

Boomsday by Christopher Buckley (Twelve) R250

24 April 2007

Christopher Buckley, former speechwriter to George H W Bush, once described himself as a “loyal but dispirited Republican”. That was, however, before the Catastrophe of the Second Term, so one is inclined to wonder about his loyalty nowadays, though one does not wonder about the state of his spirits.

In fact, though, reading *Boomsday*, one realises that nothing can really dispirit a true satirist: everything is grist to his mill, especially what he finds most dispiriting in his own society. Perhaps this is why satire is often seen as a conservative genre: the satirist is more intent on lampooning society than on changing it.

Certainly the US at the moment is a satirist’s paradise, racked as it is by inner contradictions: its rampant materialism, its conspicuous Christianity; its overblown national pride, its craven fear of just about every other nation on earth; its tireless plugging of traditional values, its more or less open corruption and venality.

In *Boomsday* Buckley rises hilariously to the opportunity. His ostensible subject is the Baby Boomers, those “approximately seventy-seven million people born between 1946 and 1964”, now ready to retire and start drawing on Social Security and bankrupting the country (these statistics should probably not be trusted).

His main character is one Cassandra Devine, a not-yet-thirty Washington spin doctor and manic blogger, who, as relief from lobbying for mink ranchers and Japanese whalers, undertakes a crusade to persuade, or bribe, millions of Baby Boomers to Transitionalize, which is spin language for committing suicide, thereby saving the economy billions, the burden of which would otherwise have to be born by the economically active thirty-somethings.

She joins forces with one Congressman Randy Jepperson, a Democrat from Massachusetts, who fancies himself as the new JFK, on the grounds of his wealth, looks, “cockmanship” and conspicuous liberal principles.

This enables Buckley to have it both ways: he can make fun of self-interest hiding under liberal professions, and at the same time use Jepperson to deliver scathing comments all too transparently applicable to the Bush administration: “It is the general rule among policy makers,” says Congressman Jepperson, “to insist that America must never leave a mission unaccomplished, no matter how wrongheaded or ill thought through. Indeed, the more wrongheaded and ill thought through, the more imperative it is to remain and see it through to its dismal and inevitable end.” Buckley does not mention Iraq; he does not have to.

Buckley is basically a disappointed democrat (with a small letter): his subject is the wild abuse of democratic institutions by the sly, the sleazy and the spinners, at the expense of the all-too-gullible American People. In his earlier novel, *Thank You for Smoking*, Buckley took on the lobbyists, and their power to spin anything. Here, he picks a wider range of topics: class-actions suits (the main character eats at a restaurant named Carnivore, “owned by a lawyer who had made \$15 million dollars from a class-action suit against the Salvation Army for dispensing sugar doughnuts to half a dozen diabetic disaster victims”); politicians, of course (“They’re born with Original Spin”), Baby Boomers, that generally affluent class born just after WW II, and now rolling into a

golden sunset on golf carts in gated communities (“Everyone sells out. Boomers just figured out how to make it an industry”); euphemistic designations, like the Society for the Relocation and Assistance of Displaced Muslim Persons, in fact a CIA unit in charge of kidnapping suspected Islamic terrorists; pro-lifers (here represented by the Rev Gideon Payne, founder of the Society for the Protection of Every Ribonucleic Molecule, SPERM, and owner of a hundred Elderheaven homes for the elderly, where inmates are selected according to their likelihood of an early demise, after of course making over all their money to Elderheaven); the oh-so-gorgeous raiments of Monsignor Montefeltro, the papal representative in Washington (he and Gideon “admired each other’s sartorial style” about as much as each other’s position on stem cell research).

Somewhere in the midst of all this spin, also spinning madly, is the President of the United States, President Riley Peacham, somewhat precariously making a bid for re-election: “By all indications, it was going to be an uphill battle. Thus far, the best his people had been able to come up with by way of a campaign slogan was, ‘He’s doing his best. Really.’”. His foul-mouthed cynicism is more reminiscent of Nixon than of the pious platitudes of the present incumbent, but the unholy mess the country is in is all too recognisably contemporary.

Jepperson, who is standing against Peacham on the slogan “No Worse than the Others”, is hoping to win the vote of the under-thirties by “scaring the shit out of them. We’re going to convince them that if they don’t vote this time ... they’re not going to be able to afford iPods and Mocha Frappuccinos.”

It should be clear that there is not an uncorrupted ideal in sight. Everything (and everybody) is for sale. Monsignor Montefeltro’s judgement on all this is: “What a country, America. A lunatic asylum, without enough attendants or tranquilizers.” One feels that Buckley is here using his character as an authorial speaking tube. And yet, like all true satirists, he would probably be at a loss in a saner society. He may even quite like his cast of foul-mouthed hypocrites, pious poseurs and rock-bottom cynics. They certainly make for good reading.