

Casual

OL' WHITE HAIR

A former colleague dropped into my Washington office to talk shop, which in our case is the exciting subject of regulatory policy. He had just come back from a visit to New York, and reported that the city is now so clean, so crime-free, so graffiti-free, its residents so full of "Hello, can I help you?" that he felt he was in Orlando—the antiseptic suburb of Disney World. Cruel.

But true enough. Perhaps Rudy Giuliani's legacy is a city that is more "livable" by the standards of the gentrifiers who have descended on it, the diners on the output of the latest hot chef. But everything has a cost, and New York City has paid a price for becoming a town in which the bland lead the bland.

It is no longer the town whose streets Frank Sinatra once prowled at night after a liquid dinner at Jilly's. Now we have Michael Feinstein, an adequate singer, but not exactly an eccentric. We expatriates who have yet to exercise the right of return can remember when Casey Stengel was presiding over the woe-begone Mets; Billy Martin was brawling with the Yankees' boss while "The Bronx Is Burning"; and Clyde Frazier was dazzling Knicks fans with hands so quick they could swipe the hubcaps off a moving car. Now we have the dull but possibly competent Willie Randolph, unable to compensate for the Mets' bumbling with Stengelese, as Casey's mangling of the language came to be known; a colorless Yankee squad that is no fun and barely able to win as many games as it loses; and Stephon Marbury, selling cheap sneakers and proclaiming himself the second coming of Clyde, which he certainly is not.

Nor is the Big Apple now anything like the place where Ed Koch and Bess Myerson once affected a pre-nuptial affair, and Koch would ask all and sundry "How'm I doing?" while Governor Hugh Carey downed booze with Reggie Jackson at McMullen's and had his then-main squeeze, Dinah Shore, sing "Happy Birthday" to his friends at "21" (on my tab). Now we have Michael Bloomberg, a relatively



colorless bureaucrat, stylish in his tuxedo when out on the town at some tame charity affair, but not known for any particular eccentricity, and have had George Pataki, not known for much of anything.

The death of grit, of eccentricity, of individuality, is not only a New York City phenomenon. Which brings me to John McCain. The senator's problem is not his age—witness the schedule he keeps and the recent clean bill of health from his doctors. It is that he is an anachronism, brought to political maturity when emollience was not

yet a virtue. On the national level Lyndon Johnson was using a combination of profanity and muscle to have his way in the Senate, Jack Kennedy was proving his manhood with a bevy of Peter Lawford's recruits (and failing to do so with Nikita Khrushchev at a no-preconditions summit), Bill Clinton was working on a dictionary with a precise definition of the word "is." Now we have Harry Reid and George W. Bush, both with personal lives beyond reproach but, er, dull—neither will ever make it onto Page 6 of the *New York Post*.

The point of all of this is not to take you on a nostalgia trip, although such looks-back are good and harmless fun. Rather, it is to suggest that

the main reason McCain looks older than Barack Obama has nothing to do with his white hair. It is that Obama is a modern, gentrifying, kids-at-ballet-class product of polling and focus groups. Become a community organizer and join a large black church if that is what advisers say is the way to move ahead; oppose free trade when polls show it is unpopular; find an uncle who liberated Auschwitz when you need Jewish votes. Expedience and other-directedness might not be all, but they are not to be ignored by a modern politician. That's just the way it is these days. Except for McCain, who charmingly believes there is a place at the summit of political life for an old-fashioned eccentric—maverick is the word of choice.

McCain might not have literally hung out with Sinatra, whose Palm Beach retreat was no "ranch." But the record shows he took the blows, faced it all, and stood tall, as Sinatra would say. He opposes corn-to-ethanol subsidies in Iowa, protectionism in Midwest states hard hit by foreign competition, and promises to continue waging a highly unpopular war until we win. He continues to do it his way.

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