

[*A Matter of Opinion*, Victor S. Navasky, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 458 pages]

Works Without Faith Are Dead

By Chilton Williamson Jr.

VICTOR NAVASKY is perfectly clear about what *The Nation*, the magazine he has edited for nearly 30 years, is against: “injustice ... the despoliation of the world’s resources ... the arbitrary exercise of power ... prejudice and discrimination ... [the fate of] the dispossessed.” Having read his memoir, I am equally enlightened regarding what Mr. Navasky, personally, is for: the First Amendment, the Rosenbergs, the First Amendment, Alger Hiss, the ACLU (most of the time), the First Amendment, world organization, the First Amendment, the First Amendment...

And I can now assert with confidence what Navasky the man believes: principally, that the journal of opinion has at the heart of its mission the maintenance of “the discursive character of public communication” (Habermas’s phrase), and that its foremost responsibility is, quite simply, to tell the truth. A magazine editor and writer myself since the 1970s, I can only applaud these sentiments. As to what Victor Navasky believes in, however, I have no notion at all. This may be connected with the fact that Mr. Navasky is a man of the Left, and that the Left (so far as I can tell) doesn’t believe in anything, either, and never has.

By “belief in” I mean metaphysical belief, which for me, personally, denotes religious belief. I have read for years, and had it explained to me for almost as long, that the metaphysical world is not necessarily identical with the religious one. While I admit to being unable to conceive how this could possibly be so, I am supposing, for present purposes, that they are identical, if only so as not to seem to insist on creedal religion as the sole mode of transcendental under-

standing. Still, at the heart of the matter lies that thing called faith, which Mr. Navasky appears to lack at every level of his belief system, and of his being. Here is one of a number of examples of this, perhaps the most dramatic in his book.

While *The Nation*, as Navasky duly notes, has printed pieces over the years arguing both for and against the innocence of Alger Hiss, the magazine can fairly be said to be, overall, for Hiss. “For” in this context carries no very precise meaning, but then neither does Navasky’s “defense” of the man, with whom he had a slight acquaintance, in his memoir. Navasky concedes that he has always doubted Hiss’s denial that he had ever known anyone “by the name of Whittaker Chambers,” and that the defendant’s inspection of Chambers’s teeth as a means of ascertaining that this was indeed the man he had known as “George Crosley” strikes him as “some sort of snobbish game” on the part of a patrician “confident that this ne’er-do-well ‘dead-beat’ ... could never bring him down with false charges.” Navasky’s chief reason for doubting Chambers’s testimony regarding Hiss is, he says, his belief that Chambers was a man incapable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality, and therefore one whose word was not to be trusted. Fair enough. In an earlier passage, however, Navasky has candidly stated what Hiss really meant for him.

The Hiss case had always seemed to me the quintessential Cold War episode. Technically the issue was whether the former high-ranking State Department official ... was lying in 1948, when he denied Whittaker Chambers’s charge that he was a member of the Communist Party and a spy; but to me the Hiss case symbolically had come to stand for more than the innocence or guilt of one man. As Chambers himself had written in his best-selling 1952 memoir, *Witness*, “The case stands for the whole [Communist] penetration of government.” Senator Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and others had seized on

the Hiss case to tarnish the entire New Deal, and Nixon had used it to jump-start his career.

Yes, but what of the guilt of the one man—or, more importantly for Hiss, his innocence? It has been said that the frame-up of Alger Hiss was—and is—an article of faith on the American Left. But faith in what? In the instance of Victor Navasky, certainly not in Alger Hiss. “Perhaps I am wrong about the Hiss case,” Navasky concedes. But how can he be wrong, having carefully avoided stating a conclusion one way or the other? It is, indeed, hard to feel that Navasky cares about Hiss as a dedicated Communist, a victim of miscarriage of justice, or even as a human being, at all. “But I am certain I am right,” he adds triumphantly, “that the mystifications surrounding the subject of espionage, compounded by the emotional legacy of the Cold War, has [sic] interfered with a reasoned assessment of the evidence”—evidence suggesting more broadly that there was an internal Red menace afoot in those days that justified the curtailment of civil liberties in the United States.

Denial of such a menace is indeed, for Victor Navasky, an article of faith. But what kind of faith is this? It is, really, not even politics, rightly understood, but an adumbration of the cultural counter-mythology that achieved incoherent form, a decade or so later, as the flower-children’s New Left. (Myth is grounded in the reality of which it is the imaginative expression, not the reverse.)

Proudly, Navasky quotes from a *Nation* editorial dated June 18, 1908. “There is no force so potent in politics as a moral issue. Politicians may scorn it, ambitious men may despise it or fight shy of it, newspapers may caricature or misrepresent it; but it has a way of confounding the plans of those who pride themselves on their astuteness and rendering powerless the most formidable ... party or boss.” Here again we have incantation substituting for political philosophy. What exactly distinguishes a moral issue from a non-moral one? The phrase “moral issues” is a catchall, ignor-

ing the truth that not all moral issues are equal—that, in fact, some moral issues are not really issues at all. What standard ought we to employ to discriminate between real and bogus ones?

Certainly not the counter-mythological one. Is economic inequality an issue, or is it a fact of life? The answer seems to be that it deserves to be an issue if it can be shown to be an injustice. G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc could have explained why extreme financial inequality is unjust, relying upon an ages-old moral and philosophical tradition to make their case. What explanation can *The Nation* offer, beyond protesting that inequality is “unfair?” So with the depletion of resources. Considered from the non-philosophical point of view, depleting natural resources is what biological entities do naturally in order to sustain life. Viewed otherwise—as a Christian, say, or a Buddhist might view the matter—depletion of resources amounts to the willful or careless destruction of God’s creation or of so much sacred stuff. That indeed amounts to a “moral issue,” in contrast to a scientific description of a biological process.

Absence of a philosophical basis deprives *A Matter of Opinion* of the slightest degree of thoughtfulness and introspection, leaving a gaping hole—458 pages wide, to be exact—to be filled with

unsparingly detailed accounts of doing deals, raising money, lunch-going, dinner-going, club-hopping, celebrity-visiting, institutional gossip, and the like. Some of the anecdotal material (by no means all of it) might have been redeemed by a briefer, more deft, and better-shaped treatment. This, however, would have required, if not a novelist’s, then at least a storyteller’s skill in developing a scene, and Navasky is neither novelist nor storyteller but rather, as he describes himself, a practicing ideologist.

That explains a lot, of course, including the book’s nearly total lack of humor, despite its wealth of wisecracks, clearly mistaken by the author for witticisms. But who ever accused the Left of having a sense of humor? Indeed, one of the few real witticisms to be found in *A Matter of Opinion* is attributable not to Victor Navasky but to William F. Buckley Jr., almost the only colleague of his acquaintance Navasky seems genuinely to despise. After Mr. Buckley announced his candidacy for mayor of New York City in 1965, the editors of *Monocle*—the magazine Navasky had founded while still a student at Yale Law School—invited him to make an appearance at their offices. Navasky, after welcoming his guest, went on to note that the last occupant of the speaker’s chair in which he sat had been Alger Hiss. “What’s Alger doing now?”

Buckley asked. “He’s selling stationary.” “It just goes to show the Soviet Union hasn’t solved its unemployment problem yet,” the Man Who Would Be Mayor replied—a response Navasky characterizes as a display of his “peculiar combination of viciousness and wit.” Somehow, we are left in no doubt regarding the relative proportions of the two elements—in Victor Navasky’s mind, anyway.

The perception of invincible shallowness is heightened ineluctably by the social background of this memoir: the intellectual and cultural wasteland that is New York City. Provinciality on the scale of Casper, Wyoming, is only to be expected, while harmful to no one beyond the city limits of Casper, Wyoming. But provinciality on the scale of New York is as destructive of American civilization as it is appalling and unnatural in itself. (The provincial metropolis is surely a thing contrary to nature.)

Jane Austen described herself as working on a “little bit (two inches wide) of ivory.” Victor Navasky, by comparison, is working on a little bit of wallboard. Anyone wishing to understand how America since World War II has been transformed into the Sahara of the Bozart, and of the intellect itself, would do well to have a look at this book. *A Matter of Opinion* exposes in graphic detail a socially and intellectually restricted—and restrictive—Philistine class, the width and depth of a wood splinter, yet substantially in control of the nation’s newspaper of record, its elite journals of opinion, publishing houses, and major cultural institutions that, taken together, have managed to achieve the improbable feat of ideologizing and commercializing the intellectual and artistic discourse of what, despite all its shortcomings, was once a unique and interesting civilization. In fairness to Victor Navasky, we should admit the nearly insuperable difficulties in making an engaging story from the sordid facts. ■

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Summer Doldrums



I am on my sailing boat cruising off Corsica with Bill and Pat Buckley, Belgian Baron Lambert and his wife Marion, Dame Vivien Duffield, and the

mother of my children. We have taken shelter outside Calvi as the Mistral is blowing “the horns off a cuckold,” to use a French expression. The *Bushido* is the kind of ketch that fears no weather—steel-hulled, 120 feet long with a 10-foot draft and an experienced crew. We did close to 12 knots under sail earlier in the evening, leaving Cap Ferrat on the French Riviera at night, just as the storm was breaking, crossing the Ligurian sea to Calvi.

Politics are not usually discussed while on a rough beam reach, but once in a bay, everyone let it rip about the war. Bill Buckley admits that had he known then what he knows now, he never would have been in favor of it. Bill, of course, is an honest man, unlike some of those Pinocchio neocons. The rest, all European born and bred, shrug and throw their hands up in disgust. Their drift is that it didn’t take a genius to know it could not be done. In fact, I remember them predicting a disaster and a quagmire.

Personally, I am on record as having written that even if the Shi’ite mullahs had their opium prayers answered, they would never have expected to be accommodated as they have been by an American administration. If we keep this up, the whole Arabian Peninsula will soon be Shi’ite. Bravo Rumsfeld, bravo Cheney, and bravo to the rest of the pompous fools who think a college diploma in history or the law equips them to handle serious geopolitical matters.

America haters, none of whom would ever be allowed on my boat, have always insisted that Uncle Sam is ever

spoiling for a fight, a trigger-happy gangster, cocksure of himself and ready to blunder in to some faraway land in a blaze of howitzers and Old Glory. American gung-hoism, on parade in President Bush’s speech extolling the military as the highest calling in front of an audience of red-bereted soldiers, strikes many Europeans as an inversion of priorities. “What about doctors and nurses?” they ask.

Well, I agree with Bush, there is no higher calling than military service, and screw what Europeans think about doctors and nurses. But why embarrass the military by turning them into cops and

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targets in strange lands and leaving them to the mercy of fanatics willing to die for 72 virgins and lotsa rice? Go figure, as they say.

American presidents have always used the military like Napoleon, or better yet Grant, as cannon fodder and worse. LBJ and McNamara poured men into Vietnam, knowing full well the war was unwinnable in the manner they had chosen to fight it. In order to save face and not be the first American president to lose a war, 57,000 troops were sent to their deaths and hundreds of thousands of wounded to their wheelchairs.

My point is this: the American public supports a protracted conflict if it is con-

vinced that the cause is a noble one, if the war is being conducted against a real threat, immediate or emerging, and if they believe their leaders have a clear strategy for winning. None of this applies to Iraq. And it didn’t apply to Vietnam either. The people got turned off when they realized that Johnson was lying about the war and that he didn’t have the guts to challenge the Soviets and China by bombing Hanoi and Haiphong.

Iraq was never a noble cause except in the eyes of the neocons, more concerned with Israel’s safety than that of any American military personnel. The Iraq War was never against a real threat but very much against an imagined one. Iraq was the biggest enemy of the religious zealots who are now running Iran as well as Iraq. Finally, as everyone except for the hucksters in the Bush

administration knows, there is not and never was a clear strategy for winning the war, or better yet, the peace which didn’t follow Saddam’s fall.

The administration doesn’t know or understand what is actually going on. No one can set out a detailed path to victory against an insurgent enemy. In the end, the military will wind up holding the bag, Bush will go to his farm in Texas, Rumsfeld will crawl into the hole where he belongs, Wolfowitz will make lots of money and attend many diplomatic cocktail parties, and Douglas Feith will receive Israel’s highest decoration and move onto some Palestinian’s land. Have a pleasant summer. ■