

In the air

Doggone!

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Professor Hugo Baskerville-Barking, author of the bestseller „Presidents' Dogs and US Politics“, was recently stuck overnight in Luxembourg, when fog forced his plane to land here. „kulturrissimo“ took advantage of this misfortune to ask him some questions.

kulturrissimo: First of all, Professor, thank you for agreeing to talk to us.

Prof. Hugo Baskerville-Barking: „Well, it was you or sitting alone in my hotel room.“

„k“: Yes, well. Professor, your latest book „Presidents' Dogs and US Politics“ leapt up into the American best-seller list at number 5. Were you surprised by this sudden success?

H.B.B.: „Course not! Bloody brilliant book. Lot of work, surfing the web, I mean, delving into dusty archives all over America. Listen, this dump must have a bar. Can't we do the interview there?“

„k“: (A few minutes later) But how did you come to write a book about US dogs? You're a classicist, your last book was „Narrative Perspective in Homer's Odyssey“, wasn't it?

H.B.B.: „Yes. But if you'd read the book, which of course you won't have done, because you people never prepare interviews properly, you'd know its thesis was that Odysseus' dog, Argos, dreamt the *Odyssey* while waiting for his master. So you see I was already into dogs. But to answer your question: it was because of Obama. I mean, there's this man. Just been elected President of the most powerful country in the world. The eyes of the entire planet are on him, on him depends the future of the Free World. He's got two ruinous wars on his hands, illegal prisons, global financial meltdown, domestic chaos. He has to find workable solutions to all these things fast - and avoid getting assassinated. And what's everyone worrying about? What kind of dog he should take with him into the White House.“ (Short bark of mirthless laughter)

„k“: Yes, I see what you mean.

H.B.B.: „You probably don't, but never mind. You'll recall the basic canine conundrum, as explained in his victory speech: He has promised his daughters a puppy and wants a rescue-dog - which would most likely mean a mongrel. But it has to be a hypoallergenic dog, which probably means a thoroughbred. Waiter! Same again?“

„k“: Not for me, thanks. But tell me, why is so important to Americans?

H.B.B.: „*Per se*, pets are good, but you have to be careful. A pet is a statement about yourself, which the average American in the street - and heaven knows, with the house-market crisis enough of them are! - can identify with or not. Cats are too independent, unreliable, so they're obviously out. Reptiles are cold-blooded, dangerous. Dogs are good, but not just any dog. A pit-bull - with or without lipstick, ha-ha! - is bad news, whereas a working-dog projects strength, a sense of duty. Let's take a look at past presidents' First Pets.“

„k“: What, right back to George Washington? (Looks at watch)

H.B.B.: „Seven hunting dogs, donkey and horse - good reliable choice for the founding president. But no, take Roosevelt. Also seven working dogs: hero, saved the Free World. Truman, two okay dogs but a *boa constrictor*! Responsible for Hiroshima. Kennedy now: nine dogs of the right stuff, four horses, two hamsters, two parakeets, canary called Robin, rabbit, okay so far ... but a cat. Fatal error. Assassinated.“

„k“: Surely not because of the cat ...

H.B.B.: „Why then?“

„k“: Oh, economic interests, stuff ...

H.B.B.: „Nah, conspiracy theory! It was the cat. Take Rutherford B. Hayes, for example. Seven dogs, OK, but *two cats*, Piccolomini and Miss Pussy. Only president whose election had to be decided by a congressional commission. *And* there was an outbreak of yellow fever while he was in office. And what about Andrew Johnson!“

„k“: What about him? (yawns)

H.B.B.: „Impeached. *No animals at all!* Fed white mice he found in his bedroom.“

„k“: Only the white ones?

H.B.B.: „Well, this was the 1860s!“

„k“: Clinton was impeached too (yawns)

H.B.B.: „Case in point. He had ... *a cat*, Socks! But then he got himself a Labrador and things immediately went better. Got acquitted, served two full terms and left office with the highest approval rating of any president since the war!“

„k“: There were other reasons ...

H.B.B.: (*Ignores this*) „And look at Car-



An Afghan called Osama

ter. *Cat*: Misty Malarky Yin Yang. No wonder the Iranian hostages were only released after he left office! You see what's at stake!“

„k“: What about Reagan?

H.B.B.: „Oh, politically correct dogs and horses.“

„k“: Gerald Ford?

H.B.B.: „Two dogs ... but also a Siamese cat. Only president never to win a national election. Took over from Tricky Dicky - an exception to the rule, by the way: Watergate, forced to resign. And *four unexceptionable dogs*. Can't understand it, really.“

„k“: Nixon was a crook, it's nothing to do with pets. Talking about crooks, what about George W.?

H.B.B.: „Had a puppy from Millie, his Dad's dog. Also had a cow called Ofelia - spelled with an 'f', can you believe it? But ... also a cat, India 'Willie'. No wonder he's been such a disaster.“

„k“: (Yawns, looks at watch) Well, Obama's not thinking of getting a cat, so that's all right. Anyway, Professor, let's stop this mindless recitation of boring facts and get back to the point: What should Obama do?

H.B.B.: „Get himself an Afghan Hound, call it Osama and to hell with the lot of them! Ha-ha-ha!“

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