

Gore Vidal in Santa Cruz

GORE VIDAL—NOVELIST, screenwriter, essayist, and a real "man-of-letters" in an age when that term has almost lost its meaning—is also very much a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the Senate. He has not yet formally announced that

fact, but he appeared in Santa Cruz last week, having already hit the hustings in over a hundred California cities and towns, to speak at UCSC. His press conference drew all three local TV crews and all the middle-to-large-size frogs in this little media

puddle, along with an outraged Abraham Lincoln buff (Mr. Vidal has written on Lincoln and suggested, among other revisionary views, that Lincoln was syphilitic) and a fair number of Santa Cruz political groupies.

continued on back cover

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continued from front page

His talk, at Porter College, drew some 400 folk and, although he was the only one there dressed in a coat and tie, it was clear that UCSC was prepared to take him to its heart. Vidal's political stance is a curious amalgam: nominally a Democrat ("We really don't have political parties in this country, because the founding fathers didn't want them," he insists) his is a highly personal blend of liberalism, Libertarianism, and old-fashioned populism. He comes by the latter honestly enough. His grandfather was Oklahoma Senator Thomas P. Gore, and he was brought up, he says, not to trust either the railroad, or the banks—a skeptical view he now extends to all of what he has amended to call "the military-industrial-political establishment." Beyond that, his politics seem largely of his own devising. "Everybody is a mixture of liberal and conservative," Vidal explains, "unless, of course, he's a fool."

Born at West Point and raised in Washington, D.C. in those circles to which his grandfather, as a member of what has been called "the most exclusive club in the world," had access, Gore Vidal is as close to being gentry as the American social structure will allow. He looks it, too: tall, handsome, elegantly dressed in a dark blue blazer, gray slacks, and a black and gold tie, he would stand out in any Santa Cruz assembly. The current of genuine populism which runs through his thought is curiously at odds with the primary political mode at UCSC, which is elitist. Similarly, the slightly old-world formality which characterizes his manner contrasts sharply with the first-name impertinence which dominates social discourse here in Santa Cruz—to hear a political candidate refer to "His Honor, Mayor Rotkin," and "Mr. Panetta," instead of the usual "Leon" and "Mike," is surprising, but refreshing too.

Mr. Vidal is also witty, articulate, well-read, and well-informed, and, while the University community doubtless thinks of itself as embodying all of the above, those qualities are actually more the exception than the rule there, as elsewhere, in the groves of academe. The young Lincoln buff is a



Gore Vidal at UCSC

John Hummel/Photography

case in point: a thin, dark-haired, pale and intense young man, his entire body expressed outrage at the thought that our 16th President might in fact have been the victim of a social disease. He protested mightily that he too had done his homework, but received, for his pains, a somewhat acerbic lecture on the evidentiary status of the available documents. He was then referred to a primary source which, apparently, he had not read.

As a writer of historical novels—*Burr, 1876, Julian*; he has written a dozen novels, the first at age 19—Vidal's claims to be a historian are very real. He is also aware that historiography is an interpretative science, and his own interpretations of American history are certainly open to debate. In the question-and-answer period which followed his talk, however, of debate there was none at all. This was perhaps for the best, one cannot but feel; the man is a master rhetorician and it is unlikely that any of those who rose to question him could match him in a forensic exchange.

The man is also a performer of no mean skill. He has mastered a series of one-liners which he interpolates into his speech, or into his dialogue, be it with public or press, with considerable adroitness; thus he will

describe, for example, professional politicians as "those who, at 25, wind up with a law degree and a hairdryer, running for public office," or note that "with the exception of the glamorous Teddy Kennedy, I'm already better known than any member of the Senate—when I go up on the hill, they ask for my autograph; I don't ask for theirs." At a 10 am press conference this seems like pretty good *ex tempore* repartee: to hear the same lines again, some six hours later, woven into the warp of the speech itself, or into the woof of the questions from the floor, is to realize that what one admired in the first instance for its spontaneity is actually a device of quite a different order. It is no less admirable, but it is different in kind.

The questions put to him by this intellectually rigorous throng were painfully predictable, in fact. They concerned his view of Jerry Brown as an opponent in the upcoming primary race ("By and large, I just ignore Jerry," Vidal said); National Health Care (he favors that); and the UN ("I guess I'm glad it's there, and someday it may actually do some good"). He has the gift of mimicry and does Ronald Reagan as well as any stand-up comic can ("Well..." he says, looking down at his shoes) and one has the sense he has fielded all these questions a hundred times before.

It will not be easy for a lot of the people who were there to hear him to admit that this is so. Santa Cruz likes to think of itself as the cutting edge of modern politics, and Vidal's audience here did not really want to learn that their concern over the defense budget and the deficit is shared by conservative businessmen in Bakersfield ("They don't want that kind of defense spending," Vidal said. "They're businessmen, and know we can't afford it.")

To watch Vidal play on the intellectual pretensions of such an audience is pure delight. The smugness that emerges when a speaker trusts his listeners with a casual quote from W.H. Auden or Thomas Jefferson; with the off-hand suggestion that one might browse through the two-volume memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, just to savor the prose; with the odd Greek word, like *hubris*, or allusions to Darwin or *The Lord of the Flies* (this last is his epithet for Governor Brown) is enough to shake one's faith in the virtue of a liberal arts education. It culminated, there in Porter College's lofty lecture hall—which functions, in less exalted times, as its cafeteria—with a gesture which was pure Santa Cruz.

From the very front row, where he had been sitting, attentively, there arose a heavy-set, bearded man, of a certain age. Balding, dressed in a plaid shirt, sandals, and jeans, this self-appointed spokesman for the community faced the elegantly blazered Gore Vidal and said: "We all enjoy this very much, of course, but Middle America is different. How are you going to communicate your concerns to them?"

Now, Gore Vidal is certainly a confident man, with a sharp sense of his own accomplishments—which is admittedly earned. At the same time, and in spite of his remark that Strom Thurmond is more likely to seek his autograph than the reverse, that self-confidence seems separate from vanity, and he was clearly taken aback by his interlocutor's assumption that the two of them were members of some self-defined and limited fraternity. "Well," he said, at last, "it's not that hard to communicate. You just talk to them."