

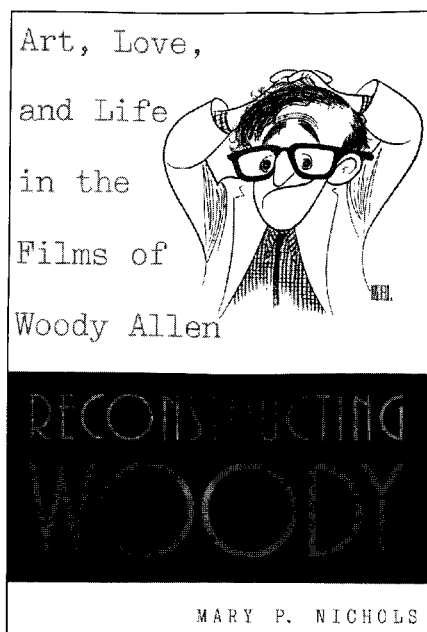
able, nihilism. Allen is, finally, just another New York intellectual. His work always culminates, Allan Bloom complained in *The Closing of the American Mind*, in "pure emptiness."

Mary Nichols, in her funny and deep book, has studied 12 of Allen's films closely enough to persuade me that Allen is not primarily an intellectual, but at his best a sort of moral philosopher. He aims to be a teacher of personal responsibility, including, by example, the moral responsibility of the thinker or artist. For Allen, art's "highest intention" is to "transform men's souls," as David Shane says at the beginning of *Bullets Over Broadway*. Allen defends the goodness of human life against the excessively morbid self-consciousness and ridiculous pretensions of modern intellectuals. He reminds Nichols of the Greek playwright Aristophanes mocking that pointy-head Socrates. But in an early sketch based on the *Apology of Socrates*, Allen also put himself in the place of Socrates.

Part Socrates, part Aristophanes, Allen addresses the spiritual and "so-called existential" themes at the heart of the tradition of Western philosophy and literature. Nichols observes that "Allen's films [only] begin with contemporary assumptions, nihilistic and existential." Then "they move from them to reveal the potential of the human soul for fulfillment in deeds of virtue and love." In classical fashion, they ascend from fashionable opinion to what is highest and most enduring about human nature.

At first look, Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite* is a rather slight tale framed by a tragic chorus about a sportswriter, a whore, and the comedy that is the search for family life in upscale Manhattan. But Nichols presents it as Allen's demonstration of how we moderns correct the tragic fatalism of the Greeks with doses of freedom and the possibility of virtue. Zeus in the film has an answering machine, and there's no telling whether he checks his messages. But at least he does not oppose our best efforts, and there's no telling what we might achieve on our own.

The tragedy of modern liberalism is its refusal to accept the intractable limits of human freedom, the inevitability of suffering and failure. The comedy of lib-



eralism is its futile effort to dispense altogether with tragedy. Allen's more limited conception of human liberty incorporates some tragedy and comedy and leaves open the possibility of divine providence. The film hints, through the inexplicable appearance of the whore's perfect match in a helicopter, that God might answer prayers after all.

Allen shows that the atheism of the existentialist depends on an exaggerated conception of human liberty: the view that human beings can conquer chance and eradicate all mystery. So when the film portrays both the sportswriter's ability to do good and his inability to play God—he tries to transform the lovable whore into something she cannot be—Allen thereby corrects modern excesses with an ironic affirmation of the wondrous mystery of being merely human. The movie is also, and maybe more than Nichols sees, a rejection of the liberal individual's aspiration toward self-sufficiency. Man's social nature—and so his responsibilities to and dependence upon others—triumphs over perverse liberal conventions that deny the binding power of tradition and family.

The realistic and lovable defender of human liberty and virtue Nichols portrays is undeniably an attractive and instructive figure, but we have to wonder to what extent it is really Allen. Allen's recent *Deconstructing Harry* is particularly

hard to fit into Nichols' interpretation. In this film, the character played by Allen (Harry Block) is nasty and morally irresponsible, and he seems to view his rather disgusting life as justified by the amoral excellence of his art. The Allen characters in previous films had characteristically been comparatively shy and sexually unadventurous. Block is aggressively foul-mouthed and obsessed with oral sex. Allen identified himself with Block's moral nihilism in an interview for the *Village Voice*.

Nichols had nearly completed her book before *Deconstructing Harry* was released, but she attempts to make her peace with it in the book's introduction. She really has to reach, beginning with the false claim that the film is very funny. *Deconstructing* should probably be understood as bringing to the surface an amoral artistic undercurrent present in many of Allen's films. It is Allen at his worst, and it is jarring in comparison to Allen at his best.

Nichols presents the best—and so a rather selective—case for Allen's moral and intellectual excellence. But that makes the book no less admirable and no less an indispensable source of moral and intellectual guidance. It may be the best contribution ever to film studies.

Peter Augustine Lawler is author of the forthcoming Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought.

A WELL-REGULATED MILITIA AT WORK

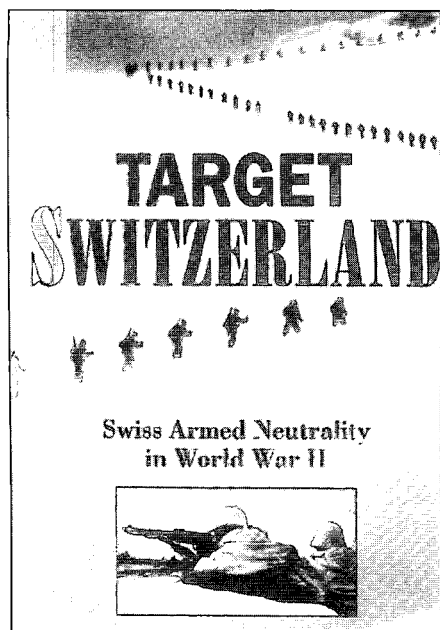
By David Kopel

Target Switzerland: Swiss Armed Neutrality in World War II

By Stephen P. Halbrook

Sarpedon Publishers, 319 pages, \$25

If all you know is what you read in the papers, then you must think Switzerland is one of the most despicable countries in the world. Switzerland, rather than joining the Allied cause, stayed neutral during World War II. After the war, Swiss banks retained the deposits of Holocaust victims rather than tracking down heirs to give them to. Case closed?



Not at all, historian Stephen Halbrook shows in *Target Switzerland*. Wrongful as the bankers' postwar behavior was, the behavior of the Swiss people during the war was morally exemplary—superior, indeed to the conduct of most of the rest of Europe. As Winston Churchill recalled, “of all the neutrals Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction.... She has been a Democratic State, standing for freedom in self-defense among her mountains, and in thought, in spite of race, largely on our side.”

Nazi maps showed that the Third Reich would eventually include Switzerland, just as it would include all portions of Europe with German-speaking people. While the majority of Switzerland's population is German-speaking, the nation was virtually unanimous in hoping and praying for the defeat of Germany. Infuriated by the lack of ethnic solidarity, and by the strongly anti-Nazi stance of Switzerland's free press, Hitler predicted that Switzerland would be “liquidated” and that he would be known as “the butcher of the Swiss.”

As Halbrook details, in every stage of the war, the Axis had powerful military reasons to invade Switzerland. Before the fall of France, the non-Alpine part of Switzerland offered an inviting path to sweep around the Maginot Line. After France fell and Italy entered the war, Switzerland offered the only convenient route for transporting men and supplies between Italy and Germany. After the Al-

lied landing in Italy, Germany's need to swiftly deploy troops into Italy became even more urgent. As the war came to conclusion in 1944-45, the Nazi leadership laid plans to make a stand in the Alps, but Switzerland stood right in the middle.

By the summer of 1940, there was only one country on Germany's borders whose free press and rights of assembly allowed the Third Reich to be publicly and lawfully denounced as the evil empire it was. In every country on Germany's borders, targets of Hitler's hate were sent to extermination camps. But there was no Holocaust on Swiss soil. Switzerland protected her own Jews, and sheltered many more refugees of all religious backgrounds—equivalent on a per capita basis to the United States taking in 3 million refugees.

In all the countries that Hitler conquered, the economy was plundered for use in the Nazi war machine. As a neutral, Switzerland did trade with Germany and Italy (and with the Allies, as the Swiss smuggled out precision ball bearings and other military equipment disguised in consumer products like watches).

Although the Germans several times massed troops on the Swiss border, why was there no invasion? The Nazis could eventually have conquered Switzerland, but the price would have been fearful. The Wehrmacht expected 200,000 German casualties; it would have taken a very long time to remove the Swiss military from the Alpine “Reduit” in which they planned to make a stand. And by the time the Swiss were defeated, every bridge and train track and everything else of value to the conquerors would have been destroyed.

The reason that Switzerland was too difficult to invade—in contrast to the nations Hitler conquered in a matter of weeks—was the Swiss militia system. Unlike the other nations of Europe, which relied on a standing army, Switzerland was (and still is) defended by a universal militia. Every man was trained in war, had his rifle at home, was encouraged to practice frequently, and could be mobilized almost instantly. The Swiss militiaman was under orders to fight to the last bullet, and after that, with his bayonet, and after that, with his bare

hands. Rather than having to defeat an army, Hitler would have needed to defeat a whole people.

Conversely, the Swiss citizen militia, with its extensive network of fortifications, had no offensive capability. The Swiss militia was not going to sweep into Berlin; modern Swiss-bashers who condemn the nation for not declaring war fail to understand that by keeping the Axis out of Switzerland, the Swiss were already doing everything they could for the Allied cause.

From the Anschluss of Austria to the Fall of France, Hitler swallowed nation after nation where cowardly ruling elites surrendered the country to the Nazis—either before the shooting began, or a few weeks afterward. But such a surrender would have been impossible in Switzerland, explains Halbrook. The Swiss governmental system was decentralized, with authority residing in 26 separate cantons. The federal government did notify the Swiss people that in case of a German invasion, any claim that there had been a Swiss surrender should be disregarded as Nazi propaganda. And because the military power was in the hands of every Swiss man, the federal government would have been unable to surrender even if it wanted to. Nothing could stop the Swiss militiamen from fighting to the very end.

America's Founders admired Switzerland as a “Sister Republic” amidst the despotisms of Europe. The Founders—like the Swiss—understood the moral implications of a universal militia system: A people who are trained to self-reliance and responsibility will defend their freedom to the utmost.

When, as William Shirer wrote from Berlin, the lamps of freedom were going out all over Europe, they burned brighter than ever in Switzerland, as the Swiss people maintained their democracy, their right to assemble, and their freedom of religion. And the Swiss people saved thousands and thousands of other Europeans from the gas chambers. And for all this, a well-regulated militia is to thank.

David Kopel is co-author of No More Wacos.

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A REGULAR
REVIEW OF
CLASSIC,
OVER-LOOKED, NEWLY RELEVANT, OR
OTHERWISE DESERVING OLDER BOOKS

THE BLACK LIST

By Roger Clegg

Invisible Man

By Ralph Ellison, 1947

Native Son

By Richard Wright, 1940

Go Tell It on the Mountain

By James Baldwin, 1952

On last summer's Modern Library list of the 100 greatest English-language novels of the twentieth century, the first two by black authors were *Invisible Man* (1947) by Ralph Ellison and *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright.

The plots of the two books are similar, at least in broad outline. In each, a young black male flees the South for a big city up north, where he becomes involved with Communists and, ultimately, winds up outside of society. Both take place principally in urban settings and are written exclusively from the perspective of the protagonist (the nameless narrator in *Invisible Man*, Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*). There is plenty of violence and a little sex in both, but no romance in either. Both, unsurprisingly, are social protest novels focusing on racism, and neither, interestingly, is much impressed with white liberals.

But the differences are more interesting than the similarities. Bigger Thomas is a prototype of today's "super predator." He is an inarticulate, uncomprehending thug, an underclass thief, murderer, and rapist (he is punished for the accidental death of a white woman, but he also cold-bloodedly

murders his black girlfriend after raping her). Ellison's narrator, by contrast, is a high-school orator, then a college boy, who is such a spellbinding speaker that the Communists quickly recruit him and put him in charge of their Harlem cell.

Both face stark discrimination, but their reactions—and Wright's and Ellison's prescriptions—are quite different. Bigger Thomas simply lashes out, and Wright, a sometime Communist himself, saw his protagonist as the symptom of a disease the only cure for which was class revolt. Indeed, Wright made clear that his critique of racism had to be understood as merely part of a broader criticism of American capitalism.

Ellison's narrator, on the other hand, not only rebels against white racism, but runs afoul of a union and ultimately rejects the Communists, all after unfairly being thrown out of college by its pompous, NAACP-style president. *Invisible Man* begins and ends with the narrator living alone, literally underground and not unhappily, in a chamber well-lit ("exactly 1,369 lights") with power stolen from Monopolated Light & Power. Ellison's prescriptions are decidedly personal rather than political: "And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own," writes the narrator in the epilogue. He has no political program, no proposed revolution, but instead a plea that seems aimed at the reader as another individual.

Wright, then 29, befriended the 23-year-old Ellison in 1937. In 1945, the by-then-famous Wright also helped a 20-year-old writer named James Baldwin win a foundation fellowship. But in 1951, Baldwin's essay explicitly attacking Wright in *Partisan Review* led to a painful break between the two writers.

Baldwin's 1952 *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is the third and final book by an African American on the Modern Library list. It, too, takes place in the urban North in the 1930s, where the

adult characters have migrated from the South (*Native Son* is set in Chicago; the other two mostly in New York City). There is no single protagonist in Baldwin's semi-autobiographical book, and the plot is essentially a series of flashbacks—recollections—of the decidedly unhappy lives of the main characters: an all-too-human black minister, his wife, sister, and stepson.

Native Son and *Invisible Man* are essentially novels about racism, but not Baldwin's book. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* could have been written with white characters, whereas that change would make *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* incomprehensible. With its depressingly dysfunctional families and heavy religious themes, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* could have been written by Dostoevsky.

While religion is a figure of fun in *Invisible Man* (the protagonist's doppelgänger is the sleazy Reverend B. P. Rinehart, "Spiritual Technologist") and an object of hostility in *Native Son* (the opiate of the masses, sure enough), all three novelists acknowledge its centrality in African-American culture. The ugliness of racism past, and the importance of religion to blacks, are the common themes of these three books and are most likely to strike today's reader.

The one, the only, institution to which black Americans could cling in the Jim Crow era was the church. Black churches played a critical role in the civil rights movement. A great irony for African Americans in the late twentieth century is that, at the same time that racism is being vanquished, many seem also to be turning from their rock of faith. In this they are not alone, but the price—sky-high illegitimacy, crime, and drug use, and a plummeting sense of personal responsibility—is one that they (even more than other, wealthier, groups) simply cannot afford to pay.

Roger Clegg is general counsel of the Center for Equal Opportunity, a Washington, D.C. think tank.