

phia Record, offering him a job. "I turned it down," Smith says, "because Kay was a St. Louis girl, and I didn't want to leave town. But I couldn't fight my way past Bovard, and I got the *Record* to renew its offer."

During his St. Louis days, when he worked too hard and stayed out too late, Smith's immediate boss at the *Star*, Sid Keener, personally roused him and drove him to work in the morning. Smith pleads guilty to another foible in those years—that of overwriting. When I went to see him in New Canaan, I brought a copy of a story he had written in June 1932, when he was covering the St. Louis Browns. It carried a Philadelphia dateline and began this way: "Twenty-two sleepless ballplayers opened leaden-lidded eyes this morning in this, the home of Ben Franklin, Mr. Max Boo-Boo Hoff and alley beer, and watched dawn curdle a sky from which shone little promise of better days to come." Smith shook his head. "Alley beer," he murmured. "Too much," he said a moment later. "'Leaden-lidded' is too much. I remember how I used to reach way out for a lead, a new figure of speech, anything to set off what I was writing that day from what I'd done the day before. I had to do it differently. The older I get, the more I admire the simple declarative sentence. It's a wonderful thing."

"I loved football when I was in Philadelphia," Smith said. "I'd cover a Villanova game Friday night, Penn on Saturday, and the pros on Sunday. I'd gallop out and write about the high school championships because I didn't want the season to end. I got a letter a while ago from a guy who used to play halfback for a high-school team and he enclosed a story that I'd written about him. I had all these shapeless troglodytes struggling in the primeval mud. It was just awful."

For years, Smith has explained his success by protesting that writing a column is the easiest thing in the world: "I just open a vein and let it bleed out," he says, "drop by drop."

"At the *Star*, when I was on rewrite, I was fast because I had to be fast. There were so few people on the staff, I sat at a smoking typewriter for twelve hours a day. I became slower and slower when I started writing a column. That's a more personal thing. In Philadelphia, I wrote seven a week, at the *Trib* I started with six and later cut down to five. In those days I hardly ever got a day off, but I was younger then and I loved it."

"Some people write a fast draft and then rewrite. I blacksmith it out paragraph by paragraph on the typewriter. I rarely sit down and write a column on four pieces of paper. Someone asked me how long it takes me to write, and I said I use all the time I have. I'm unhappy if I don't have at least two hours at the typewriter, although I've done it in as little as 35 minutes. Years ago, I realized that I wasn't a fast writer. And I realized then that I wasn't going to get any faster."

Sam Muchnick, a St. Louis wrestling promoter who worked on the *Times* when Smith was on the *Star*, recalls a column written in the back seat of his Pontiac, between Louisville, Ky., and Terre Haute, Ind., a distance of under 200 miles. "The year was 1970," Muchnick says, "because Dust Commander had won the Derby. Red was there to cover the race, and he had to be in St. Louis the next day for a speech. I was going to the Derby, too, so I offered to drive him and his wife, Phyllis, to St. Louis. He rigged up a table in the back seat for his typewriter, and Phyllis sat up front with me. When we got to Terre Haute, he dropped off the copy at the Western Union office. A few days later, when I looked in the back seat, I found about twenty crumpled up pieces of paper, leads that Smith had tried then ripped up because he didn't like them."

I asked Muchnick if he thought Smith's copy was losing any of its edge. "He's what you call a picture-book writer," Muchnick said. He paused judiciously. "Actually, I think he's getting better."

Jet planes, arc lights, and the other icons of progress have made sports writing a less civilized calling. Whereas baseball writers once traveled regally, in smoking cars, filing their copy at leisure, they nowadays are hurtled through the skies from one lighted stadium to the next. Deadlines come earlier, games run later, and Smith rarely gets to the ballpark, on business or pleasure. "My first wife, Kay, was a Cardinals fan," said Smith, as the talk turned to busmen's holidays. "She adored Stan Musial and we went to see him whenever we could. One night, there was a big silvery moon hanging over right field. Musial hit two home runs into that moon, and the Cardinals won the game, by, I think, two to one. As we got up to leave, Kay turned to me and said, 'I'm the luckiest girl in the world.'"

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Tom Bethell

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## Capitol Ideas

*On magazines, metrics, "mental illness," and moralism.*

My first encounter with *The Alternative: An American Spectator* was in the New Orleans Public Library, and my initial reaction was: How did this get past the "censor"? I then realized—as indeed I had been vaguely aware—that public discourse is usually governed by tacitly agreed-upon ground rules; for example, while it is okay to be a conservative, and it is okay to be a liberal, it is *not* okay to make fun of liberals. That is definitely a "foul." And here was a magazine I had not heard of cheerfully violating this taboo. The last time I had seen anything like it in American journalism was in the early to mid-1960s, when the *Realist* made great sport of conservative attitudes. (Alas, with the advent of the Drug Era a decade ago, the *Realist* too went to pot.)

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In a recent issue of *National Review*, Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's*, remarked that though journalists are forever bemoaning the absence of H.L. Mencken, if he were in our midst he would undoubtedly go so much against the grain that he might find it hard to get published. For example, Lapham suggested, Mencken today might say "that blacks (i.e., 'Moors') do not think as well as whites, that homosexuality constitutes a mental disorder rather than a political choice, that women, no matter how well-meaning or enraged, simply cannot make art, government, or law."

Lapham has a point. We need to remind ourselves today that Mencken's targets—Babbitry, the rude American cheerfully ignorant of European refinement—have become, 50 years later, the very centerpiece of received wisdom among the intelligentsia, in academe and the press. That is why academics and journalists

puff on their pipes and complacently bestow so many posthumous encomia upon Mencken. They are congratulating themselves.

To carry on in "the Mencken tradition" really means placing oneself in opposition to the conventional wisdom, which today, if anything, entails supporting some of the "small-town values" that Mencken attacked. The best evidence I have that *The American Spectator* is doing this is in the following: *The American Spectator* is published in Bloomington, home of Indiana University; but, contrary to what one might expect, a good many of the local profs regard the presence of this rag on their home turf as a source of intellectual embarrassment. When editor Tyrrell told me that, I knew he had to be doing something right, and I knew that my initial reaction in New Orleans had been accurate: *The American Spectator* was in gross violation of the current intellectual code.

May I ask why this metric nonsense is being foisted upon us? It emanates, of course, from a hitherto improperly identified public nuisance which lurks continually in the shadows, evading the searchlights of criticism: the Change Lobby. There is a host of people who not only love to change things about as frequently as possible but whose incomes and pensions depend on our permanent acquiescence in this turmoil. Unfortunately, this acquiescence is all too easily obtained from traditionalists who too often concede the day. By contrast, Change Lobby people are usually serenely confident that they know best and that if only they are permitted to overcome the inertia of our ignorance, Progress will prevail and Utopia will not be far behind.

I have heard many times the argument about metric-calibrated machine-tools being so essential in an era of international comity. Very well then. Have metric tools. But how does one leap from this to the demand that the Celsius temperature scale replace the Fahrenheit? I have never once heard this explained. For heaven's sake, why can't somebody stand up for once and say, "We're not going to change, but the French are welcome to do so if they wish." I suppose that would be too cruel, or piggish, or racist, or imperialist.

The Fahrenheit scale is clearly superior to the Celsius. For example, in Washington this year the highest and lowest recorded temperatures have been 100°F and 2°F. Thus we have a scale which conveniently divides the temperature encountered over most of the U.S. most of the time into units from zero to 100. That is an intelligently devised scale. But the Celsius scale is less finely tuned. One day last winter I noticed a bank sign giving the temperature in both scales as follows: 40°F, 4°C. Forty equals four, I thought. On my way home it was: 39°F, 4°C. Clearly the Fahrenheit is a more discriminating one.

But no matter. The Change Lobby will undoubtedly prevail in this as in many other things, because (above all) so many people in this country have a naïve faith that change must be informed by wisdom (otherwise, why would it have been proposed?). This fails to take into account the vested interest of the Change Lobby. "Innovative education," for example, no matter how much it is discredited, will always tend to appeal to those bureaucrats who sponge off popular gullibility about education because it employs more of them. Blackboard, chalk, and heavy ruler need only a schoolma'am. Audio-visual hardware and other gimmicks need money, create jobs for budget directors and assistant regional administrators.

The consolation is that, in a personal way, one can resist much Change Lobby lunacy. I have bought Fahrenheit thermometers for inside and outside use, and I *shall not* learn the conversion. I *shall not* think metric. In the same way, it gives me the keenest possible pleasure to know that I *shall not* voluntarily read a new translation of the Bible, I *shall not* open a book by Jean-Paul Sartre, nor shall I learn the New Math, or listen to twelve-tone music, or read a treatise on psychological development. Let others who have more time at their disposal offer themselves up as guinea pigs for these experiments upon our

crania. New things and new ideas deserve a rough reception, and if they can't withstand this treatment they are not worthy of our time.

It seems that whenever a crime is committed nowadays the accused criminal is sent straight from the police station to a psychiatrist's office. The theory behind this is that before bringing such a person to trial, thus risking bringing down the dread verdict of "guilty" upon his head, every attempt should be made to exonerate the wretch by ascribing his actions to something beyond his control. This is our way of exorcising the demon of wickedness, which, according to the ethos of our time, does not exist in individuals—only in groups (for example, society itself is apt to be wicked, as is the Caucasian race).

These reflections are prompted by the latest hilarious developments in the William Sibert case. Sibert, you may recall, is the GS-5 employee accused of embezzling \$850,000 from the government, then going on a spending spree conspicuous enough to lead to his capture. After his arrest, in the modern fashion, Sibert was released as soon as he had made the ritual expressions of sorrow, penitence, and eagerness to cooperate with the authorities (by revealing where the money was) that were expected of him.

Sibert was supposed to stay home with his parents. But he broke his promise, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office. He left home within 24 hours and took up residence in a Holiday Inn, "where he has thus far paid \$450 in cash for a room for himself and his wife." Sibert apparently has a thing about cars. Before his arrest he bought himself a round dozen of luxury sedans. Now he has gone out and bought himself a couple more—a Pontiac station wagon and a Ford Thunderbird.

The authorities are not at all sure they know where the original money went. For instance, Sibert "accounted" for some of it by

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saying he lost \$30,000 cash in a poker game. But he can't remember who with. Meanwhile he just keeps on spending more and more money. This is too much, so he is taken before the magistrate *again*, and released *again* on the same unsecured bond, but this time—you guessed it—he must see a psychiatrist for "screening." Now I ask you, who is crazy here, Sibert? Or the gullible magistrate, so faithfully reflecting the cockeyed values of our time?

I have previously criticized the *Washington Post* as though it were the principal national fountainhead of correct liberalism. Therefore this might be the place to say that the *Post's* editorial page, of late, has become, if anything, fairly conservative, especially in its foreign policy editorials. The paper's National section is still conventionally liberal in its "optional stories"—those not dictated by breaking news events; for example, no

opportunity to paste the oil companies or business in general is overlooked. And the Style section has become merely feeble, filled with reviews by third-rate critics or daily reminders by black theologians of the fourth estate that we live in a racist society. Thus the editorial page comes as something of a surprise.

To give just one example, here is an editorial entitled "Andrew Young Is Not the Problem." The *Post* pointed out that President Carter "was slow to rally to the cause of racial justice in the American South, and this failure filled him with a sense of guilt...." Young's diplomacy, the *Post* added, was characterized by "improvisations and insults and affectations of moral superiority and personal importance." Thus the Carter policy was "superficial and unnecessarily risky." The conclusion: "Those who question the administration's Africa policy should look first to President Carter and to his own evident motivation. Guilt can be a powerful and legitimate human impulse. Whether it translates into wise policy is something else again." In liberalism, that, too, is a *verboten* thought. I doff my cap. □

## THE NATION'S PULSE

by

Peter J. Rusthoven



### *Le Roi Est Mort...*

The recent death of Elvis Presley at the age of 42 has set off a series of events—some quite touching and even moving, others simply bizarre, still others coldly, calculatingly commercial—which the demise of no other performer in this country could have inspired. At this point, the commercial repercussions are the most evident. In the Midwest, at least, it is impossible to watch TV or listen to the radio without hearing a pitch for any of a number of hastily put together collections of Elvis songs, presented in that all too familiar style that is now virtually a genre in the ad business ("This unique tribute to Elvis is not available in any store"/"\$6.98 for albums, \$8.98 for tapes"/"So you don't forget, send your check or money order before midnight tonight to ELVIS, Post Office Box..."/"That address again is ELVIS..."). For a time, RCA had people working overtime, seven days a week, trying to keep up with the sudden surge in demand for Elvis recordings. T-shirts and pennants and posters are readily available, indeed, were hawked by scores of street-

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corner entrepreneurs to mourners outside Presley's Memphis mansion, even as his body lay in state inside. One young man, displaying a truly remarkable ability to mimic the voice and style of the now-deceased King of Rock and Roll, has even put out a 45 RPM "tribute" which, when first heard, sounds eerily like Elvis singing about his own departure.

While the commercial exploitation might easily have been predicted, some of the other occurrences in the week following Elvis' death seem straight from the pen of an over-imaginative screenwriter. Thousands upon thousands of ordinary, far-from-wealthy citizens dropped everything and headed straight to the mansion known as "Graceland" when the news broke. For the funeral itself—which featured a snow-white hearse followed by one white Cadillac limousine after another—a myriad of the more eminent individuals from the entertainment world joined them on Elvis Presley Boulevard in Memphis. The tearful vigil outside the front gate, itself decorated with musical notes and guitars, was disrupted at one point by a drunken hit-and-run driver, who careened wildly through the crowd leaving two dead bodies in his

wake. And Elvis had hardly been enshrined in the Presley mausoleum when a plot to kidnap the body and hold it for ransom was discovered and immediately foiled.

A casual observer may be forgiven for deriving a certain detached and cynical amusement from all this. Some aspects of the phenomenon that Elvis' death—like his life—became no doubt merit such a reaction. But to this observer, who has never been particularly casual when it comes to Elvis, the most significant feature amid all the nonsense and commercialism was the spontaneous, quite genuine, and surprisingly deep grief displayed by masses of regular people who simply loved Elvis Presley and thought he was the greatest. Given the egocentricity of most show business types, the thought must have crossed the mind of more than one celebrity in Memphis last month that, "However 'big' I become, when I go it won't be anything like this."

Anyone who in fact had that thought is right, of course; and to me it seems eminently just that the depth of mourning for Elvis Presley far surpass that which other entertainers may reasonably antici-