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BY MARK BINELLI

Starting with the immediate future, who will the presidential nominees be in 2008?

It'll be Hillary and Rudy.

Really? Rudy?

Well, yeah, I don't see anyone knocking him off. Who do the Republicans have? Fred Thompson? That's the great sexy hope – the guy who played Uncle Joe on Petticoat Junction? That's hysterical. As much as they have misgivings about Giuliani, he does appeal to their base. You don't have to think too much with Rudy: "I'm going to kill the people who scare you." That's why he didn't like Ron Paul in the Republican debates, because Ron Paul makes you think. Thinking is bad. When Ron Paul essentially said, "Maybe we should just find out why these people hate us," Rudy had a fit. He basically said, "Take it back, you bad man! We should not have to think about why they hate us. Remember, we're pure good, they're pure evil. What's to think?"

Who wins, if it comes down to Rudy and Hillary?

It really depends, in a strange way, upon Bill Clinton. I mean, he fooled around when he was president. What's he been doing now that he has time on his hands? [Laughs] Not that there's anything wrong with fooling around. Who cares? But if there's any sort of scandal, that's all the media will talk about, 24/7. The only way the Democrats can lose is if you give people a reason to go, "Fuck them and their Clinton baggage. We lived through it once, and it reminds me that my marriage isn't good."

So Hillary gives the Republicans ammunition.

Exactly. I'm not supporting any one candidate, but in this year, when the Democrats want a sure winner, John Edwards looks like it. First of all, the electorate has demonstrated their predilection for voting for Southern Democrats for president. You have to be a guy who pronounces all four e's in the word "shit" to get elected. He also appeals to the left-wing base, but he doesn't come across as what Middle America hates the most about Democrats: the dreaded elitist.

Longer-term, is the country shifting left or right?

Neither. I've seen that prediction so many times, where one party is down and people say, "They're dead." They said it about the Republicans after Watergate – then we had one term of Jimmy Carter [laughs]. That yin and yang is built into the system.

In general, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

I've always been fairly optimistic, but not lately. You know, one man's pessimist is another man's realist. People say to me, "Why are you so cynical?" And I say, "I wouldn't be so cynical if you weren't so fucking stupid." I'm pessimistic because I see multiple looming icebergs that we're sailing right toward, and Captain George Bush is the guy in the crow's nest of the Titanic. He doesn't see the iceberg. Or he sees it and he thinks it's Jesus or some shit. There are environmental, religious and financial disasters looming. What if they all go down at the same time? It's not like we're getting our shit together on any of this stuff.

How about the environment? Will increased consciousness about global warming and other threats lead to changes for the better?

There is more consciousness now, but there doesn't seem to be much movement toward political action. When Congress debates what to do, they're always throwing out numbers that are years away: "We'll reduce carbon emissions by twenty-five percent by 2018." That's not going to get it done. And don't forget, most Republican congressmen are still global warming deniers. I don't understand what any person doesn't get about "You're going to die too!" I mean, do they have their own air? I

could understand that, because they're selfish pricks by nature: "I've got my own air. What do I give a shit?" But there's a cloud of coal slag over China that's so large it affects the weather. How good can business be to justify that?

People seem to think we can save ourselves by switching to more energy-efficient light bulbs.

Light bulbs and stuff like that are good, but it's a drop in the bucket. After a while you have a nice bucket, but we need so much more. Nothing is going to change as long as the world's worst polluter, the United States, doesn't take a leadership role. Bush said it years ago: "Why should the United States take the lead on this?" Gee, I don't know. For our survival?

Some issues are so enormous, only the government can get it done. To say that we can win this on an individual voluntary basis would be like saying we could've won World War II by boycotting sauerbraten. It took the government to really mobilize an entire country – and they did! In a matter of months, Detroit stopped making cars and made only tanks and planes. There's nothing like that going on now. This is a president who asks no sacrifice from the people, even for his War on Terror. It's an attitude of "civilization is at stake, but keep shopping."

Where do you see the War on Terror going in the next five to ten years? Is it going to get worse?

We haven't been attacked again because they're reloading. They need to husband their resources, and they are theatrical. They knocked down the World Trade Center and hit the Pentagon – it takes a lot to top that. And they're patient. The blood feud that's going on now in Iraq dates back to 632 A.D. So, please – 2001 was a blink of an eye.

I do think Giuliani is right in saying that there are people who are trying to come here to kill us. The difference between today and 2003, when we invaded Iraq, is that back then it was a relatively small number of young Muslim men. Now, thanks to this clash of

civilizations we've created, the threat could come from anywhere. The Glasgow guys who crashed a car into the airport and burned themselves alive? They're like Islamic losers. The hatred is so intense, they can't even wait to get their shit together. They're just "Go now! I've got a car and some fire, and I'm just going to do it!" That's very frightening to me.

What would it take to reverse it?

Getting out of Iraq would be number one. Look, you're talking to someone who thinks religion is crazy and makes people do crazy things. But there is still the human instinct to survive. By invading Iraq, we have made it a much closer race between the human instinct for survival and "I'm going to strap on a bomb and kill these motherfuckers who invaded."

Speaking of religion, do you see people getting more or less rational in the coming years?

Both. People are finally catching on that religion is childish and dangerous. One out of five college-age people are now atheist or agnostic. About as many college-age people are atheist or agnostic as are Republicans. Europe is over religion – they're religious in name only. So the older, wiser continent, they've moved beyond that. But of course, much of the world has not. That's probably why we could not achieve peace in Iraq – it's just not how they think. Freedom is not nearly as important to them as the freedom they perceive they'll achieve after they die in paradise.

What about religion in this country? Is it becoming less of a political force?

I really feel like there's a movement building. This is the issue of the day, and people are beginning to understand that religion is the problem. Now, when the president shows up at a disaster site and says he's going to pray, it means nothing. He might as well show up and say, "I'm going to hope. I'm on it – I'm going to wish it were so." It's meaningless at best. It's difficult to steer the ship of state toward some sort of safe

harbor when at least half the people in this country essentially think we should do that by splitting open a chicken and reading its entrails. I'm suggesting we use a compass.

Will hot-button issues like gay marriage fade away as older generations start dying off?

No. It will be an issue like flag burning and immigration – something a political operative can pull out of the bag of tricks and say, “Ah! Be afraid, they want to threaten your marriage!”

Nothing will change until some of those 71 million people who didn't vote in 2004 start to vote. The people who don't vote are the more liberal people; conservatives by their nature are up in the morning and organized and go to the polls and read their fliers from the Republican Party. You know, they're squares. I'm not putting them down. You need squares to run shit. That's just their nature. And the people who are sleeping it off from the club last night – I mean, Barack Obama has the youth vote, which is wonderful, except that youths don't vote.

An economist wrote a book recently arguing that it's better in a democracy if fewer people – those who are actually educated about the issues – vote.

There should be some sort of test, although you could never do that, of course. Given how much this country gives back to its people, I don't think it's too much to ask that citizens should have to prove they know the basic ABCs on what the fuck is up. We ask nothing of our citizens, to the point where people can walk around feeling pride that they don't know anything.

So what do you see improving in the future?

Disco. I see disco fucking trouncing punk music in the next decade, finally coming back to correct the punk thing, which was not a corrective! [Laughs] What do I see improving? [Long pause] Well, um. . . .

You may have just answered the question.

The correct answer is: [hums the "Jeopardy!" theme]

Did you think much about the future as a kid?

Of course. We imagined it as so much better than it came out. We would be riding in jet packs, cars would fly, we'd just be orbs of perfect energy. You wouldn't even have a head – you'd just be a glowing ball interviewing me. But it didn't really change that much. When you look at Star Trek, the only thing that really came to pass was the cell phone. That transmitter they flip up and down is exactly the same thing. But beaming us places? That's never happened. We can't even get the airlines to work.

How do you think this period in history will be remembered?

As the calm before the storm. There will either be a horrendous terrorist attack or there will be, in the next twenty, thirty years – ten, maybe – some sort of environmental horror that changes the way people live. We have not yet been forced to alter our addiction to utter convenience. People will, in some sense, look back on this era the way Scarlett O'Hara looked back on the era before the war came – "Remember when we used to have mint juleps with the Tarleton boys at Tara?" This will be like the antebellum South. Right now we're in the good old days.

What's your best-case scenario for the future?

First of all, some Democrat better win it in 2008. Then that person should go for broke and say to the people, "Now I have to tell you the truth. I couldn't do it when I was running, because you are a bunch of babies who can't take the truth, and you know damn well you wouldn't have voted for me if I said that. But we're going to take these painful measures."

The sad part of it is, the money is there to do almost anything we want. It's not as if you'd have to raise taxes so much. If you took the money being wasted on Iraq, corporate welfare and the drug war, you would have trillions of dollars to work with. That's the core of it. Whoever is the next president has to get at this corporate state we've found ourselves living in.

Has your career unfolded the way you expected?

When I was twenty, I wanted to be Johnny Carson. And maybe when I get older, I'll want to be Johnny Carson again. It's a lot easier to just ask Lindsay Lohan about her latest rehab flameout than to study up on the issues and talk real substance like I do every week. It's boring, but there might come a time when I say, "You've heard me. I've made my point. I've had my time on the soapbox. And nobody took my advice."