

NORMAN MAILER:
MIAMI AND THE SIEGE OF CHICAGO

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Christopher Hitchens assesses Mailer's masterful account of the tensions and turmoil that took place forty years ago when Republicans and Democrats met in Miami and Chicago to select their presidential nominees. Miami and the Siege of Chicago was first published in 1968 and reissued earlier this year by New York Review Books. A version of this essay first appeared in the Atlantic.

"I AM A 'LEFT CONSERVATIVE.'" That was Norman Mailer's jaunty but slightly defensive self-description when first I met him at the beginning of the 1980s. At the time, I was inclined to attribute this glibness (as I thought of it) to the triumph of middle age and to the compromises perhaps necessary to negotiate the then-new ascendancy of Ronald Reagan. But, looking back over this extraordinary journal of a plague year, written forty years ago, I suddenly appreciate that Mailer in 1968 had already been rehearsing for some kind of ideological synthesis, and discovering it in the most improbable of places.

Party conventions have been such dull spectacles of stage-management for so long that this year (I happen to be writing on the day after the closing Democratic primaries) it has been considered nothing less than shocking that delegates might arrive in Denver in August with any more than ceremonial or coronational duties ahead of them. The coverage of such media-events, now almost wholly annexed by the cameras and those who serve them, has undergone a similar declension into insipidity. Mailer could see this coming: having left the Republican gathering in Miami slightly too early "he realized he had missed the most exciting night of the convention,

at least on the floor, and was able to console himself only with the sad knowledge that he could cover it better on television than if he had been there.” This wasn’t quite true yet: what we have here is the last of the great political-convention essayists, and the close of a tradition that crested with H.L. Mencken and was caught so deftly in Gore Vidal’s play *The Best Man*. You will note the way in which Mailer decided to write about himself in the third person, using for a title the name “the reporter.” This isn’t invariably a good idea but it generally works in this instance, even when Mailer muses, of himself, that: “The Democratic Convention in 1960 in Los Angeles which nominated John F. Kennedy, and the Republican in San Francisco in 1964 which installed Barry Goldwater, had encouraged some of his very best writing.”

Of course much of the material has become “dated,” but in interesting ways. It now seems absurd that anyone ever thought Nelson Rockefeller could become the GOP nominee in 1968, but Mailer swiftly concluded at the time that the whole idea of a Rockefeller victory was ridiculous. (He had learned a lot from that Goldwater convention, as he repeatedly demonstrates.) Nor does he ever forget the context in which these still-stately bunting-decked occasions were managing still to occur:

The novelist John Updike was not necessarily one of his favorite authors, but after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, it was Updike who had made the remark that God might have withdrawn His blessing from America. It was a thought which could not be forgotten... .

At all times, Mailer had the apocalyptic available to him, and was perfectly receptive to the images of civil war, military coup, sniper fire and racial conflagration. (“And the country roaring like a bull in its wounds, coughing like a sick lung in the smog, turning over in sleep at the sound of motorcycles, shivering at its need for new phalanxes of order.”) However—and this has to be set against his somewhat promiscuous attitude to violence and obscenity and *les actes gratuits*—he did shamefacedly admit that there was a bourgeois side to these questions, too:

A profound part of him (exactly that enormous literary bottom of the mature novelist’s property!) detested the thought of seeing his American society—evil, absurd, touching, pathetic,

sickening, comic, full of novelistic marrow—disappear now in the nihilistic maw of a national disorder.

The *caveats* there, almost embarrassed—and embarrassing too, as Mailer grunts that if he lost his country he might also lose his fictional subject—are less important than the admission they are half-intended to qualify and cannot entirely succeed in obscuring: the gruff admission that our Norman could be a patriot after all.

More remarkably, and instead of locating the then-bruited “white backlash” in other people (such as Southern Republican voters), Mailer in Miami decided to confess it stirring in himself: “[I]t was a simple emotion and very unpleasant to him—he was getting tired of Negroes and their rights.... He was weary to the bone of listening to Black cries of Black superiority in sex, Black superiority in beauty, Black superiority in war ... the claims were all too often uttered by Negroes who were not very black themselves.”

It was in 1968 that the Republicans began to lose—or more accurately to abandon—their historic status as “the party of Lincoln” and Mailer’s own resentments against black militancy did not prevent him from seeing this. He had always detested the author and beneficiary of the “Southern Strategy” so it is to the credit of the reportage here that he attempted to find the thin but definite human pulse that animated the middle-class base of Richard Milhous Nixon. He located it, aptly enough, in the distant connection that Nixon could claim with the hero of Republicanism:

They venerated Nixon for his service to Eisenhower, and his comeback now—it was his comeback which had made him a hero in their eyes, for America is the land which worships the Great Comeback, and so he was Tricky Dick to them no more, but the finest gentleman in the land; they were proud to say hello.

Pauline Kael was later to make herself a laughing stock by exclaiming in astonishment that she didn’t “know *anybody*” who had voted for Nixon. Mailer was determined to avoid this mistake in advance, confessing his own ignorance and admitting that in a large Miami ballroom filled with delegates, “there were not ten people he recognized.” The only other person of liberal/radical temper who tried to avoid condescending to Nixon and to

Nixonism was that other master of convention-floor prose, the late Murray Kempton.

And it was from Kempton himself that Mailer annexed what eventually became the running theme and essential insight of his attendance at both events. “‘Politics is property’ ... [a] delegate’s vote is his holding—he will give it up without return no more than a man will sign over his house entire to a worthy cause.” More self-evident, perhaps, among the Chamber of Commerce types in Miami (and Nelson Rockefeller with his “catfish mouth”), this extended metaphor worked particularly well—and Mailer did his level best to extend it—in the gaunt, unsentimental world of Chicago stock-yard ward-heeling: that rugged inland coast on which the waves of Sixties idealism broke in vain. It wasn’t to be “new phalanxes of order” that were conjured. It was the bitter old phalanx of the Daley machine and the Chicago PD. Of necessity, the Illinois chapter was much longer and more intense than the Florida one, but before we shift the scene it is worth saluting Mailer first for seeing clearly that Nixon would be “the one” and second for guessing that Ronald Reagan might well be the next one. His method in the second case was equally intuitive. He noticed the clever rebound from the Goldwater defeat while also understanding the purely showbiz aspect:

If [Reagan] didn’t get the girl, it was because he was too good a guy to be overwhelmingly attractive. That was all right. He would grit his teeth and get the girl the next time out. Since this was conceivably the inner sex drama of half of respectable America, he was wildly popular with Republicans. For a party which prided itself on its common sense, they were curiously, even outrageously sentimental.

If the *aperçu* in that last sentence was slightly stronger than the grammar in which it was expressed, it must be said in general that as deadline-prose this was written to an exceedingly high standard. It was a good-ish year for the literary man as front-line magazine reporter: quitting Lincoln Park as he sensed violent confrontation that would go beyond his probable endurance, Mailer ran into Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Jean Genet, and Terry Southern on their way in. And one senses a very slight problem of journalistic etiquette here, in that Mailer was the accredited correspondent of *Harper’s* magazine, while Burroughs and Genet had been retained by

Esquire, and it would have made a rather better story if it was Mailer arriving while the others were getting themselves discreetly out of the line of fire, instead of the other way about.

Could that gifted but gruesome twosome of Burroughs and Genet help to explain Mailer's recurrence to the threat of "nihilism"? He hated the war and the police and had contempt for the mobbed-up big mayors and union men who constituted the muscle of the Democrats. But he found Eugene McCarthy brittle and dislikeable, and McCarthy supporters addicted to defeat. Then there was this: "He liked his life. He wanted it to go on, which meant that he wanted America to go on—not as it was going, not Vietnam—but what price was he really willing to pay?" Mailer here was being plaintive but honest, as in the case of the above account of his Lincoln Park funk. It was becoming another of those moments where the best lacked all conviction while the worst ... well, we know how that goes. Incidentally, one can't be too careful about making familiar poetic citations. Mailer quotes Edward Kennedy as saying of Bobby's supporters that they had "followed him, honored him, lived in his mild and magnificent eye," and one suddenly realizes that he thinks he is quoting Teddy himself rather than Robert Browning's famous lines from *The Lost Leader*. As Joan Didion once observed, there are those who say "No Man Is an Island" who firmly believe that they are echoing Ernest Hemingway.

Our Democratic primaries are run the way they are now mainly because of the way they were run then. Mailer dryly watched the roll-call in Chicago and noted that the state which put Hubert Humphrey over the top (Pennsylvania) was the one where McCarthy had received ninety per cent of the primary votes. To touch on another comparison with today's politics, Mailer also noticed in Miami that Nixon had won the nomination in such a way as to also win the election: in other words without splitting or embittering his party. These and similar reflections are of interest and value in a year where the Democratic nominee is, in one of his many protean incarnations, a Chicago South Side operator with a wife whose father was a Daley precinct captain, while the Republican candidate is a repository of something in which almost nobody in 1968 would ever have believed: America's residual pride about its own valor in Vietnam. The almost-closing line of the book is the prediction that Mailer wishes he had made to Eugene McCarthy's daughter: "'Dear Miss,' he could have told her, 'we will be fighting for forty years.'" He got that right, among many other things.