

THE CHAIRMEN OF THE BORED

The Seinfeld-Sinatra Axis

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America had a chance to size itself up last week. Seinfeld and Sinatra both went out on top, and we took the measure of our heroes. Shrinkage.

For those of you who remained unmoved by Sinatra's skill and craft, I can only sympathize. For those who remained impervious to the "last-Seinfeld" hype and neither watched nor cared, I can summarize.

In the final episode of "Seinfeld," the show convicted its four principals of lacking principles. Before a jury of their peers, amassing the evidence of nine years of video clips (eat your heart out, Rodney King) the prosecution presented a parade of the stars of those clips, each more eager than the other to testify to the callow, shallow, callous behavior of the New York Four. The jury convicted its peers -- us.

"Seinfeld" has been one of the most successful shows television has ever presented, at least in the Age of Hype, and so it most likely reflect the values of its audience. If the show investigates and cross-examines itself, and finds itself guilty of criminal indifference to the plight of others, what does that make us? In the terms of the show itself, we're a new category -- "guilty bystanders", with Jerry as Chairman of the Bored.

And Frank as Chairman of the Board. New York, New York. Sinatra was the greatest singer of popular ballads who ever lived. That's widely acknowledged in the eulogies, but it's not their focus.

Their focus is on his "full life" -- multiple marriages and divorces and women ("His zipper will be in the Smithsonian," said an admiring Dean Martin); establishing Las Vegas as the place to booze, smoke, gamble and, should that not be adequate stimulation, to be titillated by the Rat Pack; and his friendships with mobsters, athletes, Kennedy's mistress, and Presidents. Presidents from FDR to Reagan, for both of whom he campaigned actively.

But wait, Reagan and FDR hardly represent the same values. Right. Frank, in one of his legendary fits of pique, got mad at JFK, yadda yadda yadda, abandoned the Democrats and became a Republican. We're talking deeply held values here -- not that there's anything wrong with that.

But Sinatra was just an entertainer, not to be expected to be a pillar of political philosophy like Presidents are. Right. And so every President, before and after The Conversion, has welcomed the Chairman of the Board to his side (literally and politically), culminating in Clinton's fulminating that he finally had the opportunity "...to appreciate on a personal level

what hundreds of millions of people around the world, including me, appreciated from afar."

Frank was the greatest ballad singer ever. We consider that to be adequate justification for a life of dissolution and intemperance. It has been an adequate credential for the White House for half a century, long before the recent run of Lincoln Bedroom pay-per-view slumber parties. "Say what you will about his personal life..." is the way it is typically introduced, the same phrase that precedes statements about the skills of luminaries such as Dennis Rodman, Pete Rose and O.J. Afterwards, we tell our children not to do what they do.

Francis Albert Sinatra, FDR Democrat, arranged for mob funds to assist the Kennedy campaign. Safely elected, JFK distanced himself from FAS after RFK showed him his FBI file. As easy as stealing a marble rye from a little old lady, we got Frank Sinatra, Palm Springs Republican. Total change in philosophy, no change in status. George Costanza's dream come true. Frank was found sponge-worthy by everyone who counted and most of us as well, no matter what he believed or how he behaved. I mean, what are we, Just-Desserts Nazis?

I spoke of this to a friend who is less inclined than I to socio-philosophical abstractions. She said, "The appeal of Seinfeld was simple -- those four got to do and say what all of us would like to." As did Frank, for an earlier generation. Generations of difference are generations of indifference. World War II, the Kennedy-Nixon debates, yadda-yadda-yadda, Jerry is Master of Our Domain.