

LETTER

FROM

E P H E S U S

Quayle Soup

Diana Simmonds

What happens if you cross a chicken with a hawk? You get a US vice-president.

Yet J. Danforth Quayle is not only the Veep, but also a fully paid-up member of the Klutz Klub, the Schlemiel Society, the Goony Bird Brigade and ... he is the man who is only a heartbeat away from control of our destiny. Just recall that twinkly old sweetie, Secretary of State Schultz — the one who writes Australian foreign policy statements — if you doubt it. And what of his boss? President Bush — a hardy annual if ever there was one — began his reign in what must surely be a heartwarming sign of things to come. The *Canberra Times*' main headline for the day summed it up perfectly: Bush pledges kindness.

Get used to it, folks, there are lots more meaningless platitudes where that one came from. This is the man, don't forget, who, when boss of the CIA and faced by two pushy subordinates with opposing views, decided (if that is the right word) that the CIA should simply have two views on the subject — which possibly constitutes kindness, I suppose. Just imagine the scene. It's the Oval Office, just about coffee and cookies time.

Top Adviser: Mr. President, I think we should increase trade with Australia and give them lots of economic incentives and cultural exchanges to ensure tenure of our secret bases.

Other Top Adviser: Jeesuschrist Mr. President. That's crap. Tell those Ossie bastards their ass is grass and they can kiss goodbye to their fannies

if they even THINK about our goddam bases.

Mr. President: Yes, yes, I think we can probably accommodate these behaviour modes and proceed accordingly. It would be an act of kindness, don't you think?

In any event, the prospect is one of greyest mediocrity and an administration whose collective hypocrisy will leave a silvery and slimy trail around the world which will accelerate the greenhouse effect by decades.

Why Michael Dukakis didn't mention the words "heroin" and "Noriega" during the campaign will remain a mystery forever. He might not have wanted to go the dirty route — commendable but stupid, given the nature of the race he was engaged in — but it was surely his public duty, and one he at least attempted to undertake as governor of Massachusetts, to protect the public from the murderous expansionism of the narcotics industry.

Why are Americans (the 426 who bothered to vote, that is) unmoved by President Bush's cosiness with an international drug dealer, never mind his other curious associations behind the Contragate? What goes on in their burger-brains is probably something only the CIA knows for sure, which stands President Bush in good stead.

Meanwhile, let's just try to avoid antagonising them: unlike his predecessor, the new boy is a waspish, snappy fellow, much given to making sneering pronouncements in a nasal, sharp-toothed tone of voice. He also shows alarming signs of not only being awake for a considerable part of the working day, but also of taking an active part in running the American empire. In any event, it bodes ill for Osstralia.

Evil Angels bodes deeply ill too. The film of the Azaria Chamberlain tragedy, scripted by Robert Caswell, with obligatory finishing touches from director Fred Schepisi, tells a chilling story. And it isn't necessarily the one known — supposedly — to millions either. It has been simplified considerably for the all-important US market, which is a pity, but it's still one of the "most powerful

collections of statements about a country and its people to make it to the popular cinema screen in years.

Underlying the main story of a young family who went on holiday and fell headlong into an unimaginable — and endless — nightmare are three strands of terrible indictment: of those who would reintroduce the death penalty, of the legal system, of the Australian media and, with it, of ordinary Australians.

As far as the law is concerned, posthumous pardons, or declarations of innocence, are as insultingly useless as they are intrinsically a part of inane and basically cruel justice systems.

The cruelty of the law is also closely related to the cruelty displayed by both the media and the general public in this case. From much that has been said and written and what is implicit in the film, it's clear that Lindy Chamberlain's crime was her failure to behave in a way recognisable and acceptable to a society and its reporters whose highest emotions and human aspirations are summed up by TV beer commercial jingles. Her husband, on the other hand, paid the price for painstaking honesty in a nation where the quality is on the endangered species list. Unlike the long-nose potoroo, however, nobody seems much fussed about its disappearance. In Michael Chamberlain's case, his unself-conscious integrity and sincerity were downright embarrassing — after all, who could even spell the words any more?

Everything in life — every experience, every day, every person — is supposed to be a lesson. If there is any point in our lives, we should gain something even from the worst adversity. From casual (TV) observation, it would seem that the Chamberlains have: they're demonstrably bigger, wiser and better people than they used to be. They're also sadder and no longer the open-faced optimists of eight years ago. As for those who would still condemn: the 426 burger-brains who voted in President Bush obviously aren't alone.