

## Grano Series – Gore Vidal

The 3<sup>rd</sup> annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the future of Europe the implications of a fast changing European Community for North America.

May, 2007

An American literary icon. He has led an eclectic public life since publishing his first novel at the age of 21. Aside from his numerous best-selling novels and essays, Gore Vidal has worked as an actor and writer for film, TV, and the stage. He received a Tony nomination for his Broadway play *The Best Man* and won the National Book Award for *United States Essays: 1952-1992*. He recently sold his renowned hillside estate in Ravello, Italy, where he lived since the 1960s. He now makes his home in Los Angeles, California.

1                   MR. LUCIANI: Before we start, I'd like to  
2 thank Lucia in the kitchen and the staff for another  
3 great meal this evening. They do a terrific job under  
4 these trying circumstances here.

5                   This is a special night. Over the three years  
6 that we've been doing this, we have had some terrific  
7 speakers but none has created such excitement as the  
8 speaker we have this evening. Rudyard and I have lost  
9 a few friends because we couldn't squeeze them all in  
10 this evening.

11                   Now, over that time, some have asked why we  
12 couldn't invite someone on the left and my answer is  
13 always the same, "I thought our speakers were all on  
14 the left." Now, tonight we have Gore Vidal and that  
15 should pretty much even out the political spectrum.

16                   Now, regardless of our politics, we agree on  
17 three things. First, our deep distrust of the New  
18 York Times. Second, our loathing of modern English  
19 departments. And third, we agree that teaching  
20 history through the movies isn't always a good idea.  
21 When Anne Applebaum was here in February, I said,  
22 "Those who don't know history aren't condemned to  
23 repeat it. They're condemned to having Hollywood  
24 teach it to them."

25                   Let me quote a line from Gore's wonderful

1 memoir, Point to Point Navigation, and Gore cites a  
2 scene from Cecil B. DeMille's 1935 classic movie The  
3 Crusades where Berengaria, played by Loretta Young,  
4 turns to her lion heart husband and pleads, "Richard,  
5 you just gotta save Christianity." Who knew the  
6 crusaders also came from Brooklyn.

7           When we invited Gore to the Grano Series, he  
8 graciously accepted on one condition, that we not pay  
9 him any less than any of our other speakers. Since  
10 our intention is to pay our speakers as little as  
11 possible, we quickly accepted.

12           Introducing Gore is an intimidating business,  
13 made more difficult by which Gore Vidal to introduce.  
14 Is it the author of 25 novels and countless short  
15 stories and over 200 works of non-fiction and literary  
16 essays? This doesn't include all his synonymous work  
17 as well. All in all, he has written about 50 books  
18 and remember, he wrote his first successful novel when  
19 he was 19, about the same age I was when I was getting  
20 around to reading one.

21           Or maybe I should introduce the award-winning  
22 Broadway playwright and screenwriter of numerous films  
23 and TV shows. I'm always reminded of the fact that  
24 Gore Vidal also was a screenwriter on Ben Hur.

25           Should I introduce the politician who grew up

1 in a deeply political family and ran for Congress in  
2 New York and the Democratic senate nominee in  
3 California? Just think what might have been if Gore  
4 Vidal had been a U.S. congressman or senator.

5 Or do I introduce the actor who appeared in  
6 many films and plays, including his own? He is one of  
7 the few people who has played others and himself in  
8 movies. As an aside this evening, one of our guests  
9 is Dr. Vivian Rakoff, whose son David, a writer and  
10 actor now in New York, played Gore Vidal in the film  
11 Capote starring Philip Seymour Hoffman.

12 Or should I introduce the public intellectual,  
13 who has remained an influential thinker and social and  
14 political commentator for over half a century? To my  
15 mind, he's the first public intellectual in the age of  
16 television, elevating it rather than it diminishing  
17 him.

18 Now, I heard a rumour that this was Gore  
19 Vidal's first trip to Canada and it turns out to have  
20 been a false rumour. He was here about 20 years ago,  
21 which is why I can't understand why he chose to spend  
22 the last 30 years or so on the Amalfi coast with his  
23 dear and beloved partner, Howard Auster, who died four  
24 years ago. But from their villa in Ravello, at La  
25 Rondinaia, they had a front-row seat to the world and

1           it seemed Gore knew everyone and everyone knew him,  
2           from Greta Garbo to Saul Bellow, Fellini to Princess  
3           Margaret to his close friend, Johnny Carson.

4                     And consider that he not only helped the  
5           career of Francis Ford Coppola as a screenwriter,  
6           Francis was his assistant on the film *Is Paris*  
7           *Burning*. Coppola credits Gore with introducing him to  
8           wine and the rest, they say, is history.

9                     Gore is all these things. He's a writer, a  
10          thinker, a witness to the 21st century who has given  
11          us the pleasure of over half a century of wit and  
12          insight. Larry McMurtry, the writer, compared Gore  
13          Vidal to Voltaire, both brilliant satirists and  
14          talkers. And where Voltaire had his court at  
15          Versailles, Gore Vidal had his at the Kennedy Camelot  
16          in Washington, D.C. and the silver screen and none  
17          better than the latter. Tonight, he has our humble  
18          court at Grano and we're so fortunate to have him with  
19          us here tonight.

20                    Now, as Rudyard said, we're going to do things  
21          a bit differently this evening. Rather than a speech,  
22          Gore will be in conversation with William Thorsell and  
23          we get to listen in.

24                    At this point, I want to reassure Gore Vidal  
25          that William Thorsell is not LEG. This week, William

1 is basking in his own triumph with the completion of  
2 the ROM addition and I think the city will never be  
3 the same for it. I loved the addition since I saw the  
4 models and also the changes. I still think it's  
5 extraordinary.

6 Now, this week is also Luminato week, as  
7 Rudyard said, and I want to thank and acknowledge two  
8 guys behind what soon will be Toronto's premiere  
9 cultural festival, Tony Gagliano and David Pecaut.  
10 Both are great supporters of the Grano Series and I'm  
11 glad that we've been able to work together to bring  
12 Gore here tonight and tomorrow night at the Elgin  
13 Theatre.

14 Without further delay, let me turn the evening  
15 over to William and Gore. Thank you very much.

16 MR. THORSELL: Thank you very much and this is  
17 obviously a rare evening, not hopefully too rare in  
18 the future for Toronto because this -- you used the  
19 word public intellectual and, you know, in the history  
20 of our country, we don't have the same tradition as  
21 they do, I think, in the United States of the public  
22 intellectual. The public intellectual goes beyond  
23 journalism, where I practice sometime, and is an  
24 activist as well and puts himself or herself on the  
25 table of politics. And Gore Vidal is a public

1 intellectual, who -- hi, again. We had dinner last  
2 night, so we were ...

3 MR. VIDAL: I remember.

4 MR. THORSELL: Yes. You remember. I'm  
5 surprised you remember, because you were on your  
6 second cognac around midnight there and I thought,  
7 "I'd better go home here."

8 We had a great dinner last night and I really  
9 think it's important in societies to have this  
10 tradition of argument and discussion, whether it's  
11 about politics or social mores or architecture even,  
12 to have a public environment of discussion. So it's  
13 wonderful to have you here.

14 Now, I'm not going to go back in history  
15 because you know who Gore Vidal is and we've heard  
16 this wonderful reference to the past. I would like to  
17 know more. I think our gang here -- I described them  
18 a bit to you last night -- want to live in the present  
19 and want to know what you think and what we all think  
20 about where the world is going.

21 So I'm going to start with the very last page  
22 of your second memoir -- maybe it's the second or the  
23 third -- and I just want to read the last page,  
24 because this is a disturbing page and it's about now.  
25 It is not about the past. Let's look into the future.

1 Chapter 56, it's called:

2 "Professor Marcy Frank has flattered me  
3 by a comparison to Pope. So in ending let me  
4 quote the last lines of the Dunciad, lines  
5 that I learned voluntarily as a schoolboy:

6 'Nor public Flame, nor private, dares to  
7 shine;

8 Nor human Spark is left, nor Glimpse  
9 divine!

10 Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restor'd;  
11 Light dies before thy uncreating word;  
12 Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain  
13 fall;

14 And Universal Darkness buries all.'" "

15 Back to Gore Vidal, at the end, the last three  
16 lines of his book:

17 "In 1943, when I recited this to a  
18 classmate at the Phillips Exeter Academy, he  
19 was bewildered. 'Why did you learn that?' he  
20 asked. 'Because,' I said, 'it's bound to be  
21 apt one of these days,' and so it is today,  
22 January the 1st, 2006."

23 It's a highly dark and pessimistic sense of  
24 where we are. Do you really believe that?

25 MR. VIDAL: If I said it, of course I do.

1                   Anyway, I was told that I'd have the riser  
2                   tonight and I said, "What is the riser?" It's this  
3                   little stage here, which is -- gets me up. I have a  
4                   titanium knee. And as I was being elevated, I felt  
5                   like Conrad Black who a grateful monarch had  
6                   translated to the House of Lords for his probity, for  
7                   his extraordinary insight into world affairs, not to  
8                   mention the life of Franklin Roosevelt which he had  
9                   the nerve to pretend to write.

10                   So I had a Blackian moment, as I was being  
11                   raised above my humble station, translated to the  
12                   Lords. I love that case. I can't get enough of it.  
13                   During the '50s and '60s, Madam Black, now the Duchess  
14                   of Hotsfur or whatever she's called, had a column up  
15                   here and every time she was getting her column ready  
16                   -- I had never met her, I knew nothing about her. She  
17                   was called Amiel something or other. And this woman  
18                   would be writing about how much she hated Gore Vidal,  
19                   who lived, you know, in the great republic to the  
20                   south. I had nothing to do with the rest of the  
21                   column, where she was smirking around rich Canadians.

22                   So I never knew why I was in there for a  
23                   special mention, but it was very unpleasant. "Nasty  
24                   piece of work," I thought, and she has gone to her  
25                   reward. No more Buck House for her. So I've already

1           gone into your class structure, you know, at the  
2           practically top. But it was weird to be regularly  
3           attacked by a columnist in another country who has  
4           nothing to do with you and you have nothing to do with  
5           that country or with her. I thought, "This is a  
6           madwoman of some kind." But she married well.  
7           Anyway, (Mr. Vidal spoke Italian at this point).

8                         Do I think Alexander Pope is appropriate for  
9           today? Of course I do. This is an episode out of the  
10          Dunciad, the arrival on Parnassus of the Lord Black.  
11          I read that.

12                        In Hong Kong, I suddenly --I don't know what  
13          happened, but I had to read something. I ended up  
14          reading a book about Mr. and Mrs. Black. The pure  
15          treachery with which they did everything was, you  
16          know, kind of admirable. I mean, they were pure and I  
17          thought, "Kindly little Canada up here," you know, the  
18          nanny nation, as we always think of it down below,  
19          "has produced two such rogues?" I was just thrilled,  
20          really thrilled. It got me through a sleepless night  
21          in Hong Kong, I can tell you that.

22                        So where were we? In the present? I can't  
23          wait for the trial.

24                        MR. THORSELL: We were somewhere where we  
25          shouldn't have been. This is much better, though.

1                   Well, we were about this -- what I picked up  
2                   last night, your sense of where we are in the United  
3                   States. You saying to us in this book, and last  
4                   night, the republic is over. The empire is down. The  
5                   republic is dead. Corruption is in and it's hopeless.  
6                   Are you really ---

7                   MR. VIDAL: I didn't phrase it like that.

8                   MR. THORSELL: Better. More eloquently.

9                   MR. VIDAL: Well, more precisely, yes. You  
10                  were using generalities and I was being specific.

11                  MR. THORSELL: Right.

12                  MR. VIDAL: And specificity is the name of the  
13                  game.

14                  MR. THORSELL: So would you correct my  
15                  paraphrase? Correct my paraphrase.

16                  MR. VIDAL: You have to pay for that, you  
17                  know. I'm a professional critic, you know. I give  
18                  lessons and I'll take you in any day.

19                  MR. THORSELL: Well, because pessimism is very  
20                  unfashionable in a way. I mean, everybody always has  
21                  a little bit of hope. But what you've been saying  
22                  seems to be almost hopeless. I mean, you've been so  
23                  ---

24                  MR. VIDAL: Well, what I was confronted with  
25                  is almost hopeless, so what am I to do but acknowledge

1           it? Down there in Dixie, below the northern border,  
2           which we've got to defend. My God, I mean, our  
3           enemies are so many now. I understand Albania has  
4           turned on us yet again. We'll go in and, you know,  
5           we'll take them out. I mean, we can do that with one  
6           nuclear weapon but there may be other Albanians  
7           lurking in our cities with terror instruments in their  
8           hands.

9                         Why do they want to remove us from this vale  
10           of tears? They hate us. Why do they hate us? Well,  
11           we're so fat and we're so pink and they just don't  
12           like anything about us.

13                        And, you see, they're bad and we're good. I  
14           hope I can get this thought through, even up here.  
15           John Hay, who was Abraham Lincoln's private secretary  
16           and later became Secretary of State under President  
17           Theodore Roosevelt -- as Secretary of State, I had to  
18           go through -- one time I went through, had to go  
19           through all of his private correspondence.  
20           Practically every letter the Secretary of State was  
21           writing, "I understand that there are problems with  
22           the -- Our Lady of the Snows." This is how he  
23           referred to Canada. Apparently, you were always  
24           bitching about something to the United States and the  
25           Secretary of State had to answer the mail.

1                   So he was saying, you know, "What on earth is  
2 -- what border is this they're talking about? I  
3 didn't know we had a border there," you know, and he  
4 was very upset. So you see, you have been a burden to  
5 us and we've invaded you three times.

6                   MR. THORSELL: As I said last night, we won.

7                   MR. VIDAL: I didn't question that. Let's say  
8 you didn't lose. No, we were -- you know, we were  
9 already brooding upon empire. It would look better on  
10 the map to have Canada. I mean, you know, we go along  
11 like this and there's a flat border and then suddenly,  
12 there's all that little stuff over there, you know,  
13 the Maritime provinces and an island or two. Why had  
14 we left that out?

15                   Thomas Jefferson was positive -- had he come  
16 back in a hundred years, he would have been disgusted.  
17 He said, "We will certainly have Canada by then," and  
18 then somebody said, "Oh. Mexico's bigger and more  
19 fun." He said, "Yeah, they may be more fun but Canada  
20 is more our kind of thing."

21                   MR. THORSELL: So this winter, in this group,  
22 we've been talking about Europe, a withered Europe.

23                   MR. VIDAL: Wither Europe.

24                   MR. THORSELL: We've talked about the cultural  
25 challenge to Europe from a boat clash of

1           civilizations. We've talked about the European  
2           division with the United States, exacerbated so much  
3           in the last couple of years, and we've talked a little  
4           bit about the rise of that other one, called Russia,  
5           and maybe the restoration of the classic balance of  
6           power in Europe.

7                         Thirty years you were European, I guess, or  
8           lived in Europe. Can you give us a sense of Europe,  
9           as almost an emigre back to North America?

10                        MR. VIDAL: Well, remember Europe does not  
11           need us. We need them. You can't get through the  
12           American skull at the moment, because we have a crazed  
13           little president who has managed to insult every  
14           single European power. I mean, when he started to  
15           attack France, not knowing, he said, "Well, what are  
16           you going to do about a country that has no word for  
17           entrepreneur? I'm a wartime president. I'm a wartime  
18           president."

19                        There is no war. Nobody will tell him that,  
20           because our press is totally corrupted and totally  
21           stupid. They won't tell him that you can't have a  
22           wartime president without a war. Now, he has done  
23           his best to start two and he has got his eye on a  
24           third one, and we have a dead Congress sitting there,  
25           "Well, minimum wage is still very important." Of

1 course, it's very important but to restrain a  
2 president gone berserk, if I were at all consulted  
3 about the next versions of the Constitution, and there  
4 will be more -- we'll restore slavery eventually and,  
5 you know, do other happy things. We have the problem  
6 of we have no recall. Even in California, we have a  
7 recall of governors that prove to be god awful.

8 A president who starts two wars without the  
9 permission of Congress, alienates the entire world,  
10 spends all of our money, kills some 4,000 Americans  
11 and who knows how many tens of thousands in the Middle  
12 East, a country with a real political basis -- by  
13 that, I mean a constitution and a parliament -- would  
14 have had him by now by the neck.

15 The United States? Well, they have no  
16 information down there. This is what I keep telling  
17 Europeans, who came to the conclusion when they  
18 watched the Middle East wars begin -- they said, "You  
19 know, how stupid are the Americans?" I said, "Well,  
20 we're not stupid at all. You know, we ended up with  
21 the world at one point. Not much stupidity went into  
22 that." I said, "You must remember, they are ignorant.  
23 They don't read. We have no public educational system  
24 for the average citizen, so he'll drift out of high  
25 school with the reading capacity of a child of five."

1                   This is not good for trade. I did my best to  
2 rectify relations between the great republic itself  
3 and those strange little countries that, you know,  
4 poor Bush doesn't know where they are or what they're  
5 doing. And I loved it, you know. He thought the  
6 French had just been kind of leaning on us all these  
7 years.

8                   I had to say to one of his colleagues on  
9 television -- I said, "You know, without the French at  
10 Yorktown, this would still be a British colony down  
11 here." "Oh, no." "Well," I said, "you know, you  
12 don't know where Yorktown is, why would you know where  
13 England was?"

14                   I have said before that one of the things that  
15 motivates me in life is stupidity excites me, and when  
16 I come home I am orgasmic. It is just -- everybody is  
17 so dumb. "If we don't fight them over there, we've  
18 got to fight them here." This little rat is looking  
19 around like this. He looks like he's drowning. How  
20 are they going to get here? Greyhound Bus? The  
21 amount of stupidity we allow to come out of the so-  
22 called mouths of our leadership is god awful.

23                   Now, enough of me. I want to hear about you  
24 in Canada.

25                   MR. THORSELL: Tell us a little bit about the

1 fabric of society in Europe, in which you have lived  
2 so long, and the fabric of society in North America.  
3 I mean, these are those kind of ineffable things about  
4 the way people are. What's the difference?

5 MR. VIDAL: Well, what is ineffable is  
6 inexpressible, so you give me a great task here.

7 I would say that the difference is that these  
8 are real countries over there. We're not. We're kind  
9 of an invention of PR. Nothing that is said is ever  
10 true that comes out of our government. Everybody in  
11 the country knows it, you know. The idea that we're  
12 dumb is ridiculous. We're very sharp about our own  
13 interests, as people find to their regret. When it  
14 comes to foreign affairs, we always act in bad faith,  
15 as people discover later, but we always have surprises  
16 for others.

17 There is a fabric of society, let's say, in a  
18 country like Italy. It's family-based. I'm not going  
19 to go into family values but it is helpful to know who  
20 you are. Everybody in America, every boy thinks he's  
21 a rock singer and every girl thinks she's Joni  
22 Mitchell or something. And there's an identity crisis  
23 going on all the time with Americans. They can't  
24 believe who they are, because they aren't better off  
25 than they think they ought to be. Well, I have that

1 feeling too. I'm a good American, but there we are.

2 So it's a country of disappointment. People  
3 have been led to believe by television advertising  
4 that things are going to be much better for them than  
5 they were indeed. Politicians do that in other  
6 countries, and they're well-placed on the bully pulpit  
7 to do it. We have nothing like that. Our main  
8 emotion is envy of those who won the lottery and we  
9 didn't.

10 And the second great is spite. Look at the  
11 way we have behaved. I just went down to Cuba for the  
12 first time a few months ago. The spite with which we  
13 have treated Castro, because he didn't collapse at the  
14 Bay of Pigs. The Kennedys were offended, "How dare  
15 they do this to us? We are the future. This is the  
16 new frontier. He should have collapsed." Well, he  
17 didn't collapse. He's still alive, after all of our  
18 attempts to, you know, dynamite his cigars.

19 I mean, this is a nasty environment that we  
20 grow up in and we're taught nasty things about the  
21 rest of the world. "Mr. Vidal, don't you have  
22 something good to say about your country?" Well,  
23 there are still voices out there who have not given  
24 up, so let us carry on.

25 MR. THORSELL: Is there a Europe? I mean,

1           this whole idea of Europe has got so diffused. I  
2           mean, the EU and now the EU gets bigger and so on. We  
3           talk about Europe as though there were a place or a  
4           society. We're not talking about foreign policy or  
5           anything, just as a -- is there a European  
6           civilization any more that can pick up if the United  
7           States falters?

8                         MR. VIDAL: Oh, sure there is and every bit of  
9           it is like my fellow illuminata here. It is the  
10          Europe of the la lumiere. And it is a great Europe  
11          since the Protestants appearance at the Renaissance.

12                        One other thing that we neglected to do, and  
13          we could have done in '45 when the mandate of heaven,  
14          as Confucius would have said, came to us after World  
15          War II, we had a chance to develop a civilization. We  
16          were number one in everything, really by accident.  
17          Ballet, something nobody had known about before.  
18          Literature, poetry particularly. Theatre. I mean, it  
19          was extraordinary.

20                        After the Depression, in which I grew up in  
21          Washington, and I spent three years in the Army in the  
22          Pacific and the Aleutian Islands, suddenly we all came  
23          back, filled with energy, ready to begin a life. And  
24          there it was, everything. The world was ours, and  
25          from Lenny Bernstein writing On the Town to -- it was

1 just a chorus of great talent released at last after  
2 depression and war and we blew it all because Harry  
3 Truman wanted to impress Stalin, so he drops the  
4 atomic bomb, forever darkening our reputation.

5 This is not generally known but every major  
6 military man in World War II, from Admiral Nimitz to  
7 General Eisenhower, begged Truman not to use the  
8 bombs. They said, "We'll be hated for all time. We  
9 have enough problems as it is with the world." He  
10 went right ahead and did it, because he wanted to  
11 scare Stalin. That's spite. God knows, it's  
12 stupidity which makes me very excited but ...

13 There is a Europe. The problem is where is  
14 America? We seem to be vanishing and that is, as  
15 somebody who contributes, he hopes, to the culture --  
16 I mean, I try to. I spent 30 years doing the history  
17 of the United States through a series of novels,  
18 through one family a bit like my own, and that's the  
19 way I educated myself. Since the schools are not  
20 going to educate anybody else that I can tell, unless  
21 you are from a rich family and you can send them, as I  
22 was sent, to Phillips Exeter Academy, which was not  
23 all that good. It was more indoctrination than it was  
24 education. But we were taught our place as the  
25 premiere empire of the world. We filled it.

1                   We had a lot of Theodore Roosevelt's rant  
2                   behind us and Franklin Roosevelt's meliorative  
3                   tentative attempts to give us a degree of socialism  
4                   which might make us as civilized as Canada.

5                   MR. THORSELL: My last question, before they  
6                   get to sort of engage with you, would be this. I  
7                   mean, it's probably a pretty self-centred thing, but  
8                   what's your sense of this country? Do you have a  
9                   sense? Does this country project any sense of itself  
10                  beyond the borders of itself, and do you have any  
11                  sense of this country or any sense of where it could  
12                  fit in the world?

13                  MR. VIDAL: Well, I just got here which means  
14                  I'm an authority, yes.

15                  MR. THORSELL: Sometimes that's true.

16                  MR. VIDAL: But seldom true. It's a good  
17                  model for us, particularly in medical care and every  
18                  now and then there are wistful looks at Our Lady of  
19                  the Snows up here, where you need not die of, you  
20                  know, whatever happens to be wrong with you at that  
21                  moment. You might be cured, looked after.

22                  No. I mean, the shadow of England is a dense  
23                  one. I had a letter -- a fan letter from a Canadian  
24                  lady. I had made a reference to the phantom Crown of  
25                  England and I was talking about the political

1 situation, you know. They have a parliament. They  
2 are a far more democratic country than the United  
3 States but, I said, you know, everywhere that phantom  
4 Crown has cast a shadow. She said, "What phantom  
5 Crown? Lillibet has more power. She drove that awful  
6 man you like, Whitlam, out of office in Australia."  
7 Well, she didn't but the Tories did.

8 And I thought, "Jesus Christ. What is going  
9 up here with Our Lady of Snows? They are still people  
10 who are awaiting for -- well, maybe they're waiting  
11 for Charles the III." I just stumbled into that one,  
12 having celebrated the return of Charles the II. So  
13 you have some good royalists up here.

14 MR. THORSELL: At this point, I think we'll  
15 throw you to the circus. Thank you very much.

16 MR. GRIFFITHS: Thank you, William and thank  
17 you, Gore. What we're going to do, again in Grano  
18 fashion, is take two or three questions and then you  
19 can choose what of that is of interest to you and  
20 answer it. I see a hand here. I'm going to go to  
21 Charley Bailey (ph.) and then I'm going to look for a  
22 question in the back room and then maybe even I'll  
23 stray into the room next door, just to make sure those  
24 folks are part of this. So Charley, go ahead.

25 CHARLEY BAILEY: In 1776, there were 3,000,000

1 Americans and you and I could come up with at least 20  
2 that we think would be excellent presidents and today  
3 there are a hundred times as many Americans and in the  
4 last election we had Bush and Kerry. Why are we not  
5 having more excellence emerge?

6 MR. GRIFFITHS: We're going to take a couple  
7 more questions just to make sure that we can get as  
8 many people in. Baljit (ph.)?

9 BALJIT: Yes. You were mentioning that it's  
10 the decline of the republic. At the same time now we  
11 see the rise of the Asian Tigers. How would Europe  
12 and the republic react to this?

13 MR. GRIFFITHS: Well, let's start with those  
14 two. So the decline of political leadership in  
15 America today and the rise of Asia and the East.

16 MR. VIDAL: Well, a few months ago I flew from  
17 L.A. to Shanghai, where I had never been before, and  
18 it was startling. L.A. is looking like a second-world  
19 city and it's sleazy, the public buildings,  
20 particularly the airport. And Homeland Security --  
21 imagine. I was born in the United States and I now  
22 live in a homeland. I thought we had defeated Hitler,  
23 you know, but apparently it was the other way around.  
24 I mean, if you can get the (Mr. Vidal spoke another  
25 language at this point) you certainly get it nowadays.

1           Shanghai was a revelation and the mood of it  
2           -- because I didn't know what to expect. I just heard  
3           there had been some building going on and the stock  
4           market was doing very well. And it was -- the mood  
5           was like New York City, like Manhattan in the late  
6           1940's, after the war had been won. The same energy,  
7           the same excitement is going on and wherever you go  
8           you see fantastically good architecture, whereas  
9           wherever you go in America you see pretty awful stuff  
10          unless some star architect has been at work.

11           And I thought really -- and I made a speech to  
12          a Chinese audience and I was laying it on a bit. And  
13          I said, "You know, I have spent a lot of time thinking  
14          about Confucius." I said, "You know, Confucius,  
15          somebody asked him what he would do should the mandate  
16          of heaven come to him, that is become emperor, because  
17          this was the period of the warring states on the  
18          mainland of China, and he said, 'Well,' he said, 'the  
19          first thing I would do, I would rectify the language.'  
20          He said, 'If the people do not understand what the  
21          emperor says and the emperor does not understand the  
22          people, there is no governance.'"

23           I said it was clear to me, having gone around  
24          for several days in Shanghai looking at everything --  
25          I said, "The mandate of heaven has come home. You got

1           it. We lost it, by default. We earned it fair and  
2           square through a bloody war, which is how it is  
3           usually done, and now it has passed back to you and I  
4           hope you will use it in the Confucian sense and not  
5           perhaps in another sense," my subtle reference to Mao  
6           Tse-tung.

7                         That was my feeling about China. It is the  
8           next place. If I were a young person who invested in  
9           things, I would certainly be investing there. And  
10          it's very exciting to see such an ancient society  
11          suddenly pulling itself -- we're falling apart -- it  
12          means that we have a chance to pull ourselves -- if they  
13          could do it, My God, after the Manchu Dynasty, they're  
14          pretty good. And the recuperative powers of the human  
15          race, I think, should never be under-estimated.

16                        What was the other one?

17                        MR. GRIFFITHS: Political leadership in the  
18          United States and why are we seeing the lack of, I  
19          guess, the titans of a bygone age?

20                        MR. VIDAL: Well, we misunderstood a lot of  
21          things after 1789, when the Constitution was created.  
22          First, the founding fathers did not want political  
23          parties. Factions, they called them. Adams,  
24          particularly, was venomous on the subject of factions.  
25          That's why Aaron Burr got so unpopular because he and

1           Thomas Jefferson put together a faction to make  
2           Jefferson president and also Aaron Burr vice-  
3           president.

4                         We had a total misunderstanding. A faction in  
5           parliament was just that. It was a group like the  
6           Whigs in England or the -- whatever it was, the  
7           equivalent at that time, or the Cavaliers or the  
8           Torys. You cannot have a true political party without  
9           a class basis, and if you don't understand that what  
10          you call it doesn't make any difference.

11                        After all, remember we started our road to  
12          empire with Abraham Lincoln and the civil war. What  
13          was Lincoln? He was a Whig. And what was the last  
14          Whig president? A very good one, called Martin Van  
15          Buren who is not known today at all because he didn't  
16          kill any people. So, you know, we have our  
17          disappointments along the way.

18                        So much for domestic affairs.

19                        MR. GRIFFITHS: Great. I'm going to go into  
20          this room here, just to make sure that these folks ...

21                        MR. VIDAL: Come back. Come back.

22                        MR. GRIFFITHS: I will. I will.

23                        MR. VIDAL: All right.

24                        MR. GRIFFITHS: Is there a question that we  
25          have in here? Come on. Surely -- here's one. Say

1 your name and your question.

2 MR. BARATZ (ph.): Victor Baratz and the  
3 question is what do you think about Russia right now  
4 and its position in the world geopolitical scene?

5 MR. VIDAL: Well, I'm forever pro Russian  
6 since we so demonized them during the period of  
7 Communism, rather unjustly. After all, they had a  
8 better educational system than we did which I -- every  
9 writer who went to Russia, the Soviet Union in those  
10 days, was beguiled at how civilized they were. Our  
11 six year-old, seven year-olds were reading, "Look at  
12 Jane. Look at John. Look at Jane and John run."  
13 That was what they were being fed.

14 The Russians were teaching them Chekhov  
15 stories. They were so far ahead of most of our  
16 college students that I thought, "This is -- I'm  
17 seeing civilization at work here." And the love that  
18 they had for their poets, not only the old ones like  
19 Pushkin, but I went out to dinner one night in Zofia,  
20 Bulgaria with Yevtushenko and we went to a restaurant  
21 up in the hills and there was a wedding party going on  
22 in a side room, rather like that one. And these boys  
23 and girls came out and, "Yevgeny, Yevgeny," and they  
24 saw him and they became just mad people. They pulled  
25 out a chair. They pulled out a table. They made him

1 stand on the chair and he recited his own poetry for  
2 the next hour. How they celebrated their marriage, I  
3 don't know.

4 So I'm a fan. Do I like everything Putin  
5 does? No, I don't. Do I like everything the United  
6 States does? No, I don't. But we don't understand  
7 them at all and we don't have the means of  
8 understanding.

9 Imagine a president who would never set foot  
10 in Europe, has never read a book and is just flabbing  
11 around trying to figure out where anything is. He  
12 humiliates us every time he opens his mouth in Europe,  
13 but we're the ones who are going to be bombed when he  
14 finally goes too far. He'll be hiding away, you know,  
15 reading about that goat down in Florida. We'll be  
16 taken out with Washington, D.C.

17 MR. GRIFFITHS: Great. I'm going to look for  
18 a couple more questions. I feel almost kind of duty-  
19 bound to call on Michael Adams, who is at the back of  
20 the room, author of a number of books about Canada,  
21 U.S. relations. Michael, let's bring a microphone  
22 back to you. I'm going to put you on the spot.

23 MICHAEL ADAMS: Is the United States of  
24 America a democracy?

25 MR. VIDAL: No. The United States is not a

1 democracy, nor was it ever intended to be. This is  
2 where the schools have got it all wrong and where the  
3 media, you know, daily gets it wrong.

4 The one thing they feared the most was  
5 tyranny, another King George the Third or a dictator,  
6 another Cromwell. Many of us are descended from  
7 Cromwell's men. That's how we became to be such  
8 vicious Protestants.

9 Well, if you want to see any of the founders,  
10 read the federalist papers. Any one of them looks  
11 like he's near apoplexy, he's about to have a stroke  
12 when he's talking about the people. They hate the  
13 people. They want the people out of government.  
14 Their idea of bad government is Pericles in Athens.  
15 And that's just, you know, forbidden country for our  
16 founders. They were Republicans and they wanted a  
17 republic based on Rome, secretly based on slavery and  
18 based on imperial progress elsewhere in the world.

19 So from the beginning we've been imperial.  
20 From the beginning, we've missed the whole point of  
21 the republican effort to create a republic in this  
22 brave new world. And I think we had a pretty good  
23 beginning. We were well served until Lincoln.

24 It's not his fault, but with Lincoln came new  
25 elements. The power of money. The power of sheer

1           greed and the power of military might. You know, the  
2           Bismarck, who had the best army in Europe or wanted to  
3           have, sent observers to our Civil War. He wanted to  
4           see what -- he knew we had created a war machine the  
5           world had never seen. Now, how this little agrarian  
6           republic pulled that off is the trick of the week.  
7           Bismarck used to say, "God looks after drunks, little  
8           children and the United States of America." For a  
9           long time, he did.

10                         MR. GRIFFITHS: I'm going to go to David.  
11           David, can we bring a microphone over.

12                         DAVID: To what extent can the United States  
13           be repaired when, mercifully, the Bush era comes to an  
14           end in 2008?

15                         MR. VIDAL: Are you optimistic that it will  
16           ever end? Once you get really bad government, it's  
17           hard to give it up. Too much money. Too many people  
18           are feeding at the trough. Watching that sort of  
19           peripheral debate they were having in Congress about  
20           pork earmarks legislation which would benefit even the  
21           worthy Congressman Murtha who got caught. It is so  
22           corrupted.

23                         Benjamin Franklin, no fool, when he was in  
24           Philadelphia went to the convention where the  
25           Constitution was put together. He didn't take part.

1 He was old. He was sick. He was very canny, very  
2 curious. As he was leaving the hall, an old lady  
3 friend said to him, "Well, Ben, what are you coming up  
4 with? What are you giving us?" And he said, "We're  
5 going to have a republic if we can keep it." And he  
6 sort of shook his head and went out of the building.

7 A couple of young turks followed him out. He  
8 was very unpopular with young folks. And they said,  
9 "Why are you so pessimistic? We've got a wonderful  
10 Constitution." He said, "Well, it is certainly not  
11 wonderful, but it will ensure us good governance for  
12 two or three years and we need that desperately right  
13 now." "So," he said, "I'm not going to challenge it.  
14 I'm not going to say what's wrong with it." The  
15 powers of the executive was one thing he didn't like.  
16 He said, "I'm not going to criticize it, so don't  
17 worry about me. I'll keep my mouth shut."

18 Then they asked him, "Well, what do you  
19 object?" And he said -- and he had been reading  
20 Aristotle too, "Every republic we know of in history  
21 has fallen apart, particularly ones with such neat  
22 constitutions and so forth. It will not last." "Why  
23 not?" He said, "In time, all of these republics fail  
24 ..."

25 MR. GRIFFITHS: Great. I see a couple more

1 questions at the back. Let's go to -- let's take both  
2 at the back. Thank you.

3 UNKNOWN: For a man who is interested in the  
4 role of powerful nations in the world, why have you  
5 lived so long in Italy? Is it a particular vantage  
6 point?

7 MR. VIDAL: Well, you know, Italy was once a  
8 powerful country. A lot of lessons you can pick up  
9 wandering around the Forum, which is how did they lose  
10 it all and nobody quite knows why Rome fell for the  
11 excellent reason Rome never fell. As soon as the  
12 Roman Empire was gone, we had the Turks. The Curia is  
13 what they call their senate house and the Curia, the  
14 actual Roman one, you can visit any time you're in  
15 Rome. Beautiful building, dating from about the fifth  
16 century.

17 The shadow of Rome is everywhere in the world.  
18 Authority, the ultimate word -- now it comes from  
19 Jesus, not from Caesar but it really came from  
20 neither. It came from an establishment that was  
21 Roman. I felt that if I didn't understand Rome, I'd  
22 never understand the United States.

23 MR. GRIFFITHS: Interesting answer. Mike  
24 Shore?

25 MIKE SHORE: I'd love to ask a non-political

1 question. Sorry, Rudyard. Mr. Vidal, of all your  
2 books, my favorite is Julian, which is certainly  
3 removed, temporally and geographically, from most  
4 other things that you've written and I would be very  
5 curious to know what inspired you to write it and to  
6 tackle those topics and what you learned from the  
7 process of creating that novel.

8 MR. VIDAL: Well, my grandfather invented  
9 Oklahoma and wit of that sort runs in our family. One  
10 hundred years ago he was elected their first senator,  
11 in 1907 and served until 1937.

12 I, like him, am a born-again atheist. We both  
13 loathe Christianity and very suspicious of monotheism  
14 in any of its forms. Well, I thought, before my  
15 suspicions which edged upon prejudice, I should better  
16 go back and explore it all so what better way than to  
17 examine the career of the Emperor Julian, who was the  
18 heir of Constantine, who had made Christianity the  
19 religion of the Roman Empire without really consulting  
20 much of anybody. He just thrust it upon them for  
21 political reasons.

22 Remember, when he beat Maxentius at the  
23 Milvian Bridge in Rome and he became the Lord of the  
24 East and the Lord of the West, he had no postal  
25 service. He had no tax collectors. All he had was

1 the organization of the church. He became a Jesus  
2 Christer and liked to call himself the 13th apostle  
3 and he was hell on earth, but that is how he governed.

4 So it was a political deal that got  
5 Christianity in numero uno place in Europe and  
6 eventually elsewhere. So why not tell the story of  
7 the Emperor Julian, who tried to restore some variety  
8 in religious matters to the Roman state? I found him  
9 a very attractive figure, a wonderful writer in Greek.  
10 Alas, I only took Latin but the English translations  
11 are very good.

12 And through examining his career, you  
13 understand the war between monotheism and polytheism  
14 and how much better polytheism is for the human soul  
15 and how much more freedom you have. There is no one  
16 father up there in heaven telling you what to do.  
17 There's just life on earth.

18 MR. GRIFFITHS: I think we will take one more  
19 question and that will be Terry Cochrane. Terry, I'll  
20 pass you a microphone.

21 TERRY COCHRANE: Thank you. Just getting back  
22 to the American situation and how to go about saving  
23 America from the problems that you see it mired in,  
24 would you see Al Gore as someone who could help turn  
25 the country around?

1 MR. VIDAL: Consanguinity requires that I do.

2 UNKNOWN: And would you accept the vice-  
3 presidential nod?

4 MR. VIDAL: Only if I were appointed before  
5 him, because we're now used to vice-presidents who  
6 govern and are in charge of torture. We've got to  
7 honour the memory of Cheney.

8 MR. GRIFFITHS: I want to thank William,  
9 first, for the conversation. I want to thank Gore for  
10 the conversation and the questions and I want to thank  
11 the questioners for their contribution to this  
12 dialogue. So please, an appreciation for Gore Vidal.

13 Now, you will each get the opportunity to lay  
14 your hands on a copy of his latest book, Point to  
15 Point Navigation, courtesy of Bennett Jones. I also  
16 want to thank our friends here at the Toronto Star,  
17 Jagoda Pike, Bob Pritchard. Look in your Toronto Star  
18 tomorrow for a great interview with Gore.

19 And, finally, I want to thank Tridel. You're  
20 going to get a bottle of wine to take home with this  
21 book, courtesy of Tridel and Vinello -- the Spinelli  
22 family of wines, who has been sponsoring us throughout  
23 this season and Vince, who is here, with this terrific  
24 product.

25 And finally, I'd like to invite Roberto, who

1 has really been at the heart of the success of this  
2 project for the last three years, a terrific  
3 restaurateur, a terrific dramateur, to thank Mr.  
4 Vidal.

5 MR. MARTELLA: Thank you, Rudyard. Only three  
6 years. Are you getting rid of me now -- I think,  
7 Gore, you'll agree that Italy is still a strong  
8 country, still an important country at least where its  
9 humanism, its pasta and its olive oil is concerned.

10 This olive oil comes neither from your  
11 ancestral home region of Friuli nor from Ravello, but  
12 it's from Tuscany from the Frescobaldi family. We had  
13 Eric Idle (ph.) here last evening and you were much  
14 funnier, actually. But a humour, I would think ---

15 MR. VIDAL: I'll remind him.

16 MR. MARTELLA: A humour tempered with a great  
17 sense of (Mr. Martella spoke Italian at this point),  
18 as the Italian would say, doing something with a  
19 seeming insouciance, obviously a lifetime of study and  
20 intelligent observances. (Mr. Martella spoke Italian  
21 at this point.)

22 MR. VIDAL: (Mr. Vidal spoke Italian at this  
23 point) is a Communist comment. Somebody asked  
24 Mussolini and said, "Duce, is it difficult to govern  
25 the Italians? They're so energetic. They're so

1 individualistic, egotistical. They are -- how do you  
2 govern the Italians?" (Mr. Vidal spoke Italian at  
3 this point.) "It's useless."

4 MR. MARTELLA: It's easy to govern the  
5 Italians, but useless. Grazie, Maestro Vidal.

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