

*Richard Cohen*

# Beaten, but Not a Loser

The way I met Al Gore was through the late Bob Squier. Squier was a political consultant by trade but a man of many parts. At his Virginia farm, he was a vintner. In political off-years, he made literary film biographies. He liked books, fine wine and a good political fight, but he loved—and that's the word—Al Gore.

Several times with me he spoke in those terms. Once, with Gore nearby, he told me he would have quit political consulting entirely if it were not "for him." He nodded in Gore's direction. Once, I think, he used the word love, but I can't be totally sure. I am sure, though, that's how he felt.

I confess I never felt that way, but I placed Squier's feelings in about the same place I put the strong but incomprehensible religious beliefs of people I admire: I don't get it, but that doesn't mean I can't respect it.

I bring up Squier at this moment because it seems to me that just recently and far too late, many Americans started to see in Gore what he did. It's not just that the vice president won the popular vote, which he did, and might have won the electoral college as well if the Supreme Court had not turned obstructionist. It's rather that for the past month, he has conducted himself with dignity, a sense of purpose and, naively as it turned out, maintained a profound and quasi-religious belief that his America would treat him fairly.

That did not happen. The Supreme Court's 5 to 4 decision, a muddled opinion that should silence critics of *Roe v. Wade*, reeked of arbitrariness. First the court ordered Florida to suspend the just-resumed recount and then it said it was too late to resume the counting. The GOP, the party of court-bashing and localism, snatched the presidency via the court's telling the locals they were yokels.

Gore could not envision such an outcome. This is what he told people who called him as the Supreme Court was deliberating. It seemed to him so basic that the candidate with the most votes wins that he fastened on a kind of American mythology and made himself the hero who would win in the end. "I called him because I felt down," one of his friends told me. "He cheered me up."

I have spent much of my life in the company of politicians. In most regards, I cannot generalize about them. But every single one wins or loses on Election Day. Most of us tend to play it safe. We eschew the big win if, by chancing it, we risk the big loss.

Not politicians. Not, particularly, Al Gore. I say "particularly" because while Gore was born to his old man's profession, he lacked a certain zest for it. He is not a natural—and he knows it. This is why he listened to those who told him how to dress, how to speak—how to be the person he wasn't. To put yourself always in the line of fire—insults, criticism—takes a toll.

Gore responded, I believe, by coiling himself in a ball—by distancing himself from the public. But politicians must like people and seek adoration. Gore does not need to be loved. He needs only not to be hurt—to be left alone, if truth be told, so he can work on his ideas, books, programs. He would make an absolutely wonderful monarch. He would not, I think, make such a wonderful president.

But I salute him for the very good fight he put up—for not being the candidate of ugly GOP rhetoric, the guy who would steal the election and lie about anything. He was never such a person, and next time around, if that is to happen, he has the credentials to prove it.

All during the campaign, I wondered about Al Gore. I recognized that his occasional mistakes or exaggerations were inflated to lies of Clintonian (or Nixonian) proportions, but still they bothered me. I searched in vain for the man Bob Squier had seen, wondering whether I simply could not see him or if he no longer existed. Now, in defeat, Gore has emerged a winner—solid, persistent, gracious and until the very end undaunted. He may have gotten beat, but he sure didn't lose.