

Arts & Letters

BOOKS

[*A Bubble in Time: America During the Interwar Years, 1989-2001*, William O'Neill, Ivan R. Dee, 448 pages]

An Era About Nothing

By Leon Hadar

I EXPECTED A BOOK called “America During the Interwar Years” to be about Herbert Hoover and FDR, the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, the Roaring Twenties and the radio as a new mass medium, the Scopes and Leopold-Loeb trials—aka the trials of the century—and about Tarzan the Ape Man.

I must be getting old(er), because I never imagined that someone would actually write a broad and ambitious account of America in the “interwar years” of 1989 to 2001, a time that for me does not fall under the rubric of history—more like a heading on my résumé. So I did not anticipate that I would be reading about George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the dot-com boom and the stock market crash of 2000, Tabloid Nation and cable television news, Monica Lewinsky and the O.J. Simpson trial—aka the trial of the century—and about Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

As a journalist and scholar based in Washington during those not-so-distant interwar years, however, I have written

a great deal about what many refer to, appropriately or not, as the Age of Clinton, the period that William L. O'Neill, a professor emeritus of history at Rutgers University, has chronicled in *A Bubble in Time*. I assumed that my being, to borrow the title of Dean Acheson's autobiography, “present at the creation” (or in this case, also a lot of the destruction) explained why the details in this book felt so familiar—the main and lesser characters, the many juicy anecdotes, even the political slang (“Troopergate”) or the euphemisms (“budget train wreck” to refer to when Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill could not reconcile their differences).

But after scanning the endnotes and not-so-long bibliography, I realized why reading this work reminded me of listening to my dear late grandfather recalling his heroic exploits during “the war” for the thousandth time. It is not that I have been there, done that; rather that I have read that, watched that. (These days we might add “browsed that.”) It seems that O'Neill has read or watched—and more important, relied on, quoted from, and referred to—exactly the same newspapers, magazines, books, television shows, and films that I read or watched during those years.

The book includes quotes from and references to all the usual suspects, most of whom are still alive: Joe Klein, Maureen Dowd, Frank Rich, and Dinesh D'Souza, among others. (For some reason, globalization guru Tom Friedman doesn't make the list.) O'Neill contextualizes and deconstructs these commentators' words of wisdom. He agrees, for instance, with Klein, the veteran Clinton watcher and author of *Primary*

Colors, whose main characters are based on Bill and Hillary, when the columnist praises Clinton “for the skill and persistence with which he promoted the well-being of women, minorities, and the poor.” But he disagrees with him on Clinton's effect on the Democratic Party. (“The New Democracy and triangulation worked for Clinton personally but hurt the party.”) Memories, like the pundits on my mind ...

Not that there is anything wrong with sharing the same associative universe and misty, water-colored memories of the 1990s with another political junkie who is very perceptive. O'Neill applies an understated sense of humor and irony to connect the many dots in his narrative. After describing in detail the so-called grade inflation rampant in academia in the 1990s—and presumably still a problem—O'Neill turns his attention to his assessment of Clinton, whom he describes as a “better than average president,” adding, “perhaps someday historians, looking over the bloody wasteland of [George W.] Bush's failure, will raise Clinton from C+ to a B-. Since context is so important, that would not amount to grade inflation.” Now that is clever, and there are many similar sarcastic touches in the book.

The structure of O'Neill's storyline is quite simple. We start our walk down memory lane with a chapter about George H.W. Bush, followed by the discussion of the first Gulf War, and then an overview of the 1992 presidential election. O'Neill devotes two chapters to the two terms of Clinton's presidency. Then there are separate sections about the O.J. Simpson trial and the rise of PC culture—that's “politically correct,” not “personal

computer”—the “sexualization” of American culture, and the depressing condition of American higher education. In between, the author inserts three shorter “interludes” including one about Alan Greenspan with a not very original title, “The God That Failed” and another about the popular TV series “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” which O’Neill considers to be “the most complex and original show introduced in the 1990’s.” He praises “its wit, cleverness, originality, intricate plot and sly references.” I was more of a “Seinfeld” fan, a show “about nothing” that kind of summed up the Clinton Age. I never watched “Buffy,” so I am not sure whether she deserves this adulation. But then, unlike the former Fed chairman, at least Buffy did not slaughter our wealth.

Indeed, like Andrew Lloyd Webber, that great cultural icon of the 1980s and 1990s, O’Neill helps us “smile at the old days.” He lets the memory live again. If you had fallen into coma when the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989 and woke up on 9/11, this book would probably be an informative and lively guide to what you had missed (or not), including the birth of SUV’s, DVD’s and cell phones—a kind of “America in the 1990s for Beginners.” As O’Neill admits in an early chapter, the “book is primarily a narrative history,” or an “informal” history, and it does not introduce us to a great theory that explains what it all meant. O’Neill is not an apolitical historian, however. His thinking is characterized by what could be described as a “radical centrism.” He colors his exposition and provides us, if not with a grand theory, with a thesis or a set of intertwining theses that seem relevant in the Age of Obama—not to mention our just concluded journey to hell on earth, which is how O’Neill seems to regard the sordid Bush-Cheney interval.

The 1990s, says O’Neill, will be recalled as “a happier and more prosperous age unmarred by terrorist attacks, long inconclusive struggles abroad, contempt for human and individual rights at home, botched disaster-recovery attempts, and a government whose arrogance was exceeded only by its ineptitude.” Hence,

compared to the presidency of Bush II, the administrations of Bush I and Clinton seem in retrospect “like a miracle of sanity and good leadership.” In addition to being characterized by peace and eventually widespread prosperity, the 1990s also marked a period of “freedom from fear,” a time after the end of the Cold War when people felt it safe to assume that “the world would not be sucked into fiery oblivion.” Since 9/11, Americans have not only entertained legitimate concerns about further terrorist attacks, but also suffered from “relentless fear-mongering by the Bush Administration [that] has frightened people while the administration’s own actions have greatly increased the amount of terrorism in the world,” which explains why today the 1990s look like a “bubble in time,” suspended between the Cold War and the War on Terror.

According to O’Neill, one of the major “missed opportunities” of this “decade of lost chances” was the “painfully bun-

more than 50 percent of the entire federal budget for fiscal year 2009 went to cover the many military-related expenditures: the costs of fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, operating the intelligence services, homeland security, veteran affairs, etc. O’Neill blames the failure to conduct a serious debate over defense spending in the aftermath of the Cold War on political pressure from the military and the national-defense establishment, which meant that, after the trauma of 9/11, efforts to control spending became almost hopeless.

But O’Neill seems to disregard another and perhaps more crucial reason why that post-Cold War debate on defense spending did not take place, which was the failure to conduct a broader debate on America’s role in the world in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, American foreign-policy goals seemed to expand at a time when Washington was not facing strong resistance from a global challenger. Influenced

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gled” attempt at some kind of universal health insurance in 1993. He blames that on the Clinton administration’s “clumsiness and inexperience,” as well as on the relentless lobbying of the health-insurance industry and the failure of congressional Democrats to rise to the occasion.

Even more troubling, from O’Neill’s perspective, was another missed opportunity, the absolute refusal of the political class to reform the military so as to meet the challenges of the post-Cold War world. Modest cuts were made under Bush I, but the “overwhelming power of the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned about long ago soon reversed the process, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 led to an orgy of defense spending that has become astronomical.” Indeed, according to some of the estimates cited by O’Neill,

by Washington bureaucrats, interest groups, and the rest of the foreign-policy establishment, the U.S. attempted to extend NATO to Russia’s border; to establish a hegemonic role in the Middle East; to launch humanitarian interventions here, there, and everywhere; and to export democracy worldwide. These costly policies created the conditions for U.S. intervention in the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia as well as the two Gulf Wars, providing the rationale for increasing defense spending into to the stratosphere.

Ironically, O’Neill seems to applaud the decisions to intervene on the side of the Croats and the Bosnian Muslims against the Serbs as well as to force Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait in the first Gulf War and criticizes the Clinton administration for failing to send U.S.

troops to bring an end to the civil war in Rwanda. But without a reassessment of America's strategic role in the world and a shift to a more selective form of intervention, the old Cold War-era paradigm with its emphasis on America as a global policeman remained intact and has continued to survive and thrive, igniting more anti-Americanism around the

CLINTON COULD **ONLY WIN ELECTIONS BY "NEUTRALIZING" THE REPUBLICANS, "STEALING" THEIR ISSUES—BALANCED BUDGET, TAX CUTS, WELFARE REFORM.**

world and leading to more wars—and by extension, creating pressure to increase spending on defense.

It can be hard to locate O'Neill precisely on the American political map. At times, he sounds like a Rockefeller Republican, or in the context of his historical narrative, a Bush I Republican. Unlike political analyst and historian Kevin Phillips, the long-time basher of George Herbert Walker Bush (and the entire Bush dynasty), O'Neill portrays Bush I not as a "preppy wimp" but as a great American patriot, a war hero, a hard-working entrepreneur, and a selfless public servant whose place in history will probably turn on his role in ending the Cold War and his skillful management of the first Gulf War. Indeed, O'Neill implies that America would have been better off if the experienced and world-savvy Bush I and not the inexperienced right-wing ideologue Ronald Reagan had been selected as the Republican presidential candidate in 1980 or if this decent and honorable man had beaten the sleazy Clinton in 1992.

Perhaps today O'Neill can be tagged as an Obama Republican. While he disapproves of some aspects of the social-cultural agenda of the political Left, such as identity politics and affirmative action, he also denounces Reaganism for its notion that government is the problem and not the solution. He subscribes to a progressive axiom that aggressive action by the federal government is necessary in order to tame destructive market forces and repair social ills. Hence the notion that

Barack Obama could become another Bill Clinton would probably be bad news for him. O'Neill is very critical of Clinton for applying the strategy developed by his political adviser Dick Morris, who operated under the assumption that Clinton could only win elections by "neutralizing" the Republicans, "stealing" their issues—balanced budget, tax cuts, wel-

fare reform—while "triangulating" the Democrats by abandoning so-called "class-war dogma" and de-emphasizing traditional liberal issues such as wealth redistribution and government spending on the poor.

O'Neill suggests this Clinton-Morris strategy has hurt the long-term interests of the Democratic Party. By turning away from their core liberal ideology and trying to embrace conservative economic and cultural positions, the Democrats have been gradually transformed into a Republican Party II, and in the process they alienated lower-middle-class voters who had not benefited from the prosperity of the Clinton years. In fact, as O'Neill sees it, many of them lost their jobs as a result of the downsizing of American businesses and the decline of the manufacturing sector. Angry at Washington, Wall Street, and the "elites," many lower-middle-class voters were drawn to the populist cultural agenda of the Republicans with its emphasis on so-called traditional values, post-9/11 radical nationalism, and xenophobia.

Clinton's main asset had been the economic and political reality of the 1990s, which included the end of the Cold War, the resultant "peace dividend" at home, the opening of new markets abroad, and the lack of global challenger to the U.S. in a time of the high-tech revolution. This created the conditions for the Clinton Age economic boom, and international peace benefited many sectors and demographic groups who supported the status quo and helped elect and then re-elect Clinton.

O'Neill contends that an important feature of Clinton's success was the "evil things" that didn't happen under his watch, though they were seeded during it. "The new age of blood and iron ushered by President Bush II, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, the three men of the apocalypse," didn't come out of nowhere, he writes. "Beneath the frivolity of the Clinton years dark forces had been gathering their strength, waiting for a chance to slouch towards Bethlehem, the opportunity that 9/11 would give them." In little-read publications, think tanks, and "other shadowy venues, neoconservatives and their allies plotted to invade Iraq, alienate the rest of the world, and ruining the American economy by means of runaway spending, massive tax cuts, and lax regulation—the trifecta of looters." Or to put it differently, the many disasters of the Bush years were "incubating in the heart of Clinton's America."

O'Neill concludes his study without any reference to the outcome of the 2008 presidential election. Obama is not even mentioned in the index. But my guess is that he would urge the new Democratic occupant of the White House to resist taking Clinton's road down the political middle and accommodating Republicans. There are some signs, however, that Obama may be trying to do just that. By selecting leading Wall Street-friendly former Clintonites as his top economic advisers and choosing a veteran Republican figure as the Pentagon chief, Obama has demonstrated that, like Clinton, he has no desire to challenge the status quo in Washington, despite the fact that more and more Americans are becoming disenchanted with the political system. It would not be surprising if O'Neill's next volume of "informal" history chronicled the many disasters that incubated in the heart of Obama's America. ■

Leon Hadar is a Cato Institute research fellow in foreign-policy studies and author, most recently, of Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East.

[*Terrorism: How to Respond*, Richard English, Oxford University Press, 143 pages]

The Anatomy of Terror

By Michael Burleigh

RICHARD ENGLISH is a professor of politics at Queen's University, Belfast, and a capable expert on the IRA and the history of nationalism in Ireland. This background bulks large in this brief account of global terrorism, *Terrorism: How to Respond*, a thought-provoking primer for politicians seeking something to stimulate them.

English begins by having a stab at defining terrorism. He rightly thinks the word terrorism has meaning and that it is legitimate to hive off this tactic of sub-state actors from the immeasur-

ably more lethal instances history affords of terrorism by state entities, from the Jacobin massacres in the royalist Vendée in the 1790s down to the much-studied crimes of Hitler and Stalin. While English doubts there is anything so concrete as a generic terrorist, he points to certain familial resemblances, which mean that something of the maniacal glint (and comedic ineptitude) of an Andreas Baader is evident in the otherwise culturally distinctive Ramsi Yousef of al-Qaeda. According to English:

Terrorism involves heterogeneous violence used or threatened with a political aim; it can involve a variety of acts, of targets, and of actors; it possesses an important psychological dimension, producing terror or fear among a directly threatened group and also a wider implied audience in the hope of maximizing political communication and achievement; it embodies the exerting and implementing of power, and the attempted redressing of power relations; it represents a subspecies of warfare, and as such it can form part of a wider campaign of violent and non-violent attempts at political leverage.

Having thus identified the problem, he questions, and invariably incorporates, a variety of different approaches to dealing with it. His specific tack is to address terrorism as a species of warfare and politics. If I have one minor criticism to make of this method, it is that while English is correct in claiming that most terrorists are not madmen, common sense suggests that individuals can be crazy—not to speak of morally deranged—without matching any clinical definition of insanity.

The first case study in *Terrorism* is the learning experience that was once “The Troubles.” English provides a fair-minded and highly condensed history of the conflict in Northern Ireland from its reignition in the late 1960s to the present post-peace-process era. Although the IRA's long war of attrition

against the British indirectly highlighted political and social injustices that required redress, the fact is that the Provos were militarily defeated and none of their strategic objectives—notably a socialist united Ireland of 32 counties without a British presence—have been realized.

I only missed a couple of points in English's account. First, the capacity to enter into a negotiated settlement obviously hinged on the remarkable longevity of the Sinn Féin IRA leadership as manifest in the careers of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. That is not possible where governments have assassinated successive terrorist leaders, as the Israelis have done in the case of Hamas. Second, English does not address the wider ramifications of the peace process. These include the cynical marginalization of the main moderate parties, the SDLP and UUP, in favor of the DUP and Sinn Féin, or the gangster-like grip that former paramilitaries (and the likes of Continuity and Real IRA) exert over the unfortunate inhabitants of very poor Republican areas. Indeed, English's account is so fair-minded that one might easily miss the fact that IRA-Sinn Féin was one of the largest organized-crime syndicates in Europe.

English moves from Belfast to the rather different example of ethno-nationalist terrorism represented by Eta. Spain's two Basque provinces enjoy the highest degree of regional autonomy that anyone can conceive of, but a tiny violent minority is hell-bent on engaging in pinprick terrorist activities. Put crudely, Eta are on a hiding to nothing. Once the French decided not to confuse Eta with wartime French *maquisards*, the ability of Eta members to scurry back and forth to the *Pays Basques* was diminished. Spain's counterterrorism police have also been so assiduous in either covertly killing or arresting many Eta leaders that there is no coherent leadership with which to deal. Ironically, the nonviolent separatism of the Catalans poses more of a challenge to Madrid, as is evident from the recent

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