



In Austin, we have all the answers

BY THOMAS G. PALAIMA

As a practicing Classics professor and "received" Episcopalian of the baby-boomer generation, I find it hard lately not to feel like an endangered species, and the most clear and present dangers seem to emanate from Austin.

First, during the Republican presidential primaries, my colleague at the University of Texas at Austin, Marvin



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Olasky, took aim in the *American Statesman* at the Classical intellectual tradition. He found Sen. John McCain somehow wanting for following a political philosophy based on the "religion of Zeus." My close rereading of Robert Timberg's "Nightingale's Song" found no evidence that Sen. McCain had ever been seduced by Zeus in any form, nor were his campaign speeches sprinkled with allusions to Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes or the tragic poets. Nevermind. The damage has been done. Any hopes we Classicists had of a return to the heady days when Robert Kennedy on the campaign trail could quote from the Greek tragedian Aeschylus — and rely on his own memory, not his laptop's — have been dashed.

Using the Olasky dichotomy, the "religion of Jesus" has prevailed in the person of Gov. Bush. And so I have scratched my plans of schmoozing with colleagues in the LBJ School in case the new president needed advice on the political implementation of Zeusism. If

elected, the governor will have no such need. He has claimed Jesus as his guiding philosopher. Now this is fine with me and many Classicists I know. Most of us were brought up in the Judeo-Christian tradition and have remained there. Jewish Classicists, some of whom were rattled by Bush's earlier statement that paradise was reserved for those who have accepted Jesus as personal savior, may be mollified by the reasoning of ex-Austinite Kinky Friedman, who long ago sized up ecumenically what the governor's father would call "the religion thing": "They don't make Jews like Jesus anymore."

Still we cannot but lament the defeat of the Greek sky god. "The Zeus thing" as practiced in the Greek city-states in their heyday was remarkably tolerant of other religions. In fact, it long resembled the "freedom-of-religion thing" as drafted by our founding fathers. It was eventually perverted by one of those Roman emperors who used to be played by Charles Laughton. But by then it had already become the "religion of Jupiter." And that is another story, and perhaps another candidate.

To many Americans, it is a relief to know that the other candidate this year will not be Bill Clinton. It is easy to imagine the president triangulating between Jesus and Zeus and coming up Jupiter. He would certainly shy away from 'the Zeus thing.' The classical Athenian practice of ostracism, whereby any politician who received 20 percent of the citizens' vote was exiled from the city for 10 years, would terrify a president who had narrowly missed being thrown out through the much more demanding process of impeachment. As a Christian

who believes in not throwing stones unless sinless, let me say that I suspect that the president would also find "the Jesus thing" soulfully troublesome, if not in the four-year term, then in the eternal post-office period.

But my Jesuit and public education must have given me a warped perspective. You read in the *American Statesman* sometime-Austinite Paul Begala's jeremiad against all baby boomers save one. You all know the punchline. In Begala's view, the one noble, self-sacrificing and other-directed exception to the self-seeking, narcissistic norm is none other than Bill Clinton. At this point, I knew my sanity was endangered. I believe in Great Society programs, in dedication to principle, in reasonable political standards of truth. I thought of Joycelyn Elders. I thought of a promise to enforce the constitutional right a citizen of any race, creed or sexual orientation should have to risk his or her life for us in the military. I also pondered the definition of "is."

This led me to wonder how Jesus as a chief presidential adviser would change the White House. Would the governor turned president sell all he has and practice Jesus' concern for the poor and the meek? Would he recognize that some of his brethren are hungry and do for the least of them? Or would "compassionate conservatism" still amount to conserving compassion, lest it require too many tax dollars from those who have already inherited much of the Earth? I have a feeling someone in Austin will know the answer.

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