

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## How populists talk, &c.

Jay Nordlinger

February 5, 2021

### Louisiana's Kennedy, Dolly Parton, Tom Brady, Shirley Jones, Joe DiMaggio, and more

Senator John Kennedy — there's a familiar name in American history! — gave a spectacular example of populist rhetoric. I'm talking about the Republican from Louisiana. Two nights ago, he was talking to Sean Hannity on Fox (of course).

“I think the American people are so tired, so tired of being lectured by the managerial elite: the politicians, the media, the academics, the corporate phonies, the tuna-tartare crowd who live in the expensive condos with the high ceilings and the important [or imported?] art on the wall, who think they're better than the American people . . .”

A humdinger. A prime specimen of populist rhetoric (and I haven't even quoted the whole thing).

The American people don't live in condos, you see. (Neither do they work in the media, the corporate world, etc.) They don't have high ceilings. They don't have art on the wall, either important or imported. And they sure as hell don't eat tuna tartare.

People who live in condos with high ceilings and art — and who eat tuna tartare — just aren't American.

What if they eat crawfish étouffée, Mr. Senator from Louisiana? Will you give them a pass on that?

I remember what Bill Bennett said about Pat Buchanan and his politics. This was back in the '90s. “It's a real us-and-them kind of thing,” said Bennett. Yes. And you want to know something funny?

When the comment came out, in *The New Yorker*, the magazine had Bennett saying, “It's a real S&M kind of thing.” They had to run a correction.

Thinking of populist rhetoric, I think of Buchanan, and Huey Long, and Father Coughlin — and George C. Wallace. He might have been the champeen. Give you an example.

Believe it or not, there was a time when briefcases were newfangled, and regarded as kind of fancy. Wallace would rile up the folks, saying, “Up there in New York City, they walk around with briefcases, as if they had somethin' impo'tant in them. You wanna know what's in those briefcases? Why, nothin' but a peanut-butter sandwich!”

Big cheers.

Senator Kennedy has a gold-plated pedigree. He went to Vanderbilt University, then the University of Virginia Law School, then — get this — Oxford (in England). And not just Oxford, but *Magdalen College*, Oxford!

As Stuart Stevens pointed out on Twitter yesterday, that's like extra-special Oxford (no offense to Balliol, Brasenose, and the rest of the colleges).

Some of my nearest and dearest — and most admired — went to Magdalen: David Pryce-Jones, Paul Johnson, and Cameron Hilditch, to name three.

Is John Kennedy a real populist — a convinced populist — or is he just playin'? Does he have any art on his walls? How tall are his ceilings? The lower the better? The more "American"?

The conservatism of William F. Buckley Jr. was very different from the right-wing populism of today. He prized culture, especially high culture. He thought there was an intimate connection between culture and conservatism. What are you seeking to conserve? He had a lot of art on his walls — important, imported, what have you. He loved music, in particular Bach. He played the harpsichord. He loved foreign languages and travel.

He was happy for you to be you, and me to be me. He was friendly with people of all types. He wanted the best for all. But he was unabashed about what he valued in life. He called caviar "cav," and if you didn't like it — tough.

Talk about art on the walls! WFB once filmed episodes of his television show, *Firing Line*, in the *Sistine Chapel*. (His guests were Princess Grace, Malcolm Muggeridge, Charlton Heston, and David Niven.)

WFB was a conservative. What prevails today is more like a prideful, chest-thumping boobery.

Oh, my gosh, these people *hated* Bill, when Bill was here. (Everyone tends to say nice things about him now.) They said he was "effete" — that was the word constantly used against him, "effete." And "elitist," "cosmopolitan," and worse things.

His scorn for them was as great as their scorn for him, trust me. These people yapped around Bill's ankles his whole life.

Yesterday, on Twitter, when I discussed Kennedy's rhetoric, one lady from South Dakota said, "I am not rich, I never went to college or had the chance to visit another country. But my walls are covered in art. The great thing about art is, it belongs to everybody."

Hear, hear, and amen. Her message touched my heart.

Someone else wrote, "I live in a rented farmhouse, in an endless struggle against the encroachment of mud and chicken manure tracked in by my passel of half-feral children, and I *love* me some tuna tartare."

Heh, me too.

Just about my favorite remark on populism came from Scott Lincicome, of the Cato Institute. Really, this is inspired: "What if the Real Populism is robotically investing a reasonable share of your monthly pre-tax income into ultra-low-fee index and/or age-rated funds, and never touching them again until you retire?"

Obviously, Senator Kennedy will be reelected forever, talking the way he does. You can almost never go wrong by piling on the populism, thick. But honestly, what a sorry way to live.

Incidentally, Louisiana is the third-poorest state in the Union. It is a state with serious, serious problems. What does Kennedy's rhetoric do to help people in Louisiana? How does it improve their lives one bit?

The likes of Kennedy just whip up bitterness and resentment, and I think that's pretty rotten.

- Dolly Parton is, among other things, a vaccine philanthropist. She donated \$1 million to research. The Associated Press interviewed her, asking, "Have you gotten your shot?" Dolly said,

No. I'm not going to get mine until some more people get theirs. I don't want it to look like I'm jumping the line just because I donated money. I'm very funny about that. I'm going to get mine though, but I'm going to wait. I'm at the age where I could have gotten mine legally last week. I turned 75. I was going to do it on my birthday, and I thought, "Nah, don't do that." You'll look like you're just doing a show.

What a gal. What a gal.

When we were in Auschwitz — in the huge section called Birkenau, the part of the camp where the trains pulled in, where the selection took place, where the gas was — my dad and I saw a large group of Israeli students. They had come on some kind of school program, and as we walked along a path near the crematoria, these Israeli kids overtook us. Like school groups everywhere, they were loud and boisterous, joking and laughing with each other.

I can't tell you how offended I was. "Shut up!" I wanted to tell them. "Have some decency! You're in Auschwitz. This is the biggest Jewish graveyard on earth. Don't you realize how many people were murdered here? How many Jews died just for being Jews? You're laughing here? In Auschwitz?"

And then, suddenly, I had a change of heart. And I said to my father: "Who do you think would be more appalled to know that all these Jewish kids are running around and laughing in this place — your mother? Or Adolf Eichmann? Who would be more revolted? Who would feel more defeated?"

- I would like to offer a music podcast — an episode of my *Music for a While*. This one is a little unusual — mixing Bach and composers from Catalonia — but I think it works, all the same.

- A friend of mine sent me this — a soldier, charged with guarding the Capitol, singing, during a break in the Library of Congress. What a marvelous moment.

- I think I have seen my favorite tweet ever. It was written by Shaun Cassidy, the singer and actor, who is the son of Jack Cassidy and Shirley Jones.

My mom just called me: "Honey? In case you're interested, 'The Music Man' is on TNT right now. I think you'll enjoy it. I play the librarian."

I love you, Mom.

Priceless. (For the uninitiated: Shirley Jones telling her son she played Marian the Librarian in *The Music Man* is kind of like Joe DiMaggio telling his son, “I once played for the Yankees, you know.”)

See you!

*If you'd like to receive Impromptus by e-mail — links to new columns — write to [jnordlinger@nationalreview.com](mailto:jnordlinger@nationalreview.com).*