

American writer and liberal thinker Gore Vidal, 1925-2012

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Gore Vidal, novelist, playwright, essayist and one-time television personality, died July 31 at his home in Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles. One of the more penetrating bourgeois critics of American politics and culture, he always remained firmly *of* and *within* the establishment.

Vidal was one of the few public figures who spoke openly about the dismantling of democratic rights in the US, and as early as the 1970s began to draw attention to growing social inequality and the subservience of political institutions to the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans. He was an outspoken critic of the brutality of American foreign policy—and earned the hatred of the ultra-right as a result.

He was an accomplished writer whose fiction, at its best, for example, in *Narratives of Empire*, attempts to capture the development of the American ruling elite and its concerns. Vidal was able to write knowledgeably about other historical periods as well, the late Roman Empire, for example, in *Julian*. His drama with less success took up political and social themes.

Vidal's literary judgments were unconventional and sometimes hit the mark, particularly when he drew attention to underappreciated authors or cast doubt on accepted opinion. His memoirs also have literary value, as they give a vivid sense of what social and cultural life was like in the United States, particularly in the first 20 years or so after World War II.

In the final analysis, however, Vidal stood out for a half century as a political commentator largely because he was one of the few honest voices still emanating from the establishment. At a time when so many liberals turned dramatically to the right and discovered the wonders of the market and the glory of the American military, Vidal held himself aloof from that process.

But there is no need to go overboard in praising him. The perfidy and worthlessness of so many others does not make Vidal more than he was. He had a genuine commitment to democracy, but never overstepped certain boundaries. He criticized the two-party system as the rule of a single party of wealth, but offered no alternative, certainly not in the form of socialism. In the end, Vidal always gave reluctant support to one or another (generally) Democratic Party politician. That helps explain why he was allowed to continue to have a place at the official table.

Given his background and the times he grew up in, the Cold

War period with its relentless anticommunism, it proved impossible for Vidal to break with official political culture or even to challenge it artistically in a head-on fashion.

His father, Eugene Vidal, was one of the first military aviators and later the director of Air Commerce in the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and was also the founder of companies that eventually became Eastern Airlines and Trans World Airlines (TWA).

Vidal's mother, Nina Gore, was the daughter of Thomas Pryor Gore, a Democratic Party politician with populist leanings and one of the first two US Senators from Oklahoma (which became a state in 1907). Vidal spent most of his childhood in Washington, living with his grandfather after his parents' divorce in 1935.

Embarking on a literary career after the war (he served in the Navy in the Aleutian Islands), he gained notoriety for his third novel, *The City and the Pillar* (1948), which dealt frankly with homosexuality.

The anticommunist witch-hunts were beginning, and the purging of left-wing elements in Hollywood had largely been accomplished by the time he began writing for film and television. Cold War assumptions, of which he may not have been fully conscious, entered into his work as they did in the efforts of other left-liberal writers.

Vidal stopped writing serious fiction by the 1950s—he attributed it to the blacklisting by the *New York Times*—and wrote genre material for a time under a pseudonym. He then wrote a number of film adaptations of plays and more original material, including portions of the screenplay for *Ben Hur* (1959).

His drama, *The Best Man* (1960), about two would-be presidential candidates (one of them based on Richard Nixon) and “dirty tricks” in American politics, was a major success on Broadway. It marked a return to more substantive political topics. It was later made into a film (1964) directed by Franklin J. Schaffner and featuring Henry Fonda.

Vidal ran for the US Congress in 1960 in New York state with the support of Eleanor Roosevelt, and other liberal figures. It marked the beginnings of his career as a public liberal intellectual.

Around the same time, he seems to have become

disenchanted with mainstream politics. It is not clear if this occurred during the John F. Kennedy administration (he was acquainted with the president through family connections), because of the president's assassination in November 1963, or was the result of a combination of troubling events.

Whatever the case, in the wake of the assassination and the soul-searching it generated, Vidal produced what many consider his most artistically significant work, *Julian* (1964), a novel about the life of the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate, based on original documents. Julian unsuccessfully tried to return the Roman Empire in 362 AD to its earlier traditional culture and religion and away from Christianity, which had become the state religion.

Vidal poses Julian's actions as a principled defense of freedom of religion and a rejection of the status quo. Tellingly, the novelist holds out the possibility that the ruling classes can produce from within their ranks a virtuous reformer, even in the midst of an empire's decline and decadence—a process he portrays quite vividly.

After witnessing incognito an orgy by palace eunuchs, Julian remarks, "It is the basis of a lawful society that no man (much less half-man) has the power to subject another citizen to his will ... What was done that night—and many other nights—was lawless and cruel."

This was clearly a commentary of some sort on the world, and, more specifically, the American state, in the early 1960s. Was it possible for the American ruling class to observe the rule of law as it created, in Vidal's view, a global empire?

As the postwar boom began to unravel and the war in Vietnam became more untenable for the American elite, establishment figures critical of American foreign policy, such as Vidal, became more visible in the mass media.

A dramatic upswing in the struggles of the working class, including in the United States, culminated in the May-June 1968 general strike in France. There is almost nothing in Vidal's large body of work that refers to these events, much less an attempt to come to terms with them. This was largely a sealed book to him.

Vidal defended the right of the Vietnamese people to determine their own fate and famously called archconservative William F. Buckley a "Crypto-Nazi" on ABC News in front of millions of viewers while both were covering the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago.

However, he had much in common with a Buckley, in spite of their differences. Both came from the upper echelons, and concerned themselves with influencing ruling class policy, albeit from different points of view.

Vidal produced a number of critical literary essays, some of which deserve to be read today, such as his 1983 piece, "William Dean Howells," which attempted to re-introduce this classic American novelist to a broader public.

After *Julian*, his most significant works of fiction were the seven novels in the *Narratives of Empire* series, which begin

with *Burr* (1973), a fictional memoir about the American "founding fathers" by Aaron Burr, who famously killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel in 1804. The series ends with *The Golden Age* (2000), an account of Washington, D.C. political circles from 1939 to 1954. Many passages ring true.

In one scene in the latter book, an adviser to Franklin Roosevelt speaks with an agent of British imperialism. The conversation centers on the global strategy of the American ruling elite. Roosevelt's adviser tells the British representative, "We'll never let Hitler invade you. But we will never accept you—with or without an empire—as an equal anywhere in the world. If we win, *we* win."

Following the events of September 11, 2001, Vidal resisted the patriotic hysteria and offered an analysis that rejected the official line. He linked the subsequent preparations for war against Iraq with the needs of American imperialism represented by what he termed the "Bush-Cheney Junta."

Toward the end of *The Golden Age*, during festivities on New Year's Eve 1999, an elderly character whose views seem to resemble Vidal's, thinks of the recently translated Mayan hieroglyphs and our ability to better understand the fate of that civilization.

He tells a journalist who asks what he feels about the new millennium, "I *feel* nothing except interest in the fact that there have been other empires before us in this part of the world and that Pacal's people [Pacal was a Mayan emperor], in time, became too many and when they did, they devoured each other."

For the last 20 years of his life, Vidal was increasingly concerned with the advanced decay of American democracy and the eruption of American militarist violence. But his criticism remained in the Populist and isolationist traditions, currents within the ruling class itself that are nationalist and hostile to the class struggle. Vidal, in fact, never came close to grasping the class struggle as the engine of world history.

While sympathetic to ordinary people, he saw them essentially as a passive mass who could be manipulated by television commercials or political sleight-of-hand.

Almost anything that smacked of a popular movement simply did not concern him as material for serious commentary. This attitude may also be the root of some of the limitations in his fiction: a more rounded, more popular, more deep-going view of American life seldom came into view, and this prevented him from producing the most aesthetically satisfying and emotionally powerful work, even in relation to some of his contemporaries.



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