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Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia. Movie review

By David Kopel

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Gore Vidal was one of the most important American public intellectuals from the late 1940s until the early 20th century. If you're not familiar with him, then I highly recommend that you view the new biographical movie *Gore Vidal: United States of Amnesia*, which is available as video on demand.

The kind of person who reads the VC and other opinion columns in the *Washington Post* is presumably interested in intellectual debate about public policy. If all you know is the current debates and current writers, then you are missing some important context for your own understanding. A well-informed person ought to have at least some acquaintance with the great public intellectuals of the past. This includes 19th-century giants such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Adams. It also includes key figures of the latter part of the 20th century, such as William F. Buckley, Arthur Schlesinger, Christopher Hitchens, and Gore Vidal. Whether you agree or disagree with their policy judgments, these intellectuals had a profound, and continuing, influence on American intellectual life. We live in the world they helped create.

United States of Amnesia is engaging, well-paced, clever, and fun, using an excellent balance of interviews and archival material. It is also a hagiography; the only significant criticism of Vidal comes from his own wry remarks about himself. On every public policy issue, Vidal is presented as being obviously correct. So if you remember Gore Vidal from the 1960s and 1970s, and have a good sense of his viewpoint, you don't need to see the movie. But if you're not familiar with Vidal, *Amnesia* provides a concise and enjoyable introduction. (Warning: The *Washington Post's* official review of the movie is considerably less positive, and *Post* film critic Michael O'Sullivan certainly has more sophisticated cinematic judgment than I do.)

Eugene Luther Vidal was born into the upper end of the American aristocracy. He was named after his father, who was FDR's Director of Air Commerce. His grandfather was the conservative Oklahoma Democratic Senator Thomas Gore. Young Eugene served as an aide to him in Washington, idolized him especially for his integrity, and adopted his name. After serving in the Navy during WWII, Gore Vidal began a long public career as a novelist, screenwriter (*Ben-Hur*, inter alia), essayist, and commentator. *Amnesia* is filled with anecdotes and observations about Vidal's friends and enemies, including John F. Kennedy, Tennessee Williams, and Jerry Brown. Vidal's position was on the left-most wing of the Democratic Party—far enough outside the party's mainstream that he could criticize Democratic idols who spoke with insightful eloquence and delivered virtually nothing of value. In Vidal's view, this included John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama. Vidal had nothing but contempt for Reagan and the Bushes.

Many people first saw Vidal in 1968, when Vidal and Buckley were commentators for ABC News during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The scene outside the convention hall looked like the last days of the Roman Republic. Abbie Hoffman and other “Yippies” successfully carried out their plan to turn peaceful protests against the Vietnam War into a riot; Mayor Richard Daley and his Chicago police department reciprocated by staging, in effect, a counter-riot, beating rioters, law-abiding protesters, the media, and others indiscriminately. On ABC, Buckley expressed his disgust with people who were expressly supporting the killing of American troops in Vietnam; Vidal then called Buckley a “crypto-fascist,” and Buckley fired back, “Listen, you queer.” Vidal was an early and ardent advocate of gay liberation, but he had not yet revealed his own personal sexual identity to the public.

Vidal delighted in acerbic criticism of anyone who disagreed with him, so *Amnesia* is filled with his barbs—some of them brilliant, some of them self-indulgent.

From the Truman administration to the present one, Vidal was a relentless critics of the national security state. He called himself an “anti-anti-communist,” and spoke forcefully against the mass surveillance society which has been created in the name of national security. My only contact with Vidal involved a November 1998 article he wrote for *Vanity Fair*, “The War at Home.” As the summary of the article states, “The U.S. Bill of Rights is being steadily eroded, with two million telephone calls tapped, 30 million workers under electronic surveillance, and, says the author, countless Americans harassed by a government that wages spurious wars against drugs and terrorism.” Compared to now, those were the good old days for privacy.

According to Vidal, my co-author Paul Blackman and I had “written the best and most detailed account of the American government’s current war on its unhappy citizenry in *No More Wacos: What’s Wrong with Federal Law Enforcement and How to Fix It.*” Vidal even sent me a nice letter. For me, that was a good lesson in how it’s possible to find common ground with someone whom you disagree with on many other issues. So when you think that somebody is wrong about nearly everything, it’s best to argue against their ideas, rather than anathematizing them personally.

Vidal was not exactly a role model in this regard, in terms his feuds with the major public intellectuals of his heyday, such as Buckley, Schlesinger, and many others. Yet although he often forgot the boundary between wit and vituperation, and spent much of his adult life living on the Italian coast, he was, in his own way, a sincere and ardent patriot, attempting to defend the old republic from being devoured by the national security empire. Like him or not, he had enduring impact on American political thought. So if you never knew who he was, or have forgotten, download and watch *United States of Amnesia*.

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