



SET THE CONTROLS FOR THE HEART OF THE SUN

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1. DO OVER

Last time I was in Florida for an election was four years ago. Steve Elliott and I covered the entire campaign, starting with Dean's scream in the snows of Iowa to the final stretch in the biggest swing state, where we joined by half a dozen journalist friends. We stayed at the house of Larry Davis, a well-known Democratic attorney in Broward County. Larry had seen 2000 up close, when he worked with Gore's legal team. But it was Ohio that sunk John Kerry. He conceded at 3 a.m. When we woke up Wednesday, we didn't bother to watch Kerry's speech. We drove to beach and slipped into the water.

Floating beneath an azure sky, we felt the specter of a second Bush term lurking behind the swaying palms. "It just doesn't seem real," Steve said. Kerry had been down in the polls but gaining, and everyone thought he could scratch out a last minute squeaker. The warm waves felt like a ritual bath, but not enough to wash away the impurities of the entire nation. "I don't know," Steve said, "if I have the strength to get back to shore."

The next four years were everything we feared.

Then came the fight for post-Bush America, launching the most intense political drama of our time. We all know what happened: John McCain, left for dead, survived his primary and then waited for the Democratic dust to settle, from which emerged a 44-year-old half-black man named Barack Hussein Obama. From the start, incredibly, Obama was winning. Let's be clear as to why: Obama had better ideas, inspired millions of people, and ran a better campaign. In response, McCain jettisoned his independent pedigree to run a cynical campaign, best embodied by his vice presidential pick, Sarah Palin. When the economy soured, Obama opened a big lead. The Republicans panicked. They uncorked their foulest potions. Fear spread among Democrats that the Republicans would destroy a chance for the country to redeem itself. By now, everyone was consuming news in multiple formats for six hours daily. It felt like you could stop someone on the street and ask, "What's the latest on that Quinnipiac poll out of Ohio?" And they'd respond, "Well, it's tighter, but the likely voter model is screwy and there's some really good news in the cross tabs." In the back of everyone's minds lurked the question: Can they win again? "It feels like the Apocalypse," my friend Starlee said as final hour drew near. "Gog and Magog are lining up on the battlefield."

This is what brought me back to Florida, a week before the election. I'm with Steve Elliott again, along with several friends who were here last time. We're back at Larry's Davis' house. Everything's the same, except different. History repeats itself, Hegel observed, to which Karl Marx, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, famously added "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." It's fitting that the renewed Republican bugaboo should offer the most succinct possible précis of Bush's eight years. But that farce is almost done. And history will not be repeated. Steve and I had been surprised by Obama's electrifying speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, and thought: If only that guy were running. Here we are.

"It's like a Do-over," Steve says. "You know that date with your high school crush, the one that went awry, and you always wished you could go back, say the right things, and live the life together that fate always intended? This is going to be like that. But better."

2. INSANE IN THE McCAIN

Broward County, which includes Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale, is Florida's largest concentration of Democratic voters. It's the state's blue firewall. "We can make up for half the other counties combined," Larry says. We happen to arrive in Florida the same day as Obama's first big Broward event, the aptly titled Sunrise Rally. Tonight is Obama's vaunted informercial, during which the cameras will switch live to the 20,000 supporters currently streaming into the BankAtlantic Center. Outside, people had been lining up to see Obama since 6am. As the cars rolled past, a small but valiant detachment of McCain volunteers perched itself on the median, hoping to stem the tide.

"Do you see our plane?" the head volunteer said, pointing.

Above, an orange open cockpit stunt plane circled with a banner: DON'T SPREAD MY WEALTH VOTE McCain!

"No communism!" they yelled at passersby.

Exciting: my first glimpse of real, live McCainiacs. They are all nice to me, but vehement in their utter loathing of the press and anyone dumb enough not to realize that Obama represented some kind of creeping putsch. My notepad attracts a lot of attention, as everyone takes turns trying to convince me, the liberal elite media, how deranged the liberal elite media are. "They have such a distorted view!" Then it's on to a nuanced discussion of the issues, like: "MAN, I TELL YOU OBAMA IS SOCIALISM!"

One of the protestors, a self described "Jewban" named Elaine, wore a red sweater with three buttons. One of them said: DEMOCRATS 4 McCain.

"So you're a Democrat?"

"No. I'm just wearing this. The office gave it to me."

The next button announced that: MARTIN LUTHER KING WAS A REPUBLICAN.

"Are you sure about that?" I asked.

"No. They gave me that one too."

"I think that's not correct."

"I don't think so either."

Two of Elaine's three pieces of flair are falsehoods pinned to her by the McCain campaign. Sound familiar? Then came Al, the organizer of this outing, who liked to yell: "Use your brain, vote McCain!"

"You see how rude they are?" He asks me. "They flip you off, they don't know nothing. These people are so stupid. And they're voting!"

"So you think stupid people shouldn't vote?"

Yes, that's right, he affirms, especially not these stupid Obama people. Then he turns to a car to yell, "GO BACK TO RUSSIA!"

Behind me, a guy named Seth looks like a theme park McCain: black suit, rubber mask, waving indiscriminately with a fixed smile. In homage to his candidate, Seth even mimics the stiff arms and double thumbs up. A nice touch. But every so often the mask has to come off.

"This thing gets really sweaty," he says, holding the slightly disturbing rubber shell of McCain's face in his hand.

"It's a pretty good likeness," I say.

"I'm going use it for Halloween too!" Seth replies.

"Pretty scary."

"Yeah. And my wife will be Sarah Palin."

"Double scary!"

"I know. I can't wait."

3. THE STONE ZONE

In 2004, the GOP fielded massive teams of lawyers to mount challenges at Democratic polling precincts on Election Day, throwing out "suspect" ballots and generally gumming up the works. One day, we discovered GOP staffers posing as gay pride protestors at a heavily religious polling station in an attempt to make churchgoing black voters uncomfortable.

But this time, there are no signs of voter suppression. "I think it's already over down here," says Larry. The nail in the coffin, he says, was Florida Governor Charlie Crist's emergency extension of early voting hours on Tuesday. "That means even he thinks its over."

Looking for potential leads on dirty tricks, Steve and I tracked down legendary Republican dirty trickster Roger Stone. Stone, who lives in Miami. loves talking to the press. Stone cuts an odd figure among Republican operatives; he learned hardball from his hero, Nixon — his self-professed political creed is WWND: What Would Nixon Do? — and has since worked for Bob Dole, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush. He also has a dyed blond buzz cut, lifts weights, and is candid about his libertine ways, including a 1996 scandal in which he had to resign from Bob Dole's presidential campaign for soliciting group sex in a magazine ad. Not too long ago, Stone had a tattoo of Tricky Dick's face on his back.

"I'm with Charlie Crist on the voting," Stone says over martinis at a restaurant in Fort Lauderdale. "You can't be afraid of democracy. You have to compete in the

arena of ideas and let people vote.” This is relatively surprising coming from the guy who, rather infamously, claims to have organized the so-called Brooks Brothers riot in 2000 wherein a mob of well dressed Republican partisans stormed the Miami-Dade clerk’s office and shut down that county’s recount, thereby helping to precipitate the legal (rather than electoral) resolution of the election.

Stone is a charismatic and deeply fascinating figure. He relishes his sinister reputation, but just how much of his resume is self-aggrandizement is unclear. Above us is Rothstein, Rosenfeldt, and Adler, the law firm where Stone bases his operations. Stone tells us that Rothstein owns this restaurant. He’s at the next table, in fact, surrounded by colleagues and friends, all well-fed guys in two-thousand dollar suits, smoking cigars, flirting with the unnaturally tan blondes in satin corsets who staff the place. It is an almost mythical portrait of fat cats, Florida-style. All they need are hundred dollar bills for lighting their contraband Cubans.

Stone offers a scathing review of McCain’s campaign. His argument: don’t have lobbyists run your campaign (not because of the political implications but because they don’t know how); don’t campaign by committee; start with one message and build on it over time. Like many conservatives, Stone is disappointed that the McCain of 2000 was usurped by the unrecognizably petty and fake McCain of 2008. “The whole reason for his candidacy was his centrist reformer image,” Stone says. “They systematically erased that advantage. No one cares about all these attacks.”

Even worse, according to Stone, is what the campaign means for the Republican party. “McCain had an opportunity to redefine the GOP as a centrist party with conservative roots,” Stone says. “Instead they went for the base and ceded the moderates.” The blame, he says, lies with Rove and Bush. Stone hates both, and not just because of their botched administration. “We’re supposed to be the party of freedom and liberty,” he says, “and they want to detain people illegally and torture them?” Stone’s libertarian leanings are why he’s voting against Proposition 2, a state ballot initiative to ban gay marriage in Florida. “Life is short,” he says. “If gay people want to marry and be happy, why shouldn’t they?”

About his adopted state, Stone likes to quote Somerset Maugham: “a sunny place for shady people.” As we talk, more dark-suited men appear at the restaurant. They all hug Stone, or give him a kiss on the cheek. They whisper in each others’ ears. One of them is said to be a local crime boss. The whole thing feels like a cut scene from *Grand Theft Auto*, *Vice City*, and I half expect Roger to give me a mission: *Listen kid, Colonel Cortez is getting to be a real pain my ass. Go to Starfish Island, get my boat, find the Cortez, and take care of ‘em.* Instead, Roger tells vivid stories of his own political missions over the years, including the ground war in Florida in 2000.

I ask Stone if he regrets the Brooks Brothers riot. He has never made such an admission, although his detractors might argue that he didn’t play a big enough role for any remorse. Whatever Stone’s contribution to the disaster of the past eight

years, it clearly troubles him because he pauses for the first time in our conversation. Finally, Stone says, "Of course I do. I think about it every day."

There may be pride buried in that guilt, but I think Stone means it. Like a blond, Nixon-tattooed Raskolnikov, Stone wants to confess. All those dead soldiers weigh on him, he says. It's hard to live with that. There's dirty tricks and there's dirty tricks. If he could have do-over, he would probably take it. It's not that he likes Obama — but this year, he says, will be different.

4. I HAVE A DREAM

I remember all my dreams. Every night. With a head full of politics, it was just a matter of time until my subconscious created its own version of Oliver Stone's "W," as happened last night. It was a jumble of three fuzzy acts that I'm going to guess are very different from the actual movie, which I didn't see. But here's the strange part: the night before I dreamt a trailer for my own version of "W," an unprecedented (for me, anyway) sneak preview of the following night's feature. And I must commend my subconscious, because this trailer was an incredible compelling piece of cinema, that I can't stop thinking about and will there for briefly share:

SCENE: George and Laura are together in a dark study. There is a fire in the fireplace. It is a quiet moment. George reclines in Odalisque repose on a tooled leather settle. It may be the real George Bush or the Josh Brolin George Bush; either way, he is definitely younger, less grey, less troubled.

He is also naked. As is Laura, who is on the floor, with her hair mussed. Privates are tastefully obscured, as their feet nearly touch at the center of the scene, framing the fireplace in the background. The rich darkness of the study and illumination from the fire make it look like an oil painting. The trailer begins on the fireplace, actually, and the camera slowly pulls back to reveal the scene of post-coital lovers. There is clever, counter-thematic music supervision, the way Sofia Copolla set Marie Antoinette repairing to the Trianon to New Order. We hear "Six Different Ways" by The Cure. The whole thing is strangely beautiful, this intimate moment from before lives were ruined. As if to say: at least they loved each other. And that's all anyone can have in the end.

5. LAST DANCE

It's 11:59 and there's no sign of the big dog. We're another Bank Center, the Bank United Center at University of Miami. It's Sunday night, thirty or so hours until the first polls open, and this will be McCain's last appearance in south Florida. McCain is supposed to go on at 12:15, but he's flying in from New Hampshire, the fourth of five campaign stops that started at 6 a.m. Now they're saying close to 1am. At this point, McCain's arrival time doesn't matter, since the auditorium has turned itself into a

swinging Latin dance party over the past several hours. There's an enormous band stand, where a pack of horns, full percussion section, and Grammy winner Albita have been lost in a half-hour Samba Odyssey dedicated to their candidate: *Don-de es-ta Sen-ior Mah-Cain!*

On the floor, costumed dancers work a rhythmic swing while waving pom poms and McCain/Palin signs. Gorgeous women twirl in floor length skirts. Lithe young men do fancy footwork. All for the love of the GOP. The Cubans are the last constituency under the Republican tent with any pizzazz. I run into a friend who's on McCain's plane and asked him if this anything like other McCain events. He asks if I am joking. This is clearly the most fun you'll ever have at a McCain event. It's as if they collected all the life left in the GOP, put it in this room, and lit the fuse for one last party. And it is, in truth, a rocking party.

"It feels like it could descend into an orgy at any minute," my friend Steve Elliott says.

Dance floors can play tricks on your mind. It's true that if you squint in here, you might be fooled into thinking that the GOP isn't collapsing into a parochial, eschatological, white dwarf. But the only reason this warm-blooded Caribbean crowd is rabid for McCain is the ever-fresh psychic wound of Fidel Castro, a half century before. For them the socialism charge has really taken hold. Half the t-shirts in sight read: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR: CUBA GOT 'CHANGE' IN 1959. Accessorizing the anti-Socialism slogans are the "Joe" (as in the Plumber) stickers, worn by nearly everyone in the room. "Come to think of it," Steve says. "I hope was wrong about that orgy."

At quarter to one, McCain appears, with his lineup of the usual suspects: Cindy, Tom Ridge, and Joe Lieberman. They smile as McCain lays into his speech, which is not a speech at all but a hit parade of the kneecappers that have bubbled to the surface of his incoherent campaign: Biden's "crisis" comment; drill here, and drill now; Obama will (gasp) engage in diplomacy; Redistributionist-in-Chief; "spread the wealth," replete with finger quotes; measuring the drapes; Mac is back; oh, and don't forget our good friend Joe the Plumber!

Similar to his general campaign, McCain offers no overarching message whatsoever on the stump. It reminds me of the quarterback running for class president in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* who takes the stage and just yells: SAN DIMAS HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL RULES! Whereas Obama's speeches apply themes to a well-crafted argument, McCain strings together a bunch of hopeful zingers, some of which fall flat even among friends. After all, no one gives a fuck about \$18 billion in pork barrel spending when the deficit this year will be a trillion dollars.

That may be why McCain keeps it short, jumping to the battle cry that has marked the end of his speeches since he accepted the nomination in Minneapolis. "I'm not afraid of the fight," he says. "I'm ready for it, and you're going to fight with me!" As

always, he whips the crowd into a furious crescendo. "Stand up," he yells as the roar drowns him out. "Fight! Stand up and fight!"

It is a rousing performance: the old soldier, mortally wounded, still rallying his troops. Despite McCain's disastrous candidacy, I feel a little bad for him. "He was misled by his strategists," said one supporter in the crowd nearby. "Obama was just better at it." Where McCain went wrong, as we know, will soon be the subject of many detailed post mortems. I've always thought McCain could have run an honorable campaign and left the political stage a hero. Instead, he'll be remembered as a tragic footnote, the malevolent foil of the grand political drama called Barack Obama.

"Don't feel bad for the guy," Steve says. "He knew the stakes. He's a dice shooter, and he put his chips on the line when he went Rovian in July." After that, Steve says, the odds collapsed around two outcomes: "President or asshole. And we all know the odds on that one."

But here, in this room, the glory of the moment obscures that inevitable reality. Now I understand why McCain stepped up his campaign schedule in the last days. It must be exhilarating to be loved in failure. Who wants to hear bad news from your strategists and pollsters when you can have your spirits lifted for another few minutes by a crowd of thousands? Soon, however, those crowds will be gone, and McCain will have to face himself. As will the party. Until then, the rallies are their mutual escape. "When I'm elected President..." McCain bellows. I guess Republicans do believe in hope after all.

6. POISONING THE WELLS

The Pompano Beach McCain field office, like almost everything else in Florida, is housed in a strip mall. There's a guy waving a flag out front, but inside traffic is light. We've been hearing about empty McCain offices, sapped of enthusiasm, but this one has a few true believers left. "We're still high on the rally down in Miami last week," says one of the volunteer coordinators. "There were a lot of Hispanics there, and it was good to hear them sing the Star Spangled Banner." Then she adds, "Oh, you know else was there? The Jewish. They turned out in droves."

Then we meet Tim McClellan, the Northeast Broward Regional Field Manager. Tim is a nice guy, forthright and friendly, which you don't usually find in any political office during a campaign. He's also gone through the political Looking Glass. After we ask a few questions about bread and butter Republican issues like terrorism, Tim quickly segues to crackpot conjecture that Obama is not a citizen. "

"That's a debunked internet rumor," I say. "Obama produced his birth certificate."

"But there's no seal on his birth certificate and the font is wrong."

This twist in the persistent rumor is being promoted, at this very moment, by a lunatic fringe blogger named Pam Geller at a rally in Palm Beach. Obama's birth certificate has been verified by the State of Hawaii and multiple news organizations. But that's not good enough by Tim. For him, the better source of fact is a lawsuit by Philip J. Berg, a longtime paranoid gadfly who has also filed lawsuits demanding "the truth about 9/11." Berg has filed so many lawsuits, as it happens, that the very lawsuit Tim cites was thrown out as frivolous. Nevertheless, Tim says, he expects that "the US Supreme Court will prove that Obama's not a citizen."

Context will help understand why this is shocking. Tim is a paid McCain staffer questioning the citizenship of the Democratic presidential candidate. Such a thing would have never have happened in 2004. Bush's campaign, for all its faults, had discipline. First off, had you wandered into a Bush field office with a notebook someone would have taken you down with a flying tackle. And you certainly wouldn't have been able to quote the local honcho straying way off message. But my encounter with Tim illuminates drives home something even more troubling: he's not off message. With McCain swinging at shadows, like ACORN, Rashid Khalidi, and the liberal media that won't tell the truth, the entire Republican apparatus has devolved into an insidious rumor mill. The sub rosa dirty work that once was the province of 527s is now official material. Some time around six weeks ago, the party held hands, took a deep breath, and stepped off the cliff.

We visit several McCain visibilities nearby, and not one supporter is interested in the issues. They want to talk about "Obama's shady associations"; how his money was raised by the PLO; and the minorities who took down the economy via Fanny and Freddy. Not a single Florida Republican seems to sense any irony when they complain that Obama, who is seven points ahead nationally, will probably "steal the election."

Spending some time among the rank and file makes you realize that the last two weeks have not been about winning this election, but making the country ungovernable. It was McCain himself who ominously warned that the "fabric of Democracy" is threatened. If this true, it's backwards: democracy has been at least moderately damaged by McCain, one of whose own advisors recently acknowledged, after being unable to point to any actual instances of voter fraud, that the whole charge is a "perception" meant to "plant seeds of doubt." I guess its the lesson McCain learned from Vietnam: if we can't have the country, no one can. Let's burn it down — and poison the wells for good measure.

But the scorched earth isn't working. Obama's still ahead. It may even backfire: resurrecting the culture war and wrapping it in paranoid delusion has stripped the Republican party to its radioactive core. Remember Rove's "permanent Republican majority" of four years ago? That dream is long gone. It is almost tragic to watch the "intellectuals" on The Corner who contort themselves into a rage in defense of Sarah Palin. If that's whom they choose as the standard bearer for the cause of Edmund

Burke, William F. Buckley, and Leo Strauss, fine. The game is over. It's that brand of politics that caused Colin Powell, the most popular Republican nationwide, to frame his earth-shattering endorsement of Obama inside a detailed un-endorsement of what his own party has become. "I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion," Powell said, that "[Obama] might be associated with terrorists. This is not the way we should be doing it in America."

7. GOODBYE DARKNESS, HELLO LIGHT

In 2004, Obama made his pitch for national unity on behalf of John Kerry. "Now, even as we speak," he worried, "there are those who are preparing to divide us — the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of 'anything goes.'" Little did he know just how far "anything" would go. But even then, Obama had an answer. "I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America — there is the United States of America...There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America."

Obama's rhetoric is stage-crafted, well-honed, political theater, but it is political theater in the service of a grand idea — an idea enshrined in our national motto. Not "In God We Trust," which came along in 1954, but the original one: E Pluribus Unum. To hear words like these invoked with real conviction is an utterly new experience for people my age. Cloaked in protective irony, we never talked about things like and "hope" and "service" and "country" and mean it. Believing in things used to make us uncomfortable.

By 7pm on Tuesday, it's becoming clear that Obama might deliver on his promise from 2004. It's about time. Everyone has been anxious-giddy-excited-nervous-hopeful all day. This morning, Steve had to tear himself away from the computer. "I keep looking for the one blog that will tell me the future and calm my nerves," my friend Starlee says. "But it just doesn't exist."

"I know he's ahead in the polls," Steve says as we all gather with Larry and Janet and several other friends. We're in the same. "But I can't stop worrying."

"Don't worry," Larry says. "We got 'em,"

"Those are the precise words you used last time," Steve says.

We're in the same place where we watched those returns. Seeing as what happened with exit polls in 2004, we mostly ignore them, but sense good vibes. Soon enough, numbers arrive: McCain's Pickett's charge into Pennsylvania is a bust. Ohio goes decisively blue. Florida's looking good. Then: Iowa, New Mexico, Colorado. The electoral math is a fait accompli, but we don't quite expect the announcement to

come so sharply at 11 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, when the last continental polls closes, the networks return from break, and the entire west coast lights up blue. Obama is now the “American President Americans have been waiting for.” Our scene, I’m sure, is just like millions across the country. Cheers, tears, and clinking of beers.

By the time John McCain makes his concession speech, we’ve already forgotten about him. Oh right — that guy! McCain, I now realize, was always irrelevant. The election was a referendum on the American experiment. In a time of peril, we faced a stark contrast: reason or superstition, tolerance or tribalism, progress or prejudice. The results are in, and they are positive. We made the right choice. In a fucking landslide even.

Early the next morning, we go to the same beach from 2004. The same azure sky, same gently swaying palms, same waves. The enormity of an Obama presidency sinks in. Commentators have already started reaching back through time to define the significance of the moment. The Reagan chapter of history is closed. The civil rights movement reached its mountaintop. The culture war sat up in its coffin, said boo, and retreated to its final resting place. The North finally won the Civil War.

Hyperbole, all. But why not take it a step further? Floating out there in the Atlantic at dawn, I declare the election to be nothing less than the triumph of light over darkness. Yeah, that's what it was. A Manichean confrontation. As at Dunkirk, or in the fires of Mt. Doom. So when you turn on the television tomorrow and they tell you that McCain lost because he changed messages, or couldn't organize his team, or raised too little money, don't listen. Because that's not what happened. What happened was good faced evil, and finally won. The waves make this thought go down easier. The spell is broken. The nightmare is over. And at the horizon, where the ocean meets the sky, the sun is rising over Obama's America.