was published in 1970 and established Toffler's bona fides as a "futurist." In that book and its successors, *The Third Wave* (1980) and *Power Shift* (1990), Toffler managed to look beyond the polarizing us-or-them antinomies of the cold war imagination to descry, with remarkable foresight, the postmodern future we postmoderns now inhabit. He observed the ways that advances in cybernetics and media technology had already transformed daily life and power politics and extrapolated from there. His books are informed, judicious, and thought-provoking.

Toffler's major competitor in the futurology business has been John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends* (1982). His work differs from Toffler's more in style than content. Toffler is discursive and sequential; the print in his books is smaller, the footnotes more abundant, and he assumes a goodly attention span. Naisbitt writes in info-bites for a later, more impatient breed of reader. His pages have the disjunctive inputs of USA

Today, with paragraphs regularly interspersed with explanatory headlines and bulleted lines, as though to say, "Skim me, I'm an easy read."

Both Toffler and Naisbitt have worthwhile points to make. The world is changing in ever-exfoliating ways, thanks to computers and satellite technology and the simple yens, of people and of corporations, to do whatever they want. These changes cannot be withstood or gainsaid, if only because they are, so often, *faits accomplis*. In their way, Toffler and Naisbitt represent the chilly common sense of cyberspace: the future will be the exclusive domain of computer-literate managers of multinational corporations; the rest of us will be consigned to the Rust Belt.

As so often with common sense, appetite dictates what is perceived. Toffler, and Naisbitt even more, accentuate the welling-up of nutrients in the churning waters of history, heedless of (or indifferent to) whole flotillas liable to sink. Thus in *Global Paradox* (1994) Naisbitt, who believes that "travel is and will continue to be the world's largest industry," only once makes significant reference to AIDS, noting how it has reduced tourism in Kenya and Gambia. Warfare rates almost as little attention: "Escalation of armed conflict in certain regions around the globe can have a negative impact on worldwide tourism. The Gulf War demonstrated just how much of an impact armed conflict can have." Naisbitt is a resident of the ski resort and mountain fastness of Telluride, Colorado, and boasts that he can interface with current events without ever stirring from his monitor. Those who access information electronically have a privileged perspective but not necessarily a clearer one. Gingrich's attitude of "Let them eat laptops" and Marie Antoinette's "Let them eat cake" are both memorable for their delicate positioning between naivete and irony. From the perspective of the trailer park and the inner city, a free ticket to cyberspace has all the allure of a half-off coupon for a Berlitz course in Japanese conversation.

Toffler's take on the problem of evil isn't so blithely New Age as Naisbitt's. His role model is Machiavelli and not Marie Antoinette, but even so he has a penchant for finding ponies at the bottom of every dungheap. Thus the "personal political views" of a media baron like Rupert Murdoch are inconsequential because such giants are necessarily committed to an "ideology of globalism . . . or at least supranationalism which must operate across national boundaries, and it is in the self-interest of the new media moguls to spread this ideology." Such a McLuhanite focus on the medium as against the message accommodates the needs of power.

It is not surprising, then, that Toffler and Naisbitt should now be advanced by Gingrich to the rank of official government-accredited gurus. Their works had already been garlanded with blurbs from the

international press and U.S. senators and CEOs. Recruiting them was a respectable sort of recent acquisition, on the order of a Monet or a Cézanne. What is much more revealing is Gingrich's alliance with another kind of futurist in the persons of Jerry Pournelle, Janet Morris, David Drake, and William Forstchen. In the work of these four once-and-future Gingrich collaborators one confronts the unnerving and sinister shadows implicit in Toffler and Naisbitt's sunshiny scenarios.

Do their names ring bells? Probably not, unless you are a science fiction fan. All four follow in the bootprints of Robert A. Heinlein, both as partisans of sending Man (and Woman) into Space as the priority for a viable future (Heinlein's first book, in 1950, was *The Man Who Sold the Moon*) and as scenarists of high-tech warfare. In *Starship Troopers* (1959), his seminal work, Heinlein uses the gosh-wow conventions of pulp-era space opera to advance a political agenda that celebrates America's future as the Rome of the space age. With the skill of Leni Riefenstahl, the author glamorizes the trappings of military power—the uniforms and macho rituals—while lecturing the reader, as if he were a raw recruit, on the need to obey one's officers and to exterminate the enemy (the Bugs, in this novel) utterly. After Heinlein, Buck Rogers and other guys with blasters would never look the same. Space opera = NASA = a blank check for high-tech research.

Pournelle, Heinlein's heir apparent, was an early advocate of Star Wars technology. His inspirational tract of 1984, *Mutual Assured Survival: A Space-Age Solution to Nuclear Annihilation*, earned him a pat on the back, and a blurb, from no less than Ronald Reagan. That book did not elevate him to the dignity of being an official policy guru, but it was published in the same year, by the same entrepreneur, Jim Baen—long the principal patron of these and other Heinleinite sf writers—as a much less noticed book, *Window of Opportunity: A Blueprint for the Future*, which identifies its authors as “the Honorable Newt Gingrich, with David Drake and Marianne Gingrich.” The preface is written by Pournelle, who salutes Gingrich's (and Drake and Gingrich's) work as “a remarkable book, almost unique in that, without the slightest compromise with the principles that made this nation great, Gingrich presents a detailed blueprint, a practical program that not only proves that we can all get rich, but shows how.”

Gingrich, on his acknowledgments page, thanks Pournelle for introducing him to his publisher. Baen, in turn, is complimented for “matching” the Gingriches with “our co-author, David Drake, and Janet Morris. Money alone could not buy the creativity, skill, and effort that Janet contributed to the final draft. David's contribution, of course, cannot be overstated.”

Needless to say, politician-authors usually do little more than talk into a tape recorder and let their ghosts take it from there. But they are expected to stand by what they've signed their names to. And what Newt Gingrich signed his name to back in 1984 is a document worth pondering. For it shows much more vividly than transcripts of his recent speeches, which are necessarily more circumspect, more "politic," his sense of his constituency—who they are and what they can be sold.

Right-wing politicians traditionally offer a mix of two flavors: resentment and hope. And while the Republican resurgence of 1994 employed vitriolic attacks on the entire liberal spectrum, hope is Gingrich's special note, as it was Ronald ("Morning in America") Reagan's. The difference is that Reagan's optimism looked back to the idyllic past of the mythical frontier in which he'd acted as a Hollywood cowboy, while Gingrich places his hope in a sci-fi future. Gingrich sounds that motif at full diapason in the introduction to *Window of Opportunity*: "Breakthroughs in computers, biology, and space make possible new jobs, new opportunities, and new hope on a scale unimagined since Christopher Columbus discovered a new world. . . . There is hope for a continuing revolution in biology which will allow us to feed the entire planet; hope for jobs, opportunities, and adventures in space."

Adventures in space turn out to be a major component of what we are to hope for. One can't help but sense the influence of Gingrich's sci-fi collaborators, especially at such moments as this: "Congressman Bob Walker of Pennsylvania [now Chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology] has been exploring the possible benefits of weightlessness to people currently restricted to wheelchairs. In speeches to handicapped Americans, he makes the point that in a zero-gravity environment, a paraplegic can float as easily as anyone else. Walker reports that wheelchair-bound adults begin asking questions in an enthusiastic tone when exposed to the possibility of floating free, released from their wheelchairs. Several have volunteered to be the first pioneers."

This "Arise and float!" is evangelism with a canny subtext, not unfamiliar to sci-fi professionals. Space is envisioned as that New Frontier where the indignities of ordinary life—onerous no-future jobs and low status—are to be remedied, as they were by an earlier expansion into the American West. Space is Texas, only larger. In the twenty-first century, Gingrich (or his ghosts) declares, a third-generation space shuttle "will be the DC-3 of space. From that point on, people will flow out to the Hiltons and Marriotts of the solar system, and mankind will have perma-

nently broken free of the planet.” In short, vote for me and someday your children will inhabit the *Star Trek* of their video dreams.

As hopes go, that might seem to be on a par with the Rapture awaited by fundamentalist Christians, and indeed, the demographics are not mutually exclusive. The same audience/electorate that polls tell us expects the Third Coming sometime soon might well settle for a visit to the Venus Hilton as a good second-best. It’s only a fantasy, after all.

But people buy fantasy, as Gingrich’s ghosts well know. And the fantasies they can be sold are by no means limited to space as the last frontier. All four of the Gingrich ghosts have specialized in military fantasies that skillfully meld high-tech weaponry with the kind of gung-ho glamour one associates with recruiting posters. Indeed, the cover of *Star Voyager Academy*, by William Forstchen (the contracted collaborator on Gingrich’s much-tsked-over forthcoming novel, set in 1945 and featuring a “pouting sex kitten”), takes the literal form of a recruiting poster, including the pointed finger and “We Want YOU!” As its title suggests, Forstchen’s novel is a lineal descendant of Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*, a young-adult-level paean to the joys of military life. The enemy now is not hive-dwelling “aliens” (Heinlein’s shorthand for the Communist menace) but the United Nations of Earth (shorthand for government bureaucracies other than NASA). In this, Forstchen reflects the dilemma faced by the right wing as it searches the landscape for an internal enemy to replace the Communist menace.

David Drake, a co-author of *Window of Opportunity*, had his first notable success with the Hammer’s *Slammers* series, begun in 1979, which is a hybrid of TV’s *Star Trek* and *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

Janet Morris, likewise, has specialized in future war scenarios from the perspective of a female guerrilla. If women are not suited to foxholes, as Gingrich recently suggested, they may still wreak havoc from behind a computer monitor. With her husband, Chris, sometime co-author and once-upon-a-time partner in a jazz-fusion band, Morris also works as a consultant in weapons development, specializing in “weapons of mass protection”—like the sticky foam that can be sprayed on demonstrators in lieu of bullets.

The bibliographies of Forstchen, Drake, and Morris are as impressive as that of Balzac, but Pournelle, their senior by a generation, has outdone them all in his ability to cater to their target audience. He is, quite simply, the best writer of the lot, and if not the most prolific (only a computer could crunch those numbers), surely the most successful.

Characteristically, Pournelle’s best books are collaborations. Drake,

Forstchen, and Morris have collaborated not only with Gingrich but with one another, and others still, in a manner as complex as a cable-knit sweater. They have not as yet had the good fortune to collaborate with Pournelle's regular partner, Larry Niven, with whom Pournelle has produced some classic sci-fi titles, including *Inferno* (1976), a modern recension of Dante's book of the same name; the best-selling *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977), a futuristic disaster novel; and *Oath of Fealty* (1981), the tale of a right-wing utopia that seer Gingrich himself would be proud to set his name to.

*Oath of Fealty* is unique in the annals of utopian literature in offering a plausible depiction of the Orwellian nightmare from the point of view of Big Brother. In its blueprint of a privileged Fortress America—called Todos Santos, a self-sufficient “arcology” plunked down in the middle of a feral Los Angeles, where the wealthy can live protected from the promiscuous mob of undesirable anarchists, terrorists, and other paupers—*Oath of Fealty* echoes Jack London's *The Iron Heel* of 1907 and foreshadows the “custodial state” commended in *The Bell Curve*.

The plot pits the arcology's security chief against ecoterrorists who will go to any lengths to monkey-wrench Todos Santos. As one terrorist explains in her confession to the TS police, “Todos Santos is beautiful, Tony, but it uses too many resources to support too few people. The more successful Todos Santos is, the worse it will be for everyone else. . . . Don't you understand that technology is not the answer, that using technology to fix problems created by technology only puts you in an endless chain?” Tony, the security chief, has a clearer view of what is at stake: “If Todos Santos goes broke then it can't run any longer, expenses, expenses, expenses, it's property rights against human rights, money against lives and I'm defending the money. I'm defending my city!”

Pournelle regularly uses the medium of his fiction to take revenge on his ideological enemies. That is, after all, a novelist's prerogative. In *Inferno*, he and Niven have a field day in devising suitable Dantean torments for such enemies of the corporate state as the woman responsible for banning cyclamates (an early alternative to saccharine); another woman who, for reasons like those of the “ecoterrorist” quoted above, prevented the building of power plants and oil wells; and a man whose sins were vegetarianism and jogging. Pournelle's enemies list, like Rush Limbaugh's, includes anyone who would keep the rich from getting richer as fast as they can. But he understands that more is required than a loser's vindictiveness. One must offer hope, and what can that be in a future in which, as even he is willing to admit in his darker fictions, Third

World immiseration must be imported to America by the rigors of corporate logic?

It must be Outer Space, the final utopia, where the Rapture is to be achieved by the wonders of modern technology. Whether the promise is a conscious or unconscious scam on Pournelle's part, or on Gingrich's, can be known only to their confessors. It is probably intended as a benign deception, as when a faith healer promises to cure afflictions of all kinds. He knows that for a certain percentage the placebo effect will kick in. As for the rest, well, it's their own fault if they still need crutches. They didn't believe hard enough.

Whatever happens to the cripple, the faith healer's coffers will be filled. In that regard it is interesting to learn that there is a new collaborative novel on Pournelle's hard disk, and this time his collaborator is none other than Newt Gingrich. This new collaboration is to be a Tom Clancy Yellow Peril adventure, an account of a future war between a perfidious Japan and a guileless USA.

When the book does appear, it is guaranteed a large-scale commercial success. *Window of Opportunity* flopped eleven years ago because Gingrich wasn't yet a media star and because it's basically no more than a very long-winded speech. But a sensational premise and the professional polish that Pournelle can supply could make the novel a bestseller such as even popes might envy. The recent film *Bob Roberts* hypothesized a *fin de siècle* demagogue who uses folk-rock music as his entrée to high office. But for an electorate with sufficient reading skills and attention spans, the novel is probably still, as it was for Disraeli, the art form best adapted for political propaganda, if only because it has built-in deniability. A politician will get in trouble by calling Barney Frank a fag; a novelist always has the excuse that it is his characters who say all those terrible things. A collaborative novel offers a further margin of deniability.

After the Yellow Peril has been dealt with and we've all seen the movie version, what then? In an era of franchised fiction there is really no limit except what the market will bear. There must be dozens of other authors as eager as Pournelle to join their craft with Gingrich's marketability.

But why stop there? Andy Warhol was a master franchiser. He solicited ideas for pictures from people with a knack for ideas and had them silk-screened by people with a knack for that. Gingrich could do the same. He could merchandise, under his own trademark, sandwich spreads, skateboards, mousepads, bullets, aftershave.

Marketers, this is your Window of Opportunity. Offer him millions and promise the Moon.