

EASY CHAIR

Bully Pulpit
By Thomas Frank

It makes perfect sense that Andrew Breitbart's last month on this earth—or at least one representative moment of it—is documented in an exhaustively played YouTube video. The setting is the lawn outside Washington's Wardman Park Marriott, where the right-wing Internet impresario, who died at age forty-three on March 1, had just given a speech to the adoring throng at the Conservative Political Action Conference. Now, having left the hotel, he discovers that CPAC is besieged by protesters from Occupy D.C.

The video clip, shot by somebody in the crowd, initially shows protesters banging on a drum and chanting one of those “Hey hey, ho ho” routines. The camera then pans left and comes across a man with longish white hair and a beard—like Santa Claus with prominent canines and a permanent snarl. It is Breitbart, and he is yelling something: “Behave yourself! Behave yourself!” It is a line from one of the *RoboCop* movies, and Breitbart screams it again and again and again, clinging to the words even as a couple of real-life cops temporarily nudge him out of the frame.

Then something clever occurs to the protesters. They change tempo and take up a different chant, which seems specifically aimed at their tormentor: “Racist, sexist, antigay! Right-wing bigot, go away!” Now something clever occurs to Breitbart. Picking up the pace, he begins shouting: “Stop *raping* people! Stop *raping* people!”

And that, I submit, is American political discourse in the early months of 2012—as conducted by the nation's most tech-savvy, Internet-enlightened factions. To note that these factions

are speaking past each other is to utter a crushing understatement. These are people so cocooned in self-righteousness that they are unwilling even to hear what their opposite numbers are saying. Their cherished caricatures of the other side—alternately racist or rapist—are all that matter.

This bizarre showdown was not out of character for Andrew Breitbart. It wasn't an ugly incident that marred an otherwise respectable career. On the contrary, it was the very sort of thing his followers admired him for doing. Breitbart loved to confront protesters, to bellow at people in public places, to call journalists ugly names. He would while away the hours fantasizing about an armed civil war against liberals, insisting that such a conflict would be entirely justified, since conservatives were the great victims of American life and liberals were “the bullies on the playground.”

But these things are not what make Andrew Breitbart worth writing about. There are dozens of right-wing loudmouths with high media profiles. Breitbart was something different: a man who started from genuinely critical premises and went haywire somewhere down the line.

I met him just once, while we were both waiting to appear on a TV program, and was surprised to discover that he was a fairly decent fellow in person. I was further surprised to learn—although I can't recall the conversational turn that brought us to the subject—that he shared my admiration for *Spy* magazine, which prosecuted an endless war against the nation's celebrities during the

Eighties and Nineties by means of pranks and creative derision.

The connection seems obvious in retrospect. Breitbart's single greatest moment as a political provocateur involved a *Spy*-style prank: a series of hidden-camera interviews in which employees of ACORN could be seen offering advice to two youngsters who had announced that they wanted to get started in the prostitution business, importing underage women for the purpose. The videos didn't expose the delusions of the powerful, as classic media pranks are supposed to; they felt more like the work of daring college kids who had gone slumming and would now report back on all the crazy stuff they heard. Still, the stuff they heard from those ACORN staffers was undeniably crazy, and the firestorm that followed, ginned up resourcefully by Breitbart, proved too toxic for the community-advocacy group to overcome.*

The aspect of *Spy* that I loved most, however, was its contempt for celebrity, its gleeful smashing of our modern-day idols. And this is basically what Andrew Breitbart was all about. It is not clear from his articles, books, or blustering speeches that the man really shared or even understood the broader concerns of the political movement that lionized him. But when the subject was Hollywood, Breitbart's hate ran pure. He was a native son of upper-middle-class Los Angeles, and trashing the

* *The mainstream media was an indirect victim of the prank. The ACORN videos were heavily edited and included knee-slapping intros featuring one of the pranksters duded up in a pimp costume worthy of a Seventies blaxploitation film. In truth, the prankster wore ordinary street clothes when visiting the ACORN offices.*

lazy assumptions and comfy prejudices of his fellow Angelenos seems to have been his life project.

In 2004, Breitbart published *Hollywood, Interrupted: Insanity Chic in Babylon*, which he co-authored with Mark Ebner, *Spy's* West Coast man and a journalist whose work I particularly relished when I was young. The book was a product, Ebner explained to me, of the two men's "mutual loathing for Hollywood and celebrity." Elsewhere, Breitbart described his hometown and its pathological self-absorption this way:

The people who come to L.A. saw *Beverly Hills, 90210* or a variation on that theme, and so that's how they act there. Or they see *Entourage*. So you have bad actors coming to Hollywood bad-acting the part of what they think Hollywood is like. So you have really insecure people in a non-meritocracy where it's all about your relationships, who are vicious backstabbers, who don't think you should be dating somebody. It's like an orgy of people climbing over each other to stick it into the next orifice.

When I read that, I wanted to cheer. Yes, Hollywood was vain and shallow long before *90210* first aired in the early Nineties. But every now and then we need to be reminded, in brutal terms like these, what a vale of pretense and putrefaction the culture industry is. Had I been raised in its narcissistic demesne, I sometimes think, I might have become a confrontational right-winger myself.

Breitbart's instinct was to magnify the horror, to build Hollywood's venality into the central problem of the world. The film industry, he argued, was somehow prior to or determinative of everything else that goes on in America. "*Hollywood is more important than Washington*," he announced in last year's memoir, *Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World!* "What happens in front of the cameras on a soundstage at the Warner Bros. lot often makes more difference to the fate of America than what happens in the back rooms of the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill."

This, then, was Breitbart's political theory. Start with the unquestionable fact that Hollywood is liberal, in a kind of foggy lifestyle way, and that

this liberalism trickles down via the royalist and almost feudal workings of celebrity culture, according to which Angelina Jolie can probably cure scrofula or racism by revealing to the world her well-toned right leg. Add to this the belief that Hollywood is all-powerful, and the obvious conclusion is that spoiled actors rule America. You can safely ignore the postindustrial havoc masterminded by Chicago School economists and the wars waged by hard-bitten Beltway necons. What really matters is those damned movie stars and their shallow longing for artisanal cupcakes and peace in Darfur.

Perhaps it is inevitable that a son of Brentwood should believe Hollywood holds supreme power over American life. This is, after all, what Hollywood itself tells us: that to live a life beyond the camera's worshipful gaze is to never have lived at all.

It's also an idea that occurs naturally to anyone raised in the pale blue TV light of twentieth-century America—like me, for example. Of course culture is important. In fact, when I was younger, I would probably have agreed with Breitbart's basic claims. I thought that advertising directed our consumer habits, that rock stars made our mores, and that newspaper people set our political agenda; that they were, all of them, unmoved movers accountable to no one.

But of course it doesn't work that way. I eventually discovered that there was something even more important than movies in determining what happens in Washington, and in every town in the United States: profits. In fact, to try to understand American life without recognizing the significance of business is to deny its essence, its motive force. It is to talk about cars without mentioning motors, or gasoline, or roads.

This is a step that Breitbart, like most of the right, was never really able to take. He talked constantly, in his ultra-cynical way, of a "Democrat-Media Complex"—a sort of pumped-up liberal-bias leviathan—but as far as I can tell, he never took his cynicism beyond that. It didn't dawn on him that Hollywood's vaunted liberalism might be just for show, an expression of some

deeper (and yet shallower) industry need, no more meaningful than, say, its desire to see the little people of the world using hemp bags to cart their crap home from Whole Foods.

This left Breitbart with a worldview that was both totally politicized—in which every stray comment was a work of fiendish propaganda—and yet completely superficial. He was an ardent collector of grievances, of the stupid things public figures say about one another. But the actual *substance* of controversy mattered little. Every question was to be debated at the second remove, and every debate could be understood as a succession of mean names each side called the other, with a fail-safe winning argument: *They started it!*

For example, when describing the lead-up to the Iraq war in *Righteous Indignation*, Breitbart simply rehearses a list of clueless things uttered in 2002 and 2003 by Hollywood liberals, then informs us that these people pushed their perverse antiwar vision through the media "unchallenged." And that's it. That's the story of how we got into the Iraq war, with its trillion-dollar price tag and its tens of thousands of corpses and its ruination of that country. You, reader, might recall debates over WMDs and Saddam's responsibility for 9/11, but to judge by his memoir, Breitbart pretty much missed that part of the story.

Or consider the 1991 confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, which Breitbart often cited as the reason for his swerve to the right: as the hypocritical liberals huffed and puffed and persecuted the nominee, the blinders fell from the young Angeleno's eyes. However, when he told the story of his epiphany to Sixties troublemaker Paul Krassner last year (the people at *Playboy* had the brilliant idea of putting these two Katzenjammer Kids in a room together), Krassner responded with a sheaf of repugnant opinions Thomas had subsequently rendered from the bench. At once Breitbart dodged the question. He knew nothing about those. A single TV moment twenty years ago was all that mattered.

Putting aside his Hollywood-hating crusade, the central idea of

Breitbart's career was to depict liberals as a tribe of false accusers always painting the world—to quote that Occupy D.C. chant—as “racist, sexist, antigay.” Of these three, the charge of racism was their favorite, not to mention the most potent, and Breitbart's goal was to neutralize the strategy once and for all.

What brought him closest to achieving this ambition, ironically, was becoming a false accuser himself. In July 2010, one of Breitbart's websites posted video excerpts from an address to the NAACP by Shirley Sherrod, a Department of Agriculture official in Georgia. The speech, as it was edited, seemed to show Sherrod making a startling admission of racism toward a white farmer who came to her for help. In the unedited version, Sherrod went on to tell how she overcame her prejudices, realized the common predicament of poor people regardless of race, and tried to save the white man's farm. But the complete video did not surface until the next day—and in the meantime, the right's infinite-repeat machine had been switched on, Sherrod had been fired, and the bias spotters had already staked out the second remove, criticizing the mainstream media for not attacking the racist USDA bureaucrat. Then it all fell apart. Apologies ensued, and Sherrod was offered another government job—which she declined, preferring to sue the neatly pressed khakis off Breitbart instead.

So too it went with Breitbart's war on celebrity. He started out as a man who loved to puncture Hollywood vanity, then became a VIP himself. “Media is everything,” he used to say, and by the end it was all he was—a caricature, as he reportedly confided in his final days to Sixties radical Bill Ayers. His articles and books, like the Supreme Court decisions of Clarence Thomas, were secondary and are now largely forgotten. What will be remembered is the ranting collection of pixels he leaves behind, those images of a stout man with graying hair and a snarling lip, saying something mean to someone.

As for Breitbart's relationship with his one true love, the Internet, I think it is best demonstrated by recalling the way he once quarreled with a *Gawker* editor via instant message for three

days. On and on the mighty champions fought, ultimately generating some 10,000 words between them while trying to hash out whether neo-Nazis could be described as right-wing. Here was an endless Iron Butterfly drum solo of pointless speculation and wandering rage, with no pauses to acknowledge things that are obvious to everyone or to check history books that might have cleared matters up quickly. Just two voices screaming at each other in the ether, their petty insults and accusations preserved for future generations.

For four decades now, the Breitbart model of political confrontation has been around in one form or another. The more I look back over its history, the more I am convinced that its closest evolutionary relative is pro wrestling. There are the same mock-feuds, the same posturing outrage, with the antagonists always avenging their vain selves or the wounded honor of their stage friends. The conflicts mean nothing. There is nothing at stake. And in the end there is nothing to remember.

Then again. By some quirk of fate, the *New York Times* that was on newsstands at the moment of Andrew Breitbart's death carried an op-ed by Nicholas Kristof bemoaning bullying as a sort of national plague. For his lead, Kristof quoted remarks delivered at Harvard by Lady Gaga, who described how the meanness of bullies *upset her straight-A habits* in high school.

Reading the article the next day, I thought for just an instant that I might miss Andrew Breitbart, who once seemed willing to take a hatchet to the happy tree house of middlebrow complacency. But he never really delivered on the pretense-puncturing promise of his early days. As his career unfolded, he chose to sluce his high-octane scorn not over the powerful but over the traditionally powerless. His skirmishes with ACORN, with unions, with Shirley Sherrod—these were not the acts of a cultural renegade. They were dirty tricks, deserving of an epithet that Breitbart wholeheartedly embraced: *Nixonesque*. ■



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