

MY RUNNING MATE: THAT "GREAT AMERICAN",
LEWIS McDONALD GRIZZARD JUNIOR

presented
by
Jim Love

to the Athenaeum Society of Hopkinsville, Kentucky
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It is painfully obvious to those of you who were in attendance at the presentation of my most recent "paper" that my "No Change" political party "died a-borning".

Were it not for that simple fact, we might very well be meeting in the East Room of the White House this evening, though I'm sure I would have had to surreptitiously given you access, rather than face an electorate which has little tolerance for gatherings of those such as us, and chance losing my hard-won "mandate".

Imagine the outcry that would accompany the revelation that the President of the United States belonged to a group which had the nerve to actually limit its membership, and then the national news media would go into a "feeding frenzy".

Can you imagine what "60 Minutes", "20/20", and "Prime Time Live" would do when they learned that the members were all white males with names like Adams, Turner, Freeman, and King, that we were overwhelmingly Protestant, heterosexual, and that some of us still smoke--and enjoy it.

Because I was only planning to be a "one-term" President, I would not "cave in" to the pressure and resign, or otherwise exhibit any behavior which might indicate that I have nothing but the utmost admiration and respect for this organization and its members and what it--and they--stand for, though I must admit I sometimes find it difficult to articulate exactly what that is.

Yes, this is a "mini-announcement" of my consideration for another run for the "Oval Office in 1996, but since the essence of my try for the highest elective office in the land has already been well-chronicled, I won't waste your time by repeating my platform.

I feel that one of the major shortcomings of my abortive 1991-92 campaign was the lack of a recognizable "name" on the ticket, and it is my intention not to repeat that mistake next time.

My purpose here tonight is to introduce my potential running mate to that small--and possibly non-existent--number among you who have never heard of him--and he is a white, male, heterosexual southerner.

And for those of you who have already heard of him, I hope to provide some additional background and information on that "GREAT AMERICAN" Lewis McDonald Grizzard Junior of Atlanta, Georgia.

He's been called a "Faulkner for just plain folks" and an exponent of "redneck chic", but Grizzard, who describes himself as a "quintessential southern male", is not that easy to explain.

Grizzard--and it is Griz-ZARD', despite the predilection of many people, including Western Kentuckians, to place the emphasis on the first syllable, is probably best known to most of you as the columnist who appeared on the editorial page of the "Kentucky New Era" as part of the "shakeup" which followed the retirement of long-time "New Era" columnist Joe Dorris.

However, I'm sure there are several of you ^{WHO} are familiar with at least some of his books, which now number upwards of 15 and are probably most notable by their titles.

The first was published in 1979 and is titled "Kathy Sue Loudermilk, I Love You", and followed the columnists' frequently-used ploy of choosing several of his favorite columns, or those which have received the greatest response, and publishing them in book form.

"Kathy Sue Loudermilk", who is described by Grizzard as the only female who needed a bra at birth, was followed by other collections of columns under the titles, "Won't You Come Home, Billy Bob Bailey?", "Don't Sit Under the Grits Tree With Anyone Else But Me", and "When My Love Returns From the Ladies Room, Will I Be Too Old To Care?"

Others in the Grizzard collection include the one which has sold the most copies, "They Tore My Heart Out and Stomped That Sucker Flat", which is a description of his first open heart surgery, which has since been repeated.

Incidentally, this "track record" of health problems might raise some question about Grizzard's ability to serve as Vice-President.

No problem. He already maintains a frenetic schedule, turning out three to four columns a week, averaging nearly one book per year and then promoting them through personal appearances, making numerous appearances as a public speaker each year, and playing golf at every opportunity.

Hey..If Dan Quayle can do it, so can Lewis Grizzard.

Other books he's authored include "If Love Were Oil, I'd Be About a Quart Low", "Elvis is Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Myself", "Shoot Low, Boys--They're Ridin' Shetland Ponies:In Search of True Grit", "Don't Bend Over in the Garden,Granny,You Know Them Taters Got Eyes", "Lewis Grizzard on Fear of Flying:Avoid Pouting Pilots and Mechanics Named Bubba", "Lewis Grizzard's Advice to the Newly Wed...and the Newly Divorced", and "Chili Dawgs Always Bark at Night".

But it was the introduction to Grizzard's 1992 book, "I Haven't Learned Anything New Since 1962...and other nekkid truths", which sold me on the Georgian as a potential running mate.

Here is what he says to open the book, with the less-than-modest heading, "One of the Few Introductions in Literature That's Worth Reading". I agree.

Says Grizzard:I had a handle on things in 1962. It was the year I turned sixteen and got my driver's license. It was the year I lettered in basketball and baseball in high school. I'd never heard of Vietnam in 1962. I didn't know that fried foods were bad for me. Arnold Palmer was still winning golf tournaments. Sandy Koufax was still pitching for the Dodgers.

Whenever I wanted French fries in 1962, Mama would cut potatoes by hand and cook them for me. Movies hadn't become "films", most of them still made sense, and nobody in them--unless they were made in Sweden--got naked. I had a large collection of Elvis records in 1962 and hung out at my hometown truck stop that had an all-country jukebox featuring Hank Williams, Faron Young, Jim Reeves, Ernest Tubb, Kitty Wells, and Patsy Cline.

I had a pretty blond girl friend. The best thing on television was "Gunsmoke". Miss Kitty was a good businessperson, but she wasn't pushy and could accept a compliment from a man without charging him with sexual harassment. Incidentally, I checked "Webster's New World Dictionary" and "har-rass-ment" is the lone acceptable pronunciation of h-a-r-r-a-s-s-m-e-n-t.

Back to Grizzard:

I slept well in 1962.

But the very next year, somebody shot the president. I was changing classes in high school when the principal announced it on the public-address system. Soon after, I saw the alleged assassin shot dead on live television.

Then the Beatles came.

Then all hell broke loose.

And changes began to unravel my simple, neat world. What once was good became bad. What once was unthinkable became acceptable. Somebody introduced Lite beer, forerunner to nonalcoholic beer. The national television news went from fifteen minutes to a half hour, because there was more bad news to announce. A lot more.

People--American people--got completely naked on the movie screen, the free-agent system was introduced into professional sports, and a fat kid named Jack Nicklaus replaced Arnold Palmer as the world's best golfer.

Sandy Koufax got arthritis and retired.

And it didn't stop there. It began to steamroll over me. So much of what I had been taught was right, suddenly was wrong. Girls wanted to be in the Boy Scouts. Later, homosexuals wanted to be in the Boy Scouts.

The "isms" came. Racism, sexism. The phobias came. Homophobia, xenophobia. Causes sprang up faster than I could keep up with them. Save the Whales. Nuke the Whales for Jesus.

Hippies. Drugs. Punk rock.

Northern sportswriters complained because Southern colleges wouldn't recruit black athletes, so Southern colleges recruited black athletes in droves. Then Northern sportswriters said all Southern college athletic departments had "plantation mentalities" and were exploiting the black athletes.

They started advertising feminine-hygiene products on television. People began paying two dollars for a bottle of water.

I had three friends killed in Vietnam.

Phil Donahue got his own television show.

My second wife made me go to see a psychiatrist. We were living in Chicago. The psychiatrist wanted to know if my mother ever held me and read to me as a child.

I said, "Probably." He asked me if I would mind if he held me and read to me. What did I know about psychiatry?

The man held me and read to me from some kid's book about a rabbit and a turtle, as I recall. I lasted about four minutes before I burst out of his apartment. My second wife and I got a divorce.

My grandfather had been a Democrat. All my forebears had been Democrats. Then the liberals took over the Democratic Party and spent all our money, so I became a Republican, the party of Dwight Eisenhower, whom my grandfather hated for spending so much time playing golf at Augusta National when he was president. I felt guilty for that.

Watergate. The older I get, the more I think it was much ado about nothing other than a new breed of journalists running amok instead of covering fires. Journalists wanted to bring down presidents. So they did.

I managed three divorces by 1982, and then began going out with women who looked at me like I was crazy when I asked them to fry hand-cut French fries for me.

AIDS, OPEC, the sushi eaters, PMS, VCR, ICBM, CD, and what happened to TLC? "The Arabs are trying to buy America," somebody said. Somebody else replied, "Don't worry. The Japs won't sell it to them."

I wrote the word "Japs" in a column. An editor replaced it with "Japanese" and told me I was insensitive.

The American League adopted the designated-hitter rule.

The privately-owned American passenger-train system collapsed. I had to remember that my seat cushion could be used for flotation in case my plane crashed into a body of water.

Miama was lost to the Cubans. San Francisco was lost-- first to the hippies, and then to the homosexuals. New York City was lost, because it had become ungovernable. Washington became a crime capital, gangs in Los Angeles got their hands on nuclear weapons, and a hole in the ozone layer is going to burn us all to a crisp one day anyway, if radon or cholesterol doesn't get us first.

The Berlin Wall fell. When can we expect a unified Germany to attack Poland again? The Soviet Union crumbled. We'll have to use our tax money to feed its citizens.

We won the war in the Gulf, but we didn't have George Patton or Douglas MacArthur around to tell the president to stick to it and then go ahead and take care of Saddam Hussein once and for all.

The Atlanta Braves finally went to the World Series, and the Native Americans(a/k/a The People Who Were Here First) screamed racism because the team used a Native American name and its fans dressed up like Cochise and brought tomahawks to games.

Atlanta won all three outdoor games of the World Series. Unfortunately, it lost all four played indoors under a Teflon roof in Minnesota.

I went out with a woman who got mad at me because I told her I was too tired to have sex.

"Besides," I told her, "we've only known each other three hours."

She got up, dressed, and went home. I never saw her again.

A lot of people got assassinated. A lot of bad people got off too easy.

Del Shannon committed suicide.

I was switching through the cable one day and came upon MTV. Good God.

Somebody introduced instant grits.

Masters and Johnson decided to get a divorce.

I was reading one day and came upon the name of some sort of rock-music group called the Butthole Surfers.

Do what?

It's been 30 years since 1962--this book was written last year.

I'm forty-six, haven't forgiven the Japs for Pearl Harbor, have tired of all of the movements that just won't go away, still don't want to be around homosexuals, remained convinced that Bernie Goetz did the right thing when he shot those punks in the New York subway, can quit smoking for a time but can't seem to kick it for good, have never drunk Perrier, still write on a manual typewriter, can't figure out telephones anymore, put too much vodka in my screwdrivers, despise computers, and I still don't have a clue what it is women really want.

This book is dedicated to everyone just like me, the Lord have mercy upon us.

If a statement such as that isn't grounds for election as Vice-President of the United States, I don't know what is.

Lewis McDonald Grizzard Junior was born October 20, 1946, a year and 66 days after "V-J Day", which qualifies him as a bona-fide "Baby Boomer".

He was born at Fort Benning, Georgia, where his father, Lewis Senior, a highly decorated soldier who received a battlefield commission in World War Two, threw his career away for a reason which remains unknown to his son to this day.

Those events are chronicled in Grizzard's most serious work, which has a title taken from the Roger Miller song, "Dang Me", and is called "My Daddy Was a Pistol, and I'm a Son-of-a-Gun".

It opens with Grizzard and a friend reminiscing about their "daddys" following a tennis game and numerous cold beers.

Grizzard says he can't drink much and think about his daddy without crying.

In fact, he has an acronym for such behavior--CAYDD, short for "cryin' about your daddy drunk".

And if ever a son had a reason to cry about his daddy--drunk or sober--it is Lewis Grizzard Junior.

By all standards--including those of a doting son--Lewis Grizzard Senior was a remarkable man--a soldier so outstanding he was given a battlefield commission after receiving the Bronze Star for valor and the Purple Heart for wounds he received in the European Theater of Operations in World War Two; a teacher and coach; a singer and storyteller of such skill that he was able to sustain himself in his declining years when gripped by alcoholism that he was able to captivate fellow worshippers in small town country churches who invited him home for Sunday dinner and often sent him on his way with money in his pocket.

Grizzard calls "My Daddy Was a Pistol..." his "daddy" book, and says he was discouraged by some, who questioned the interest that such a book would generate, but was encouraged by one of his former wives.

The end for Lewis Grizzard Senior apparently began in Korea, where his unit was overrun during one of the winter campaigns against the North Koreans and Chinese Communists and he and two other men were separated from their unit and listed as "missing action".

Fortunately, they linked up with a Chinese Communist deserter, who led them back to UN lines, but not before they suffered severely from the cold and from a lack of food.

Grizzard notes in his book that when later he asked his mother why she and his father had separate bedrooms during their second stint at Fort Benning, she only said, "Your father wasn't the same man after Korea."

Lewis Senior began to drink. Grizzard says that a relative told him that his father had borrowed \$50,000 during one 6 month period after Korea.

He separated from his wife, but continued to visit with Lewis, and on at least two occasions, disappeared with his son, further increasing his alienation from his wife.

He was declared a deserter and given a less-than-honorable discharge.

Lewis Junior details the frequent disappointments, coupled with the unexpected appearances by his father, who became an itinerant teacher in Georgia and Alabama, frequently establishing himself in a community during the summer prior to a school year, working his considerable charm on everyone in sight, and then convincing the superintendent that he needed an "advance" on his salary, which was always forthcoming--and then disappear.

One such appearance was when the younger Grizzard made a basket at the buzzer to upset the Number One ranked team in Georgia during a high school playoff game, while another created a somewhat difficult situation on the occasion of Lewis Junior's graduation for high school.

Mrs. Grizzard had subsequently remarried and because of his resentment for his stepfather, Lewis had done what he could to make his new father's life miserable while also bridling under the discipline "H.B.", as he called his stepfather, attempted to impose on him.

It seems that he only had two "sit down" tickets for the graduation exercises, with those without tickets on the floor required to stand at the rear of the gym.

Lewis Junior says he learned a lot that night. H.B. insisted that Lewis Senior sit with his ex-wife and that he stand.

Lewis said the gracious action by his stepfather went a long way toward his understanding of H.B. and the way he had handled the difficult situation faced by all stepfathers.

He said he had the "best of both worlds" that graduation night, with two fathers and a content mother, coupled with some cold beer iced down in the trunk of a friend's car and an accomodating girl friend who let him take some heretofore unheard of post-graduation liberties.

However, the unexpected appearances of his father after Lewis Junior went to college and got his first job as a sports writer for the "Atlanta Journal" created some problems and embarrassing situations.

He details the painful experiences of locating his father at various hotels and even at one point sneaking him out of an Atlanta hotel because he didn't have enough money himself to pay the bill--only enough for a bus ticket to Pembroke, Georgia, where his father periodically resided with his third wife, who was known to the younger Grizzard as Aunt Dolly.

The beginning of the end for Lewis Senior came in late July or early August of 1970 when Aunt Dolly called the sheriff after Lewis's father refused to stop drinking in her house and threatened her when she tried to take his bottle from him.

He left Pembroke and went to Claxton, a nearby town in an adjoining south central Georgia county.

It was there that he had a stroke, though when the police contacted Lewis Junior he was told that his father had bruises on his head, as if someone had hit him, though that was never pursued--either by the police or the son.

Grizzard says they were able to contact him because his father was carrying a letter with his son's name and address when he was admitted to the hospital.

In the next-to-last chapter of the book, Grizzard details the "death watch" over the next several days as he attempted to balance his responsibilities to his job against the demands of being with his father since he was the only child and most of the rest of the family had been alienated by Lewis Senior's behavior over the years.

His uncle John Wesley, Lewis Senior's brother, did spend some time with him at the hospital and rode back with him to Atlanta after an initial four day stay.

Lewis says in the book that his uncle finally had to return to the capital city, and on the ride back he said what the younger Grizzard said took away any guilt he had, thinking that death was the only hope his daddy had left. Uncle John Wesley said, "He don't deserve no more hell".

The end came August 12, 1970 with the younger Grizzard on hand after an early morning 200 mile drive made in just over 3 hours.

I quote from the book:

There were three men in the hospital room with daddy when I arrived. They were friends from his church in Pembroke.

They stood at one end of his bed. Each had his hands folded in front of him. Country folk deal with death quietly. They do not fight it, generally. They are at peace with its inevitability. Their faith, forged in them for a lifetime, makes acceptance of death a ritual of calm and dignity.

"I'm daddy's son," I said to them.

"Yes, sir," one of the old men said. "The Major (as Lewis Senior called himself though he never rose above the rank of Captain while in the Army) was always talking about you. He was very proud of you."

I was struck by their respectful stance toward me. All three were much older than I, but their upbringing had taught them reverence for the family of the dying.

Lewis Senior was dying of pneumonia, and his son was told that he could go at any time.

Lewis Junior observed in his book: So this was it. He would die in this bed, in this tiny hospital in this town with his son and three friends to watch him go.

I wanted to tell the three men his life story. I wanted them to know more of what they were seeing pass into the ages before them.

They knew only "the Major", a big, happy man with a thousand stories.

"Your daddy was a blessing to our community and church," one of them said.

Tell me about it, I thought. He sang and played for you, didn't he? And he made you laugh for a time and forget your troubles. He wasn't like other men you knew. His personality was so forceful. He brought life to wherever he happened to be.

But you don't know all the story, I wanted to say. You don't know how brave he was. You don't know how he led men in battle. You don't know how many nights he spent doubting there would be another for him.

You don't know about the hell in Korea, about the years of loneliness and wandering. You don't know my mother and how much he loved her. You don't know about the torment that followed him. You don't know there must be some black secret that is dying with him.

You don't know how he was when I was a little boy. How I cried for him when we thought he was lost in Korea, how we cried for him when he came back to us.

You don't know what a terrible waste you are witnessing. This was a special man, a gifted man, a man for whom there could have been no limit to accomplishments.

But look at him. Death should not be inglorious for such a man. Better that he died heroically, felled in battle.

I had vowed not to cry. This was another test of my manhood, another in a series of tests I was constantly giving myself, for no other reason than to prove my manhood in daddy's sight. To cry now would be a sign of my weakness. To cry now would be to disavow my adulthood. I stood there alone with my dying father. There was no mother to turn to and bury my face against for comfort. This was mine.

The last breath came. We all saw it and heard it. There was a sense of relieved sigh to it. Or maybe there wasn't. Maybe that was my imagination.

Seconds passed. Then, a minute was gone. I put my daddy's hand in mine. I held it tightly. Another minute passed. I would not speak. I knew I would not speak. Someone else would have to signal the end.

"I believe your daddy has passed," one of the men said.

I stood over the body, with daddy's hand still in mine. I was dazed. I thought of trumpets! I wanted trumpets, goddammit! I wanted the pealing of bells. I wanted something more than silence.

The helplessness I felt became immense. This is it, I thought. It is over and it had been so quiet, so lacking in drama. He breathed and then he didn't breathe anymore, and the nurses came and the doctor came and they pulled a sheet over his head and a man said a prayer. That had been it. Death is a sneaking son-of-a-bitch. It makes not a sound.

I remember writing something about daddy that night. I hardly remember what I wrote, however, and the piece has long since been lost. I remember the theme of it, though. It was that a great man had died, and I was the only one who had any real sense of his greatness.

That is probably where this book had its subconscious conception. That feeling of frustration, that nobody but me really knew the big picture, never left me after that night.

Nobody was taking this thing hard enough, I thought. There should have been wailing and gnashing of teeth. But who was to do it?

Certainly not my mother. It simply had been too long. Uncle John Wesley was a man who took everything in stride. Betty, (another former wife of Lewis Senior) had done all she could while she was married to him. Bob, a stepson, loved him, but he was not a man to "carry on". Aunt Dolly was on her way someplace else with a daughter. My wife was just doing me a favor being with me.

Daddy and his memory were mine. His curse was mine. I had endured a lifetime of it. Of all the people he had touched, he had touched me the deepest. He had become my burden in life. He would be my burden in death. Seventeen years later, what am I saying here?

I am saying, know this man and what he was. Know what he gave and know that he got too little in return. I cry for my daddy. I want somebody else to cry for him, too. This book is my gift to his memory. These are the tears that didn't come when I held his hand in death.

So there you have it: both sides of that "GREAT AMERICAN", Lewis Grizzard Junior, a man fit to be Vice-President of the United States of America.

I'll close with a quote from Grizzard in his book on golf, entitle "Does a Wild Bear Chip In the Woods?".

"I have eaten dinner with two presidents, sang on stage with Larry Gatlin, shook hands with Bob Hope, been to New York City several times and Paris once, kissed the best looking cheerleader in the history of the Atlanta Falcons square in the mouth and have played golf with Arnold Palmer. My life is complete."

Not yet, Lewis. It won't be until you barnstorm the country under the banner of the "No Change" party-- something I look forward to.