

PERIODICALS

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Ruling Class

"The Wasp Ascendancy" by Joseph W. Alsop with Adam Platt, in *The New York Review of Books* (Nov. 9, 1989), 250 W. 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10107.

For 300 years, this country was ruled, if not always governed, by a small White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) elite. George Bush notwithstanding, the WASPs as a group have not enjoyed an organized political victory since the upright ladies of Mrs. Charles H. Sabin's Woman's Organization for National Prohibition Reform helped put martinis back on the nation's tables in 1933.

Alsop, a prominent newspaper columnist who counted himself a "very minor member" of the WASP "ascendancy" before his recent death, writes that his tribe had many faults and one great virtue: It created a handful of political leaders and public servants who were without peer.

Truth be told, direct WASP participation in politics was only sporadic after the Federalist Party fell apart during the administration of President Thomas Jefferson (1801-09). "Money was the true occupation; and money was the source of the ascendancy's authority." Controlling the big banks that financed the nation's economic development, the WASPs of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston "felt a right, even a duty . . . to set the tune and lay down long-term rules for the rest of the country."

The WASP ascendancy "supplied the role models followed by other Americans, whether WASP or non-WASP, who were on their way up in the world." It was not quite as impermeable as we now imagine,

says Alsop. Entry into the ascendancy—the Roosevelts, of Dutch origin, are a famous example—was frequently advertised by "ecclesiastical migration" into the Episcopal Church. The rules of behavior and deportment were endless. "For an evening suit," Alsop recalls, "a double line of braid on the trousers was required, whereas a mere single line of broader braid was needed for a dinner jacket." Proper speech was paramount. One said coffin not casket, curtains not drapes, house not home, and so on.

Of course, the WASP way of life was not all trivialities. The greatest advantage of the ascendancy, Alsop believes, "was that the young had their careers laid out for them in advance so there was no foolish waffling." Membership instilled the self-confidence and sense of duty that gave the nation some of its greatest leaders—the Roosevelts again, as well as such post-World War II foreign policy "wise men" as Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze.

But "grossly selfish" mismanagement of the nation's financial system during the 1920s and the Great Depression finally cost the ascendancy its dominance. And a good thing, too, says Alsop. For had it remained in power, he doubts that it would have been permeable enough to allow Italians, Poles, and other ethnic groups into the nation's elite, this nation's "greatest single feat in the 20th century."

Yet today's elite, lacking a cohesive cul-



The WASP ideal: Theodore Roosevelt and family in 1874. Roosevelt declared his opposition to plutocracy and mob rule but thought there was "something to be said" for aristocracy.

ture and a sense of its role in American history, is not likely to produce leaders even in the small numbers that the WASP ascendancy did. Somehow, Alsop believes,

we must found a new self-conscious elite to create future generations of "wise men more representative of the mixed America that gives me such pride."

A Thousand Points of Bite

"Confessions of a Ghost" by Patrick Anderson, in *Regardie's* (Nov. 1989), 1010 Wisconsin Ave. N.W., Ste. 600, Washington, D.C. 20007.

Patrick Anderson says he must have been "temporarily insane" when he first agreed to write a speech for a politician. He wrote it in the spring of 1976 for Jimmy Carter, then a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. Carter introduced this new "Kennedyesque" marvel by woodenly informing an audience, "Now I'm going to read a statement my staff prepared." Then he plodded through the text.

Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, later explained to Anderson that "it was just part of Carter's I'll-never-tell-you-a-lie

posture." Anderson eventually realized that "it galled [Carter] to speak my words, because it suggested that he couldn't do everything himself." Unlike many of his competitors, however, Carter had more ambition than ego.

Most politicians, says Anderson, who went on to write speeches for other Democrats, "don't know what they want to say. They really don't want to say anything, because almost anything they say will offend someone." With rare exceptions, "they hate brevity, scorn clarity, and fear their