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GORE VIDAL

IN HIS LATEST MEMOIR, AMERICA'S MOST UNFLINCHING BIOGRAPHER RECALLS SCENES FROM HIS LAST 40 YEARS. WE NEED HIM FOR 40 MORE

These are not the usual words of a memoir: "Since these so-called neoconservative contingency plans for world conquest will end more soon than late in our destruction one wonders why our media, bought and obedient as they are, cannot see that they are on the wrong side of human history...silencing those few of our citizens who see what is up ahead for us." The "us" is, of course, the U.S. The gentleman writing is Gore Vidal. At age 81, Vidal is one of the few brave men of letters who does "see what is up ahead of us." He writes it cleanly, with open eyes; his style never skirts the terrible facts in the effective prose. One of the most recognized names in literature—and, ironically, one of the least accessed within his native borders—the writer has always spoken unapologetically about the crimes and conspiracies of the American government. So it should come as no surprise that his latest memoir, *Point to Point Navigation* (a follow-up to his 1995 bestseller *Palimpsest*) weaves a political and social chronicle of the United States as much as it offers an account of the personal and the private. Never in our time has one man stood in so many currents of spectacular American culture—from the rise of television to the rise of commercial aviation, from Tennessee Williams to Timothy McVeigh. But Vidal does not read his movement through the world for its surface appeal. He plows against the grain and roots out myths and deceptions. *Point to Point Navigation* begins with Vidal's love affair with film, and ends, audaciously, with his theory on the Kennedy assassination. "I re-dreamed the Republic's history, which I have always regarded as

a family affair," he writes. Along the way he talks of loss (the death of his partner Howard Auster in 2003), the world of literature (Truman Capote and Paul Bowles included), and his run-ins with everyone from Jackie Onassis to Rudolf Nureyev. *Point to Point Navigation* sometimes reads like a writer setting his lands in order before the end, but mostly it's a genius 21st-century thinker with a brain on rapid-fire. Vidal took time from his libraries to spend an hour talking the truth in his Hollywood Hills home. **Christopher Bollen**

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN *Point to Point Navigation* seems to come out of a series of losses. You quote a lot of obituaries. You mention Hurricane Katrina and the tsunami. And you reflect a lot on your partner who died in 2003. Was it these losses that motivated you to write the book?

GORE VIDAL I'm not very sentimental. But I'm legalistic, and I like to set the record straight. Everyone's writing memoirs, and I factor in a lot of them. I figure while I'm still alive I might as well correct them. A great deal of the book was in response to what others have said. My first memoir, *Palimpsest*, covered my first forty years. These are my last forty years.

CB You quote the Renaissance writer Montaigne quite a bit. He seems to be a ghost floating over the pages. Specifically you talk about his missive about the dangers of lying. Do you find writing a memoir and being truthful to the past a difficult practice?

GV You don't always know the truth. That's why I call it a memoir. Otherwise it would be an autobiography, and I'd have to go back in the stacks and check every date. This book is simply how I remember. Memory is very curious—physiologically. You break your leg when you're 10 years old. At 40, you think back to it. You don't have tapes in your head. You don't have films. It isn't a movie you're setting up. What you recall when you summon up the memory of the broken leg is the last time you remembered it. That's the only thing accessible. You can't go back to the initial event. That means memory is always fading.

CB There's a scene in *Palimpsest* where you see a young John F. Kennedy walking up the street and you wonder if you should be going into politics rather than publishing a novel. I wonder if you would have been the kind of politician you are as a writer?

GV I don't think a writer can be a politician. A writer must tell the truth as he sees it. A politician must never give the game away.



Those are contrary forces. Publicists have an easy time with it, someone like Winston Churchill. He wasn't a bad journalist at all. But he was lighting his own statue all the time. That kind of writing can go with politics. But nothing where you say what you think.

CB You've said that the United States has "lost the republic"—in a sense, that it's an empire now. Is there any chance for us to get out of this, or are we a doomed civilization?

GV I'm not a prophet. Usually when these things are gone, they stay gone. Democracies tend to blur into empire; chaos and dictatorship come. One follows upon the other.

CB You were in contact with Timothy McVeigh, who allegedly bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, while he was in prison awaiting execution. Your questioning of the "accepted" understanding of that event must have put you under some serious scrutiny.

GV Considering my grandfather invented that state...It's a very personal matter to a lot of Oklahomans. But one of the bad traits of our countrymen is that history is not taught properly in schools, so they really have no background for anything that happens. McVeigh was a very bright guy. He was very concerned about the health of the republic. He wrote quite a bit of telling stuff while on death row. It was his revenge on the federal government for what they did at Waco and Ruby Ridge. I don't approve of what he did—I get tired of having to say that over and over—but I understand what his great gripe was. He was a professional soldier. He got a bronze star in the first Gulf War. He was the best shot in his company. He was a gun nut. He was ambling around, driving across the country. He came from Buffalo. He actually witnessed what happened at Waco, the government's violation of the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which states that under no circumstances are federal troops ever to be used against American citizens. But there they were, with all of this equipment, setting fire to all these religious nuts. I think he saw himself toward the end as a John Brown, that he was the first to strike the blow for revolution.

CB Do you think it's even possible to have a meaningful revolution of any sort in the United States?

GV This is a country in love with liars. There is no objection at all to what we are told daily. And those who try to tell the truth are smeared.

CB You end your memoir discussing irony.

GV That's the one thing Americans are unsuited for. [Laughs] I thought they ought to know what it is that they can't handle.

CB How long have you had the theory you put forward on who really killed Kennedy—basically that it was the mafia, due to Robert Kennedy's sudden mob roundup, right on the heels of the President's covert hit on Castro involving the mafia? That's irony.

GV I've known all along it was mafia. And I've known all along that it was mafia due to Bobby Kennedy, who tried to brighten his image by arresting them.

CB You had a very famous home in Ravello, Italy. Now you're in Los Angeles. Do you miss Italy?

GV No. I had the best of it. Rome I miss from time to time.

CB Do you think writing outside of the country helped form your thoughts on America? You are the American man of letters who lived a long time outside its borders.

GV Living outside the bubble is helpful, of course. The European press is better at describing American politics than the U.S. The nice thing about being a writer is that you start with two countries, the U.S. and the U.K. I write as much for publications in the U.K. as I do here. And then I picked up a third country, Italy. My novels are more popular there than anywhere else.

CB You've made no small bones about your problems with the *New York Times*, specifically since the publication of 1948's *The City and the Pillar* and their subsequent ban on reviewing your novels.

GV It's the bad news paper, as in morally bad. There were nine books that they refused to review in the daily *Times*. They try to get around that by saying they reviewed me in the *Sunday Book Review*, but that's not the same thing. They've never made a go of that publication. So along came my friends and I, and we put out the *New York Review of Books*, showing them how it should be done. But to have, at the beginning of your career, eight books getting great reviews out of England and absolutely nothing out of the *New York Times*, is difficult. *Time* and *Newsweek* followed suit. It's sort of a dictatorship. The daily reviewer told my publisher, "I'll never read another book by him, much less review it." The *Times* permitted that. So I had to go into television. The *Times* hated Tennessee Williams, too.

CB Very few writers can do novels and politics. Can writers influence political opinion on a broad spectrum? Gore Vidal

is one of the few writers whose name means something to broader culture.

GV That was television. What the *New York Times* did to me was that I stopped writing novels. It got me writing for television and appearing on television. Then I ran for office. I didn't have the money, but I had Johnny Carson and Hugh Downs. I got them for votes and probably a few readers.

CB Has your brush with writing for television and film made you a better writer?

GV It always makes you a better writer. The first thing you learn is that everything you write counts. You can't just prattle along not quite knowing what you are doing. Those fugue-like states are the things you're going to have to cut later.

CB What's your writing ritual?

GV I write when I get up. It's the best time because you are closer to the dream world and your imagination. I think that's very good for inventing a world at the tip of your pen. I write dialogue on the typewriter because I want to see it right away. You don't want to see prose right away, so I write in longhand. My inventions tend to start with a sentence. I hear the sentence and I try to find out what it means.

CB You see the U.S. as being in a pretty bleak state. What do you foresee happening?

GV I think it's going to go crashing. We are facing bankruptcy. Social security is staggering along and of course the brokers want to privatize it. That's what Bush is in office for. We'll go broke. That will be the end of the wars. We won't be able to build an army. They may be stupid enough to try a draft, in which case they may have a real revolution on their hands.

CB I wonder, if the population really knew what was going on, if they'd revolt. You once rewrote the State of Union speeches and read them on TV.

GV People are too entranced by television. I'm not allowed on television anymore. Television is only there to celebrate corporate America and there's no room for critics of what a statesman once called the "greatest nation in the country."

CB Do you have a view on what seems to be an impending war with Iran?

GV The Bushites want to invade. Neoconservatives guided by foreign policy want the United States to intervene everywhere, control everything, change regimes. It's very dangerous. We will probably be destroyed in the process. It's not a good idea to ostracize Muslims. It's just not wise. In the case of Iran, it is a very great civilization—Persia. A lot greater than what we have achieved or ever will achieve. On one level, we can all be grateful that the world is beginning to understand that Bush was not elected the first time or the second time. The oil and gas men, they are a bunch of gangsters. They seized control of the legislative branch, and they got him selected by the Supreme Court, and they control the judiciary. Five to four, anyway.

CB I hope that the world knowing that is enough. You could argue that we knew it, but simply let it happen without much fight.

GV We've never been a very adventurous people. Americans not only cannot grasp ideology, they don't need it. Unfortunately we are starting to see all of these signs of religious mania. I'd rather have Communism than some of these things that pass for religion now. It breeds racism and bigotry. It was inevitable that the political right would get together, talk about little lord Jesus, and fool them into their votes.

CB I have a theory that my generation is more conservative than my parent's generation. Has that ever happened in the U.S. before?

GV Your parents' generation had the draft. The little lads did not want to go off and be killed in the jungles of Vietnam. Do you know, to this day we've never explained what we were doing there? Other than fighting Communism—and by fighting there and losing there, we helped spread Communism. China suddenly became our competitor.

CB You've written about so many different periods of American history. Is there one period that you haven't tackled yet that you'd like to?

GV 1846. Our invasion of Mexico. And Henry Clay—what a great figure.

CB The research that kind of historical work takes is massive.

GV Which I enjoy. It's like breaking rock.

CB No chance for a Kennedy book?

GV Poor Jack.

CB I'm sure you still have secrets on that family that haven't come to light.

GV I don't think so. Most of the secrets are known.

CB Maybe it's hard to tell those secrets.

GV If people are living, I'm not going to embarrass them. The reason I deal so much with obituaries in the memoir is that once they are dead, their feelings cannot be hurt.

Gore Vidal (left) in Federico Fellini's 1973 film *Roma*
Point to Point Navigation is out November 2006 from Doubleday