I Told You So: Gore Vidal Talks Politics: Interviews with Jon Weiner. Jon Weiner, ed. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012. p/bk 143 pp. ISBN 978-1-61902-174-7. Price: £8.98.

If any book would benefit from the audiobook edition it is this slim volume of interviews with Gore Vidal. Always an entertaining and provocative conversationalist, Vidal's discussions with historian and *The Nation* contributing editor Jon Weiner have been collected in *I Told You So: Gore Vidal Talks Politics.* The volume presents four interviews dating from 1988 to 2007 arranged in reverse chronological order by Weiner for reasons left undisclosed. Perhaps the arrangement is a nod to the title, which Vidal once described as "The four most beautiful words in our common language." (Preface) The more recent conversations may be meant to inform our reading of earlier interviews. Or perhaps the tile is an acknowledgement of Vidal's most visible public role; not as author, but as a prophet foretelling the end of our republic, ignored by both masters and masses, yet foretelling the future with great accuracy. In this age of drone strikes and government surveillance of US citizens in name of "national security", Vidal's concern with our National Security State seems prescient.

The book is best read as a primer on Vidal's favorite political and social observations. A veteran of stage, television, and political campaigns, he knows how to charm an audience, dusting off a number of well-polished observations as if speaking them anew. This is most evident in his 2007 conversation with Weiner before a large audience at The Los Angeles Times Festival of Books. Chronologically last, this interview is presented first in the book. Weiner sets up the questions expertly, allowing Vidal to revisit old themes, retell some favorite stories and explore new areas of interest. Vidal's responses are for the most part brief and comic here, playing to the crowd. A sympathetic questioner, Weiner prompts Vidal to voice observations both old and new, although he often misses the opportunity to follow up Vidal's statements with challenging questions.

Later chapters, featuring earlier interviews, prove more interesting. The last is a 1988 interview that was also included in Richard Peabody and Lucinda Ebersole's recent *Conversations with Gore Vidal* (2005), and one can see the reasoning behind reprinting it once more for this collection. It is not only the first meeting between author and editor but also the

most thought-provoking of their discussions. In his introduction Weiner speculates that Vidal agreed to this initial interview "because he had a long-standing critique of the mainstream of the history profession [...] [and] welcomed the chance to speak to younger 'radical' historians who were sympathetic to his left-wing vision of the American past." (10) Vidal explicates his theories of government and culture in more detail here and, given the comparative depth of their conversation, this interview ends the book on a properly satisfying note.

As subject and questioner remain the same, and some questions are repeated, small, but significant changes in Vidal's political outlook appear. For example, in 1988 Vidal regarded the presidential race as meaningless, believing there was no difference between the two candidates; in his view they were simply the twin heads of a one-party system. By 2007 Vidal had joined with those calling for "Anybody but Bush" and supported the Democratic candidates. Asked which President he considers the worst Vidal honors George W. Bush with the title in 2007 for his many failures, most notably the administration's response to Hurricane Katrina and our war in Iraq. In 2006, Woodrow Wilson in named worst for involving the United States in World War I, a move which the isolationist Vidal believed set the United States upon its present course:

> Of course I was [an isolationist] [...] And so was every right-thinking young man on the left [...] all the progressives in the United States were anti-war. This is something left out by many historians. We have always been a national devoted to the principles of George Washington. Nations do not have friends or enemies, only interests. (32)

Although worried about his place within the history of literature, Vidal was reluctant to speak about his work, preferring to use his time in the spotlight to address political issues. On the occasions when the author speaks about his novels, we gain some insight into his concept of literature. Eventually historical fiction and politics supplanted Vidal's other interests as a writer. He witnessed the audience for the novel not just shrinking, but becoming stagnant thanks to the efforts of academicians. Although his literary and political career had been interfered with by Vidal's Moriarty,

The New York Times, much more damaging was the trivialization of the novel from literature to mere academic exercises: "Literature is supposed to be about merit, and there is nothing else that matters on earth. If you have values. Now it's always about somebody trying to get tenure in Ann Arbor." (30) For Vidal, the end of the novel as literature coincided with the curtailing of a cultural golden age in the United States, a period bookmarked by the end of World War II and the beginning of the Korean War. The short period of peace witnessed a dynamic rise in the arts, not only in terms of literature but also across all branches of American culture:

> We suddenly shot to the top of the world in ballet [...] Then there was the age of the great musical [...] every week a new musical coming along, most of them classics by now [...] The theater was never so alive [...] there was all this pent-up energy. (52-53)

However, President Truman's policies effectively extinguished this bright beginning. Art and politics become Vidal's subjects as he increasingly turned his energies upon a political system which had extinguished even art.

There are pleasures to be had in this collection. For those familiar with the author's views, it is a chance to hear Vidal's voice once more on these issues. For those readers new to the author, it is a fine, affordable introduction. Vidal was always a fascinating conversationalist whose provocative insights into the decline of the United States both culturally and politically were balanced by the dim hope that, in calling attention to these problems he could help effect changes and remind us of our ideals. If in the end we heard his warnings but did not listen, Vidal may have taken comfort in the knowledge that he told us so.

Works Cited

Peabody, Richard, and Lucinda Ebersole, eds. *Conversations with Gore Vidal.* Jackson: UP. of Mississippi, 2005. Print.

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