THE TALK OF THE TOWN

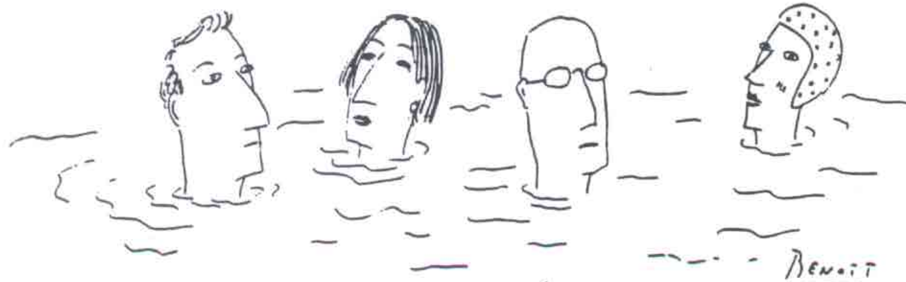
OLD TERRORIST

A FEW days before President Clinton became the focus of all attention on Martha's Vineyard, Virginia Foster Durr, the white dowager of the civil-rights movement, enjoyed a moment in the spotlight. It was her ninetieth birthday, and a large party was thrown for her at the summer home of her daughter Lucy and her son-in-law, Sheldon Hackney, the President's recently confirmed choice to head the National Endowment for the Humanities and, the other week, one of Mr. Clinton's golfing partners on the island. Sitting in a big wicker chair on the porch, while some four hundred people milled around on the lawn, Mrs. Durr heard herself praised by, among others, William Styron, Art Buchwald, C. Vann Woodward, and Lady Bird Johnson, in hyperbolic terms usually reserved for the deceased. Mr. Clinton sent a birthday note, and Mr. Hackney read aloud a separate, more lengthy birthday greeting from Hillary Rodham Clinton. The guests ate hot dogs and hamburgers, said more nice things about Mrs. Durr, and reminisced about what Mrs. Johnson called "a yeasty, we-can-do period in American history." Mr. Styron addressed the guests as "fellow cult members." In the course of the afternoon, Mrs. Durr, white-haired and wearing a pink sweater, a pink kerchief, and a pink skirt, accepted handshakes from nearly all the guests, often repeating, "We've got to come together or this country's going to hell."

Mrs. Durr commands such generous praise not just for what she helped accomplish but for what she gave up in doing so. She was born into a wealthy upper-class family in Birmingham, Alabama. Her grandfather had been a slaveowner, and Miss Virginia Foster, growing up in a household with several black servants, didn't question the system of racial oppression that provided them. "I was a racist, plain and simple," Mrs. Durr reflected at her birthday party, and she recalled that in 1922, on the first night of her sophomore year at Wellesley, she had objected to being seated in the dining hall at the same table as a black student. Her housemistress gave her a choice: sit where she was told or return to Alabama. "It was the first time anyone had ever questioned my beliefs," Mrs. Durr said. (In her autobiography, "Outside the Magic Circle," she called this incident "the origin of a doubt," because "it hurt my faith, my solid conviction of what I had been raised to believe.")

Her full conversion, however, came later, during the Depression, when her husband, the lawyer Clifford Durr, was involved, in Washington, with the government's efforts to help rescue failed American banks. Through his work, she became an enthusiastic supporter of the New Deal, and she committed herself to liberal causes by joining the Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee. In 1948, she abandoned the Democratic Party to support Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party candidate, in the Presidential election. Then, in 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, Mrs. Durr and her husband helped take the case to the Supreme Court, where a young black lawyer named Fred Gray successfully used it to argue that the city's segregationist laws were unconstitutional.

Speaking at the birthday party, Mr. Gray said, "Clifford Durr taught me how to practice law and advised me on all of those cases, and the person who advised Clifford Durr was Virginia." He presented Mrs. Durr, who remained seated throughout the afternoon, with a small wooden plaque that read "Sit Long, Talk Much." Art Buchwald attributed Mrs. Durr's longevity to the fact that "Virginia has never forgotten a grudge—she has an enemies list going back to Teddy Roosevelt." He suggested that her friends cheer "the scoundrels that kept her young and fit," explaining, "Every time she thinks of retiring from



BENOÎT VAN INNIS

the fray, the name of one of them pops up, and she's ready to fight another day." So the party guests, who included veterans of the civil-rights movement, yellow-dog Southern Democrats, labor organizers, and Clinton Administration appointees, applauded loudly as Mr. Buchwald read the following names: Harry Truman, J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon, Arthur Schlesinger, George Will, Jim Eastland, McGeorge and William Bundy, Roger Baldwin, and Margaret Thatcher. Mrs. Durr scowled as each name was read. "I don't have time to tell you what their crimes were," Mr. Buchwald said, "but I'm certain Virginia will tell you if you just ask her."

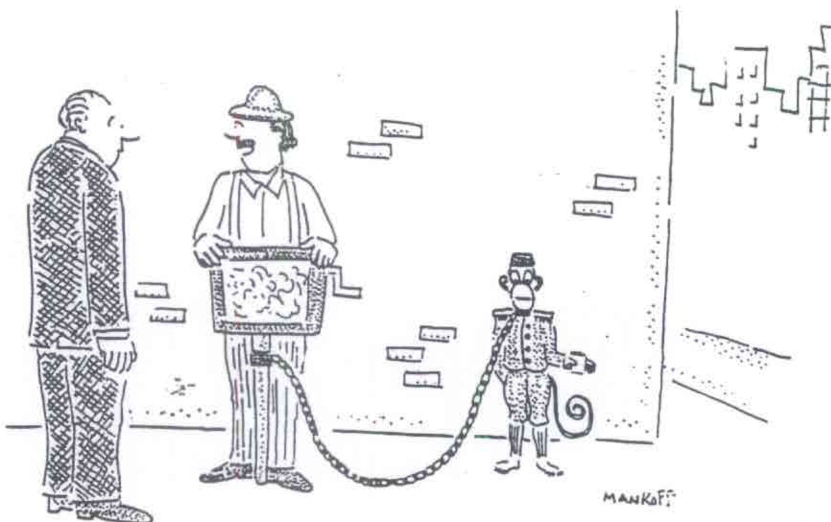
Later in the afternoon, as guests sipped lemonade and ate birthday cake, federal judge Myron Thompson told them how a friend had once characterized Mrs. Durr: "She said, 'Let me tell you about Virginia—she's an absolute bitching terror, but she's our kind of terror.'" Then he wished Mrs. Durr a happy ninetieth birthday with the salutation "Long live terror!"

TOASTMASTER

GOVERNOR CUOMO telephoned the other day sounding almost neighborly. He was in his office, in the Governor's Mansion in Albany, winding up the week. His staff had called earlier with the happy news that Toastmasters International had voted him the outstanding government speaker for 1993. (General H. Norman Schwarzkopf won last year.) When the Governor called, he said he hadn't known much about Toastmasters International—a support group for public speakers, based in Mission Viejo, California—before winning the award, but he sounded pleased, and remarked that giving speeches was never easy. "You still hope it rains," he said. "You hope they'll call up and say they have to cancel, the rabbi's sick."

The Governor talked on, without any prompting, and before long his voice took on a familiar lift and roll. He let drop the fact that a book of his speeches was being published soon. "I've given keynote addresses, I've given Convention addresses, I've talked in huge lecture halls, I've had debates before the Keidanren, in Tokyo—I've had all kinds of situations," he noted, and said that he still wrote his own big speeches but that what he liked best was to speak without any prepared text. "When you're speaking extemporaneously, when you're swimming with the waves and taking the waves, that's the best way to do it."

Governor Cuomo said he didn't always know whether he had given a good speech, but when he'd given a bad speech he usually knew it. "Oh, yeah, stinkers," he said, reflectively. "They're easy to produce." He gives so many speeches these days that sometimes they blur in his mind, but he did say that there was one day recently when he'd given six. He didn't have any tangible rhetorical tips, either, he said. He didn't stand on the dais any particular way; he didn't gargle before going on. "Believe what you say. Don't say it unless you believe it" is his main bit of advice. That was what made Ronald Reagan so effective, he pointed out. "He spoke with a command, an ease, and an assurance that bespoke sincerity." As for historical favorites, "you can say Churchill, you can say Demosthenes, you can say Cicero, but the best is Lincoln."



"Hey, believe me, I tried, but I couldn't find a qualified American who would do this work."

MUSIC UNDERGROUND

IT was like one of those Mickey Rooney–Judy Garland movies in which the kids finally get into the barn and get the show on. This one happened in a small town where the folks turned out in black tie and fancy silk, where they warmed themselves with champagne and caviar, and where the barn was in a forty-foot-deep hole that had been dug in a patch of meadowland eight thousand feet up in the Rockies. When the Joan and Irving Harris Concert Hall finally opened its doors, the week before last, in the glamorous wilds of Aspen, Colorado, everybody said the equivalent of "Gee whillikers!"

"This is the first concert hall of the twenty-first century!" declared one of the stars of the inaugural concert, the violinist Pinchas Zukerman, who had just led the Aspen Chamber Symphony and six teen-age soloists—all of them from the Aspen Music School and most of them girls of Asian descent, dressed in variations of cherry-blossom pink—in four violin concertos by Vivaldi.

"It's a miracle!" said Joan Harris, a Chicago arts activist, who two years ago, with her philanthropist husband, Irving Harris, contributed a million dollars to kick off a campaign for seven million dollars to build the hall. "I never imagined this when I first came to Aspen, in 1968, to get my kids out of Chicago, because I was nervous about violence at the Democratic Convention. I fell in love with the place and its summer music festival, and we've been coming back ever since. Our primary aim was to add to the festival's rehearsal capacity. The old music tent was being used until two and three in the morning, way past