

March 12, 2003

Gore Vidal Backgrounder

This week, a rare interview with one of America's foremost intellectuals - author Gore Vidal, who speaks out not just against a war, but what he calls the erosion of the American dream.

REPORTER: Mark Davis

For over 50 years, author Gore Vidal has been at the centre of both America's intellectual life and its politics. A rare character whose interests and relationships have spanned both Kennedy and Kerouac. Born into a virtual political aristocracy, Gore Vidal turned to literature, producing 22 acclaimed novels, five plays and numerous screenplays. But the producers of the satire 'Bob Roberts' captured the other Gore Vidal, playing the senator he could have been bemoaning the erosion of America's founding liberal principals.

GORE VIDAL (EXCERPT FROM 'BOB ROBERTS'): It's almost exactly 30 years since I came to the Senate. It was 1960 - Jack Kennedy had been elected President. "We're going to get America moving again." There was gonna be a new frontier. "The world is going to be a better place."

Throughout his career, Vidal the author immersed himself in the politics of his nation.

GORE VIDAL (ELECTION CAMPAIGN ARCHIVE): I'm running for office largely out of just sheer rage and frustration - that you have a society that is constantly at war with everybody on earth, doesn't give a goddamn about the people who live in the society, doesn't give a goddamn about education and look at 10 million unemployed.

A mixed strand of literature and political intrigue that he continued in semi-retirement and semi-residency in Italy, including moments of high controversy when he defended Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh.

GORE VIDAL: Well, he's neither crazy and certainly doesn't hate the world, but he hates the American Federal Government. This is plainly a country in great trouble - a country that is beginning to run amok. And McVeigh's sacrifice of himself to his sense of justice - no, I don't approve of his killing the children - is a wake-up call - it's an alarm bell.

The dual threads of politics and literature have run through Gore Vidal's life, but no more so than in recent years. The novels have stopped, but the essays have been pouring out. His most recent collection - 'Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta' is one of his most overtly political publications. A vitriolic and eloquent condemnation of both the Bush Administration and the war in Iraq - it's been on the US bestsellers' list for over eight weeks.

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Gore Vidal Interview

Mark Davis spoke with Gore Vidal from his home in Los Angeles. (This segment is followed by a full transcript of the interview.)

MARK DAVIS: Gore Vidal, thanks for joining us on Dateline.

GORE VIDAL: Happy to have crossed the Dateline down under.

MARK DAVIS: In the past few years, you have shifted from being a novelist to principally an essayist or, in your own words 'a pamphleteer'. It's almost the reverse of most writers' careers. Why the shift for you?

GORE VIDAL: Why the shift in the United States of America, which has obliged me - since I've spent most of my life marinated in the history of my country and I'm so alarmed by what is happening with our global empire, and our wars against the rest of the world, it is

time for me to take political action. And I think anybody who has the position, has a platform, must do so. It's also a family tradition. My grandfather lost his seat in the Senate because he opposed going into the First World War. And he won it back 10 years later on exactly the same set of speeches that he'd lost it. So, attitudes change, attitudes can be changed but, now, I am not terribly optimistic that there is much anyone can do now the machine is set to go. And, to have a major depression going on, economic, really, collapse all round the world and begin a war against an enemy that has done nothing against us other than what our media occasionally alleges, this is lunacy.

MARK DAVIS: Over the past 40 years or so, you've written about the undermining of the foundations of the constitution - liberty, human rights, free speech. Indeed, you've probably damned every administration throughout that period on that score. Is George Bush really any worse?

GORE VIDAL: No, he certainly is worse. We've never had a kind of reckless one who may believe - and there's a whole theory now that he's inspired by love of Our Lord - that he is an apocalyptic Christian who'll be going to Heaven while the rest of us go to blazes. I hope that isn't the case. I hope that's exaggeration. No, we've had...the problem began when we got the empire, which was brilliantly done, in the most Machiavellian - and I mean that in the best sense of the word - way by Franklin Roosevelt. With the winning of World War II, we were everywhere on Earth our troops and our economy was number one. Europe was ruined. And from that...then, in 1950, the great problem began when Harry Truman decided to militarise the economy, maintain a vast military establishment in every corner of the Earth. Meanwhile, denying money to schools but really to the infrastructure of the nation. So we have been at war steadily since 1950. I did...one of my little pamphlets was 'A Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace' - how that worked. I mean, we've gone everywhere - we have the Enemy of the Month Club. One month, it's Noriega - king of drugs. Another one, it's Gaddafi. We hated his eyeliner or

something and killed his daughter. We moved from one enemy to another and the press, the media, has never been more disgusting.

MARK DAVIS: You charge what you call the 'Cheney-Bush junta' with empire-building, but hasn't America always been an empire and isn't this junta just a little bit more honest about it? They aren't shy in proclaiming their belief that America has something worth exporting?

GORE VIDAL: I prefer hypocrisy to honesty any time if hypocrisy will keep the peace. No, we have had an imperial streak from the very beginning but it didn't get going until 1898, when we picked a war with Spain because we had our eye on Spanish colonial possessions, specifically the Philippines, which got us into your part of the world - into Asia and, from that moment on, we really were a global empire. And then, by the time of the Second World War, we'd achieved it. It was all ours. No, what is going on now is kind of interesting. We've never seen anything like it. There's a group of what they call neo-conservatives - most of them were old Stalinists and then they were Trotskyites and then, finally, they are neo-conservatives now. They preach openly and they're all over the war department, as we used to call it, the Defence Department. Mr Wolfowitz is one of their brains and they write really extraordinarily frightening overviews of the United States and the rest of the world that we, after all, have all the military power that there is and let's use it. Let's take the Earth. It's there for us. They're talking glibly now about after they get rid of Saddam - which they think is going to be a very easy thing to do - well, Iran is next. One of them, not long ago, made a public statement - "It's time we really had regime change in all of the Arab countries."

MARK DAVIS: Well, Bush has claimed that the American belief in liberty will deliver a free and peaceful Iraq. Even with the stench of oil in the air, George Bush probably can deliver that - a free and peaceful Iraq that is. Isn't there a legitimate case to be argued that there's a greater good at work here?

GORE VIDAL: There is no greater good at work. We cannot deliver it. Only the Iraqis can deliver that. You don't go in and smash up a country, which we will do, and gain their love so that they then want to imitate our highly corrupt political system. We saw what happened in November 2000, when Albert Gore won the popular vote by 600,000, he actually won the electoral vote of Florida, but a lot of dismal things happened and denied him the election. So that's what happened there. So for us to talk about a democracy that we are going to translate into other lands is the height of hypocrisy and is simply foolish. You don't invent governments for other people.

MARK DAVIS: The American virtues of individual liberties, although viewed by many people with some cynicism, are still meaningful to people around the world. It's interesting to note the support that America is getting from the former eastern bloc European nations - Rumsfeld's "new Europe". The American message still resonates with them, doesn't it?

GORE VIDAL: They're not clued in to what sort of country the United States is. They've certainly found out what kind of country the Soviet Union was and they didn't like that one bit and they associate us with their relative liberation. That's all. What we're really about they don't know. They believe the propaganda. They believe the media, which is constantly going on about democracy and freedom and liberty and the greatest country on Earth and so on, and the only thing wrong in the world is there are evil people who hate us because we are so good. Well, I don't know how anybody can buy this line, but people do. People are not very well informed. The well-informed countries - western Europe - know perfectly well what our game is. General de Gaulle took France out of NATO, because he suspected that we were in the empire-building business and he didn't want to go along with it yet, simultaneously, France remained an ally in case there was a major war with the Soviets. I don't think we should take too seriously those eastern European countries. In due course, they will wake up, as Turkey did, that we are dangerous.

MARK DAVIS: The defence of American civil liberties has been a consistent theme of yours, most vocally in recent months, in

response to the Patriot Act and the new Homeland Defence Agency. But it would seem that Americans don't share your views in any significant numbers. Why not?

GORE VIDAL: They do. What I do is quite popular. Now, mind you, we're not much of a reading country, but we certainly watch a lot of television. You can pick up a tremendous audience across - you know, millions of people have been marching. If you read the American press...

MARK DAVIS: And yet there's been very little political response to the establishment of those agencies or the very dramatic constitutional changes that have been made in the Patriot Act. We're not really hearing a strong movement, not from the Democrats, not in the media.

GORE VIDAL: Well, we don't hear it because they're part of it. You know, we have elections - very expensive ones and very corrupt ones. But we don't have politics. We made a trade-off somewhere. This was after Harry Truman established the national security state and suddenly television came along and elections cost billions. It cost \$3 billion to elect Bush. That's a lot of money. And there was a campaign almost without issues except personalities. Nothing was talked about. Nothing was talked about going to war as quickly as possible, which of course obviously was in his mind. So you have a country that is not political, without political parties. There are movements of people, which go largely unrecorded. There are eloquent voices out there but you don't see them in print, you don't hear them on the air.

MARK DAVIS: Well, one of those voices is one of your contemporaries, Norman Mailer. He wrote recently that, after a long life, he's concluded that fascism, not democracy, is the natural state and that America as a nation is in a pre-fascist era, a mega banana republic increasingly dominated by the military. Is it a view that you share?

GORE VIDAL: I have those days, yes, such as Norman is having. But I am more deeply rooted in the old constitution with all of its flaws and in the Bill of Rights with all of its virtues. That was something special on Earth and Jefferson was something special on Earth, when he said that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness - nobody had ever used that phrase in the constitution before or set that out as a political goal for everyone. So, out of that came the energies of the United States that made it the number one country in the world and the most inventive and the most creative and then the Devil entered Eden, and we ended up with an Asiatic empire and a European empire and a South American dependency and we are not what we were. The people get no education. I call it 'the United States of Amnesia'.

MARK DAVIS: Well, you're one of America's harshest cultural and political critics and yet you write and clearly talk very romantically about the republic. You've documented those ebbs and flows where you believe it's verged from its founding principles. In the broader sweep, what is the state of America today?

GORE VIDAL: Adrift, but adrift toward war, and it's a war that we can't win. I suppose we can blow up Baghdad but I think, when that starts, if that happens, we can count on retaliation from 1 billion Muslims and who knows what other? We are opening up - I don't know - a Pandora's box. It's as if we're opening a tomb and God knows what will come out of it. This is dangerous country. This isn't just ordinary colonial aggression - a European power that wants to take over Panama, something like that. This isn't it at all. First of all, they're proudly talking about a cultural and religious clash between Christianity and Devil's work. Well, that's very dangerous and very stupid. And I don't know how you win that one.

MARK DAVIS: Well, there are definite echoes of the 1950s in America today. Are the 1950s back with us?

GORE VIDAL: Well, nothing repeats itself except human folly, so, no. I do feel an energy across the country - this may be because I go to energetic groups - that are fighting their own government, but they're

going to lose because the government is now totally militarised and ready for war, a war they can't really sell to the rest of the world, but they're going to do it anyway. This is something new. We've never had a period like this and it was - to somebody like me, who is really hooked into constitutional America - this is incredible. We cannot trust the Supreme Court after their mysterious decisions on the election of 2000. We have no political parties. We've never much of them - I mean the Democrats, the Republicans - we have the party of essentially corporate America. It has two right wings - one called Democratic, one called Republican. So in the absence of politics, with a media that is easy to manipulate and, in the hands of very few people with interests in wars and oil and so on, I don't see how you get the word out, but one tries because there is nothing else to be done.

MARK DAVIS: Gore Vidal, thanks for joining us on Dateline.

FOLLOWING IS THE FULL TRANSCRIPT OF THE GORE VIDAL INTERVIEW:

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GORE VIDAL: Happy to have crossed the dateline down under.

MARK DAVIS: In the past few years, you have shifted from being a novelist to principally an essayist or, in your own words 'a pamphleteer'. It's almost the reverse of most writers' careers. Why the shift for you?

GORE VIDAL: Why the shift in the United States of America, which has obliged me - since I've spent most of my life marinated in the history of my country and I'm so alarmed by what is happening with our global empire, and our wars against the rest of the world, it is time for me to take political action. And I think anybody who has the position, has a platform, must do so. It's also a family tradition. My grandfather lost his seat in the Senate because he opposed going into

the First World War. And he won it back 10 years later on exactly the same set of speeches that he'd lost it. So, attitudes change, attitudes can be changed but, now, I am not terribly optimistic that there is much anyone can do now the machine is set to go. And, to have a major depression going on, economic, really, collapse all round the world and begin a war against an enemy that has done nothing against us other than what our media occasionally alleges, this is lunacy. And I have a hunch - I've been getting quite a bit around the country - most people are beginning to sense it. The poll numbers are not as good as the Bush regime would have us believe. A great...something like 70% really only wants to go into war with United Nations sanction and a new resolution. I would prefer, however, that we use our constitution, which we often ignore, which is - Article 1 Section 8 says, "Only the Congress may declare war. The President has no right to go to war and he is Commander-in-Chief once it starts."

MARK DAVIS: Over the past 40 years or so, you've written about the undermining of the foundations of the constitution - liberty, human rights, free speech. Indeed, you've probably damned every administration throughout that period on that score. Is George Bush really any worse?

GORE VIDAL: No, he certainly is worse. We've never had a kind of reckless one who may believe - and there's a whole theory now that he's inspired by love of Our Lord - that he is an apocalyptic Christian who'll be going to Heaven while the rest of us go to blazes. I hope that isn't the case. I hope that's exaggeration. No. We've had...the problem began when we got the empire, which was brilliantly done, in the most Machiavellian - and I mean that in the best sense of the word - way by Franklin Roosevelt. With the winning of World War II, we were everywhere on Earth our troops and our economy was number one. Europe was ruined. And from that, then in 1950, the great problem began when Harry Truman decided to militarise the economy, maintain a vast military establishment in every corner of the Earth. Meanwhile, denying money to schools but really to the infrastructure of the nation. So we have been at war steadily since

1950. I did a...one of my little pamphlets was 'A Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace' - how that worked. I mean, we've gone everywhere - we have the Enemy of the Month Club. One month, it's Noriega - king of drugs. Another one, it's Gaddafi. We hated his eyeliner or something and killed his daughter. We moved from one enemy to another and the press, the media, has never been more disgusting. I don't know why, but there are very few voices that are speaking out publicly. The censorship here is so tight in all of the newspapers and particularly in network television. So nobody's getting the facts. I mean, I spend part of the year in Italy and really, basically, what I find out I find out from European journalists who actually will go to Iraq, which our people cannot do or will not do, and are certainly not admired for doing so. We are in a kind of bubble of ignorance about what is really going on.

MARK DAVIS: Well, is the pamphlet the only viable option for voices of dissent at the moment?

GORE VIDAL: Well, it's a weapon. I suppose one could - Khomeini had a wonderful idea, which made him the lord of all Iran. When the Shah was on his way out, Khomeini flooded Iran with audio recordings of his voice, very cheaply made in Paris, and they were listened to by everybody in Iran - it's too late for that sort of thing for us. There are ways of getting around official media and there are ways of getting around a government which is given to lying about everything, and the people eventually pick up on it, but things are moving so swiftly now.

MARK DAVIS: You charge what you call the 'Cheney-Bush junta' with empire-building but hasn't America always been an empire and isn't this junta just a little bit more honest about it? They aren't shy in proclaiming their belief that America has something worth exporting?

GORE VIDAL: I prefer hypocrisy to honesty any time if hypocrisy will keep the peace. No, we have had an imperial streak from the very beginning, but it didn't get going until 1898, when we picked a war with Spain because we had our eye on Spanish colonial

possessions, specifically the Philippines, which got us into your part of the world - into Asia and, from that moment on, we really were a global empire. And then, by the time of the Second World War, we'd achieved it. It was all ours. No, what is going on now is kind of interesting. We've never seen anything like it. There's a group of what they call neo-conservatives - most of them were old Stalinists and then they were Trotskyites and then, finally, they are neo-conservatives now. They preach openly and they're all over the war department as we used to call it, the Defence Department. Mr Wolfowitz is one of their brains and they write really extraordinarily frightening overviews of the United States and the rest of the world that we, after all, have all the military power that there is and let's use it. Let's take the Earth. It's there for us. They're talking glibly now about after they get rid of Saddam - which they think is going to be a very easy thing to do - well, Iran is next. One of them, not long ago, made a public statement - "It's time we really had regime change in ALL the Arab countries." Well, there are 1 billion Muslims and I don't see them taking this very well, and if a smallish place like wherever it was ultimately can produce so many suicide bombers, 1 billion Muslims can take out the whole United States or western Europe. I would always opt for peace, as war is always a mess. But I was in a war which the junta, Mr Bush and Mr Cheney, did everything possible to avoid being involved in - Vietnam. Cheney when asked, as he became vice-president, they said, "Well, why didn't you serve your country at the time of Vietnam?" and he said, "Well, I had other priorities." I'll say he did. Those of us who...we are the one group, the World War II veterans, we are a shrinking group obviously, but we are the ones that are the most solidly against the war. The people who stayed out of Vietnam, the rest who have never known war, are just gung-ho for other people to go fight. They, themselves, don't do it. But there is a split here between those who've had a bit of experience of the world and of war and the others who are mostly interested, certainly the junta, as I call them, in Washington, they're all in the gas and oil business. People ask me, "Are you saying there's a conspiracy?" - because that's the word where everybody starts laughing. It means you believe in flying saucers. "No," I said, "I'm going to change the world." We won't say it's a conspiracy that all the

great offices of state are occupied by gas and oil people - the President, the Vice-President, National Security Adviser - it's not a coincidence. "It's a coincidence," and everybody smiles - that's a nice word - "Oh, yes, of course, it's a coincidence" that they are running the government and getting us into a war in oil-rich places."

MARK DAVIS: Well, Bush has claimed that the American belief in liberty will deliver a free and peaceful Iraq, even with the stench of oil in the air, George Bush probably can deliver that - a free and peaceful Iraq that is. Isn't there a legitimate case to be argued that there's a greater good at work here?

GORE VIDAL: There is no greater good at work. We cannot deliver it. Only the Iraqis can deliver that. You don't go in and smash up a country, which we will do, and gain their love so that they then want to imitate our highly corrupt political system and, on the subject of democracy - I happen to be something of a student of the American constitution - it was set up in order to avoid majority rule. The two things the founding fathers hated were majoritarian rule and monarchy. So they devised a republic in which only a very few white men of property could vote. Then, to make sure that we never had any democracy at work at the highest levels of governance, they created something called the electoral college, which can break any change that might upset them. We saw what happened in November 2000, when Albert Gore won the popular vote by 600,000, he actually won the electoral vote of Florida, but a lot of dismal things happened and denied him the election. So that's what happened there. So for us to talk about a democracy that we are going to translate into other lands is the height of hypocrisy and is simply foolish. We don't invent governments for other people.

MARK DAVIS: The American virtues of individual liberties, although viewed by many people with some cynicism, are still meaningful to people around the world. It's interesting to note the support that America is getting from the former eastern bloc European nations - Rumsfeld's "new Europe". The American message still resonates with them, doesn't it?

GORE VIDAL: They're not clued in to what sort of country the United States is. They've certainly found out what kind of country the Soviet Union was and they didn't like that one bit and they associate us with their relative liberation. That's all. What we're really about they don't know. They believe the propaganda. They believe the media, which is constantly going on about democracy and freedom and liberty and the greatest country on earth and so on and the only thing wrong in the world is there are EVIL people who hate us because we are SO good. Well, I don't know how anybody can buy this line, but people do. People are not very well informed. The well-informed countries - western Europe - know perfectly well what our game is. General de Gaulle took France out of NATO because he suspected that we were in the empire-building business, and he didn't want to go along with it yet, simultaneously, France remained an ally in case there was a major war with the Soviets. I don't think we should take too seriously those eastern European countries. In due course, they will wake up, as Turkey did, that we are dangerous.

MARK DAVIS: Well, unlike Iraq, indeed any members of the 'axis of evil', Americans can change their government with some drawbacks, they can express their opinions. On the eve of a war, whatever Machiavellian benefits might accrue to the US, isn't there still moral weight in the voice of America, given its history as a democratic force over the past century?

GORE VIDAL: I spoke to 100,000 people two weeks ago in Hollywood Boulevard, down the hill from where I'm speaking to you now. There were 100,000, lots of police, many helicopters overhead which, as the speaker got up, would lower themselves to try and drown your voice out. The press did not record that there were 100,000 people. They said, "Oh, 30,000 perhaps. That might be an exaggeration," they said. Unfortunately for them, the 'Los Angeles Times', generally a fairly good paper, had a long shot from La Brea where I was speaking on a stage straight up to Vine Street, which was a mile or two away, and you saw 100,000 people, so their very picture undid them. What I'm saying is the censorship is very tight. Don't think we're a free country to say anything we want. We can say it, but

it's not going to be printed and you're not going to get on television. One of our great voices for some time now for peace in the world is Noam Chomsky. I've never seen his name in the 'New York Times' in any context other than linguistics of which he's a professor at MIT. We go totally unnoticed. I can do a pamphlet and it's the Internet that gets it to people. So I can sell a couple of hundred thousand copies of a pamphlet. No word of it will appear in the 'New York Times'. To my amazement this time, they actually put it on their bestseller list. Generally, they won't do that. I can't tell you how tightly controlled this place is and it's beginning to show, because talk radio and so on - I've done a lot of that lately - the questions you get, the people are so confused. They don't know where Iraq is. They think Saddam Hussein, because he's an evil person, deliberately blew up the twin towers in Manhattan. He didn't. That was Osama bin Laden or somebody else. We still don't know because there has been no investigation of that, as Congress and the constitution require. So we are totally in the dark and we have a president who is even in a greater darkness, who's totally uninformed about the world, leading us into war because, because because.

MARK DAVIS: Well, the defence of American civil liberties has been a consistent theme of yours, most vocally in recent months, in response to the Patriot Act and the new Homeland Defence Agency. But it would seem that Americans don't share your views in any significant numbers. Why not?

GORE VIDAL: They do. What I do is quite popular. Now, mind you, we're not much of a reading country, but we certainly watch a lot of television. You can pick up a tremendous audience across - you know, millions of people have been marching. If you read the American press...

MARK DAVIS: And yet there's been very little political response to the establishment of those agencies or the very dramatic constitutional changes that have been made in the Patriot Act. We're not really hearing a strong movement, not from the Democrats, not in the media. There is a certain acquiescence.

GORE VIDAL: Well, we don't hear it because they're part of it. You know, we have elections - very expensive ones and very corrupt ones. But we don't have politics. We made a trade-off somewhere. This was after Harry Truman established the national security state, and suddenly television came along and elections cost billions. It cost \$3 billion to elect Bush. That's a lot of money. And it was a campaign almost without issues except personalities. Nothing was talked about. Nothing was talked about going to war as quickly as possible, which of course obviously was in his mind. So you have a country that is not political, without political parties. There are movements of people, which go largely unrecorded. There are eloquent voices out there, but you don't see them in print, you don't hear them on the air.

MARK DAVIS: Well, one of those voices is one of your contemporaries, Norman Mailer. He wrote recently that, after a long life, he's concluded that fascism, not democracy, is the natural state and that America as a nation is in a pre-fascist era, a mega banana republic increasingly dominated by the military. Is it a view that you share?

GORE VIDAL: I have those days, yes, such as Norman is having. But I am more deeply rooted in the old constitution with all of its flaws and in the Bill of Rights with all of its virtues. That was something special on Earth and Jefferson was something special on Earth when he said that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness - nobody had ever used that phrase in the constitution before or set that out as a political goal for everyone. So, out of that came the energies of the United States to have made it the number one country in the world and the most inventive and the most creative, and then the Devil entered Eden and we ended up with an Asiatic empire, and a European empire, and a South American dependency and we are not what we were. The people get no education. I call it 'the United States of Amnesia'. I've written now is it 12 books I think, doing American history from the Revolution up to the Millennium. They're very popular because they don't get it in school and they don't get it from the media. So people do read my books. But there should be more by other people too. It is a terrible thing to lose your past, particularly

when you had such an interesting one, as we did. In the 18th century, we had three of the great geniuses of the 18th century all living in this little colonial world of 3 million people. We had Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. These were extraordinarily wise men and understood the ways of the world, and they gave us a very good form of government. No, it was not a liberal government. It was a very reactionary one. But it was the 18th century - 1787 was when the constitution was written. It was as advanced as the human race had ever got at that time in devising a republic. To have lost that and to have lost all memory of it - we've been having a big argument about we've got "In God we trust" on the money. Well this is over the dead bodies of Thomas Jefferson and the other founders, most of whom did not believe in God and wanted to keep Church and State separate. Every American seems to think, "In God we trust" was put on the money by George Washington. Well, it was put on there by Dwight Eisenhower in trying to get some southern votes, Baptist preachers.

MARK DAVIS: Well, you're one of America's harshest cultural and political critics and yet you write and clearly talk very romantically about the republic. You've documented those ebbs and flows where you believe it's verged from its founding principles. In the broader sweep, what is the state of America today?

GORE VIDAL: Adrift, but adrift toward war, and it's a war that we can't win. I suppose we can blow up Baghdad but I think, when that starts, if that happens, we can count on retaliation from 1 billion Muslims and who knows what other? We are opening up - I don't know, a Pandora's box - it's as if we're opening a tomb and God knows what will come out of it. This is dangerous country. This isn't just ordinary colonial aggression - a European power that wants to take over Panama, something like that. This isn't it at all. First of all, they're proudly talking about a cultural and religious clash between Christianity and Devil's work. Well, that's very dangerous and very stupid. And I don't know how you win that one.

MARK DAVIS: Well, there are definite echoes of the 1950s in America today. Some of the loudest critics of that shift are also

**products of that era - yourself, Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller.
Where are the young Vidals, the young Mailers, the young Millers?**

GORE VIDAL: One of the things that happened, although we don't have much of an educational system for the general public - the writers of the Second War, all except a few like the three that you've just named went into the universities to teach. Eisenhower in a rather great speech when he left office - he warned against the military industrial complex, which he said was taking over too much of this nation's money and life. A part of it that is never quoted - he said, in effect, that "The universities and learning will be hurt the most because, because when places of learning and knowledge, investigation are dependent upon government bounty, subsidies, for their very lives - which we were doing, we were giving everything to the science department to develop weapons, well that also went for the humanities, the history department too, the English department. We have a whole generation of school teachers and they're not very good school teachers. Some of them are very talented writers, but they're quiet. They don't want to rock the boat. They want to keep their jobs. They saw in the '50s - what happened if you got associated with radical movements. You lost your job and they weren't easy to find. Now, they're quiet as could be.

MARK DAVIS: Is the '50s back, or are the 1950s back with us?

GORE VIDAL: Well, nothing repeats itself except human folly, so no. I do feel an energy across the country - this may be because I go to energetic groups - that are fighting their own government, but they're going to lose because the government is now totally militarised and ready for war - a war they can't really sell to the rest of the world, but they're going to do it anyway. This is something new. We've never had a period like this and it was - to somebody like me, who is really hooked into constitutional America - this is incredible. We cannot trust the Supreme Court after their mysterious decisions on the election of 2000. We have no political parties. We've never had much of them - I mean the Democrats, the Republicans. We have one party - we have the party of essentially corporate America. It has two right

wings, one called Democratic, one called Republican. So in the absence of politics, with a media that is easy to manipulate and, in the hands of very few people with interests in wars and oil and so on, I don't see how you get the word out, but one tries because there is nothing else to be done.

MARK DAVIS: Gore Vidal, thanks for joining us on Dateline.

GORE VIDAL: Thank you.