

THE NATION'S PULSE



THE LIBERALS' LOST WEEKEND

by Robert D. Novak

When I mentioned to colleagues in the news business that I planned to visit New York City July 4 for the rededication of the Statue of Liberty, the invariable reaction was wonder and pity. "Boy," one journalistic friend told me in a refrain often repeated, almost word for word, "that is the last place in the world I would want to be."

Yet, non-journalistic friends invariably expressed envy that I was going to be lucky enough to watch the relighting of Miss Liberty from Governors Island, the parade of the tall ships from the carrier *Kennedy*, and the fireworks display from the battleship *Iowa*. "Can I come along to carry your suitcase?" was a frequent request.

While my colleagues were turning down gilt-edged invitations of the kind I received, hundreds of thousands of their countrymen were pouring into lower Manhattan—without tickets, without a vantage point to watch the festivities, often without a place of lodging. What my friends in Washington wanted to avoid at all costs, middle America felt it could not miss.

Here is evidence of an elite's determination to avoid rubbing shoulders with the masses. All but the very highest level of VIP's at Liberty Weekend encountered endless waits, bungled transportation, and crowds, crowds, crowds.

Phobia over too-close contact with their fellow citizens, of course, did not show up in the national news media's lamentations preceding the weekend. The critics concentrated on the event's vulgarity and commercialization, with an overlay of distaste for overt patriotism.

No wonder, then, that media scolding began with the ultra-leftist *Nation*, a publication committed against capitalism and patriotism in America. By publishing an article called "The Selling of Miss Liberty" last November, it triggered media frenzy by alleging im-

Robert D. Novak is a nationally syndicated columnist and sits to the right of Morton Kondracke on "The McLaughlin Group."

proprieties in the forthcoming celebration. As July 4 neared, more and more mainstream journalists reenacted Eugene McCarthy's apt metaphor of birds joining their companions on a telephone line. A good percentage of the country's respectable commentators were out on that line with the *Nation*, trashing the festivities in advance.

The *New Republic*, vacillating between neoliberalism and neoconservatism, moved left. Editor Michael Kinsley assigned his favorite young hatchetman, Yale University undergraduate Jacob Weisberg, to savage the ceremony with "Gross National Production" in the June 23 issue. "... This July Fourth weekend," Weisberg predicted, "is likely to be remembered as the most revolting display of patriotic glitz and tacky pageantry in the country's history."

Kinsley, promoting Weisberg's article over CNN, elaborated: "I'll tell you what glitz is. What's glitz is 40,000 people being sworn in [as citizens] across the country. ... It's tasteless." On the weekly talk show "The McLaughlin Group," moderator John McLaughlin introduced a discussion of the controversy this way: "Tacky, tacky, tacky: the gross-me-out Fourth, or no way to treat a lady." Morton Kondracke of *Newsweek* praised McLaughlin for "one of the best lead-ins to a program I've ever seen," then went on to predict "excess" and "overkill."

Roberta Brandes Gratz, writing in *USA Today*, went so far as to say that "a sullied image is indelibly affixed to Miss Liberty's sparkling new looks." She was "sullied" because fund-raiser Lee Iacocca and impresario David Wolper were in charge, instead of the government. The villain is privatization.

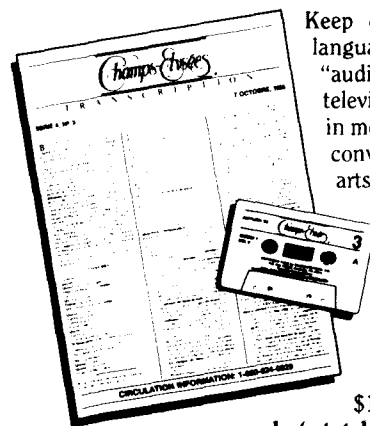
Prof. Arthur Schlesinger, theoretician of the New Frontier's left wing, wrote in *New York* magazine that "what ought to have been a grand national occasion, organized by the Republic itself, has turned in private hands into a shaming orgy of commercialism." He claimed the "Reaganite fetish of 'privatization' ... divests Miss

Liberty of her dignity." Columnist Haynes Johnson, writing in the *Washington Post*, sounded the same theme: "I would prefer her [the Statue's] preservation to have been accomplished by the expenditure of public funds instead of the spectacle of private firms coming to her rescue and then cashing in on their good works."

The symbol, harped on by nearly every journalist who wrote about the weekend, was an Elvis Presley look-alike contest. Ill-advised it might have been, but it consumed no more than four minutes of one Wolper-staged gala. I missed that event, so I shall not carry away the sight of 200 Elvis imitators. The memories I do retain are

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rich: President Reagan presiding over the relighting of the Statue, accomplished by laser technology; President François Mitterrand concluding his French speech with an English birthday wish for America and the Statue of Liberty; the Vietnamese refugee girl reading her prize-winning essay on liberty; the parade of the tall ships; the magnificent fireworks display.

The two events that most moved me were two that prospectively disturbed Mr. Kinsley (who, predictably, did not attend). The mass swearing-in of the new citizens was a stirring moment for a grandson of immigrants. It also should have been instructive for a nation of immigrants that today, as frequently in the past, flinches at welcoming newcomers to our shores.

The same instruction can be ascribed

to the presentation by President Reagan of a "Medal of Liberty" to twelve distinguished Americans of foreign birth. "It's a great American tradition that dates back about two weeks," sneered Kinsley, with special contempt reserved for Bob Hope as a recipient. Hope was there, as were all the others (including Henry Kissinger, Itzhak Perlman, I. M. Pei, James Reston, and Elie Wiesel) except the

nonagenarian Irving Berlin. It was tasteful and stirring, as was most of the program.

But the true spirit of Liberty Weekend was felt away from the great warships, the \$5,000 seats at Governors Island, and the special treatment for VIP's. It was to be found in the streets of lower Manhattan, shut off from vehicular traffic, where Americans from across the continent strolled, celebrating the rededication of the symbol of their precious liberty.

These Americans had no tickets for special events, but there was no lack of activity for them. The street scene looked a little like the Pamplona festival in Spain I attended a year earlier: food stalls selling a wide variety of ethnic fare, free entertainment on temporary streetcorner stages, beer sold outside taverns at makeshift counters, smiling people wandering through the carless streets, just having a good time. The New York scowl had disappeared for a weekend.

Why would these people, without an unimpeded view of the Statue much less access to the festivities, travel hundreds or thousands of miles to watch over television what they could have seen in their homes? Because of the sense of being there.

The mood was personified by Connie Nichols, a banker's wife from McPherson, Kansas, who was one of the victims of a deranged, saber-wielding Cuban immigrant who ran amuck on the Staten Island ferry in the closing hours of the previously violence-free weekend. Though she suffered minor stomach wounds and her husband was hospitalized with deeper cuts, she told Mayor Ed Koch that the attack, which took two lives, "should not detract from a party you gave for a whole nation."

Liberty Weekend turned out to be so much better than the gloomy predictions of the nay-sayers that I wondered whether some of them might admit error. At least one did. Mort Kondracke, on "The McLaughlin Group" that weekend, said he had been wrong the previous week.

But Kondracke was alone. The critics were in full cry, asserting the events had fulfilled their worst fears. They were unmoved by the mass swearing-in, called "stilted" by *Baltimore Sun* television critic Bill Carter. Having condemned Wolper in advance for tastelessness, *Washington Post* television critic Tom Shales could only ask after the relighting ceremony: "Is good taste incompatible with love of country?" Shales was relentless, summarizing the weekend as "a tasteless trivialization of a treasurable idea."

The gap between the ordinary Amer-



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ican's pride and the media elite's disdain may betray an endemic sourness of spirit among those who try to set the nation's tastes but do not succeed. Not far below the surface, however, can be found political motivations.

After the relighting ceremony, Shales wrote of some people—himself obviously included—“who like to think America is ‘about’ more than sales figures, merchandising brainstorm and the blowing of one's horn.” But after the weekend's windup, he more precisely pinpointed the source of his disaffection. Noting a “high profile” over the weekend for Ronald Reagan,

his wife, and his Cabinet, Shales said “this is hardly an administration that is likely to go down as one of the most liberty-loving in history. Perhaps the weekend was conceived as more of a farewell to liberty than a celebration.”

That came close, but it took syndicated columnist Mary McGrory to really make the point—shared but not admitted and perhaps not even perceived by so many colleagues. She compared Liberty Weekend with the Bicentennial celebration of 1976, when Americans were in a chastened mood over Vietnam and Watergate (“We were grateful rather than triumphant”), and found it wanting.

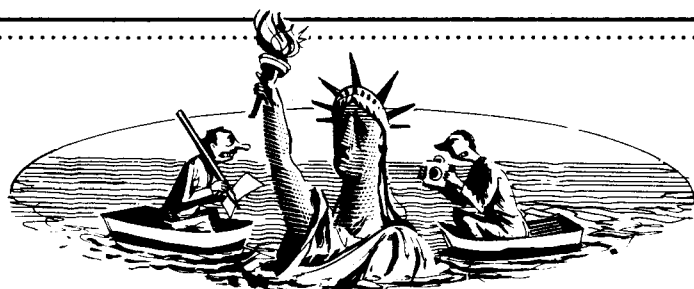
She went through the obligatory ventilation about commercialization, the Elvis Presley look-alikes, the special medals, “Hollywood and Broadway . . . in charge,” and the “vulgar pageant” of the new-citizen swearing-in.

But that's not really what makes my good friend Mary angry. It's the transformation of America between the start of the Jimmy Carter years and the six years of Ronald Reagan. She describes what's wrong not only with the Liberty Weekend but with America: “We're complacent, we're standing tall.

We've invaded Libya, we're fighting a surrogate war against a little country in Central America. We have measured our muscle against some of the smallest nations on the globe and we have prevailed. It's supposed to make us feel proud—and patriotic.”

The spectacle of Liberty Weekend that made Americans feel proud enraged Mary McGrory and a good many other journalists, who are less willing than she to admit ideological motivations but jabber instead about bad taste. In truth, the media assault had lots more to do with Ronald Reagan than with Elvis Presley look-alikes. □

PRESSWATCH



BUMS

by Michael Ledeen

As promised last month, here are just a few of the cases in which the media have helped terrorism:

- In 1974, terrorists seized a courthouse in Washington, D.C. and took hostages. As luck would have it, they kept the hostages in a room that had a two-way mirror in it, permitting the police to see what was going on. But this fact was revealed by the media, and the terrorists had the mirror covered with—fittingly enough—newspapers, thus increasing the hostages' risk.

- On November 22, 1974, a British Airways airplane was hijacked to Cairo airport. In response to the terrorists' demands that their comrades in other countries be freed, an aircraft—which was supposedly carrying the released terrorists—landed in Cairo. But a local radio reporter broadcast a real scoop: There were no terrorists on board, it was a hoax to trick the hijackers. One of the hostages on the BA plane was immediately killed.

- In the September 19, 1977 edition of *Stern* magazine in Germany, it was revealed that the government team negotiating with the Baader-Meinhof Gang for the release of hostage Hans Martin Schleyer, had no intention of releasing the prisoners that the German terrorists were demanding in return for

Schleyer. The terrorists then broke off all negotiations with the government, opened a channel to Schleyer's son, and negotiated a ransom of fifteen million dollars. This was announced by the German Press Agency, which even went so far as to report the time and place that the ransom was supposed to be paid. Hundreds of journalists raced to the spot, and of course no transfer of money took place. Four days later Schleyer was dead.

- A San Francisco radio station monitored police frequencies during the Patty Hearst kidnapping, and learned of an impending arrest of three terrorists. This was immediately broadcast; the terrorists heard it and evaded the police trap.

- Following the hijacking of an American airliner in 1972, in which the hijacker parachuted to safety, police planned to place transmitters in parachutes in the future. This was published within two days of implementing the strategy, thus rendering it useless.

- During the Hanafi Muslim occupation of the B'nai B'rith building in Washington, D.C. in 1977, the terrorists were interviewed on radio talk shows. Just at the time that the police were trying to win the confidence of the terrorists to negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis, one of the hosts of a local talk show asked the terrorists, “How can you believe the police?”

- During the TWA hijacking in the summer of 1985, an American televi-

sion network announced that the “Delta Force” had been sent to the Mediterranean to free the hostages. The terrorists, who had taken the plane to Algiers and had given the authorities until 7 a.m. to meet their demands, took off two hours earlier, thus depriving the governments involved of the possibility of immobilizing the aircraft in Algeria, rather than facing the almost hopeless task of liberating the hostages in Beirut.

One could continue this list at far greater length. And for those interested in the phenomenon, I highly recommend a little-known book, written by two Dutch scholars, Schmid and diGraaf, *Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (Leiden, 1980). Schmid and diGraaf show, for example, how media coverage of one event serves as an inspiration for others (hijackers of airplanes who asked for parachutes became a near-epidemic at one point, clearly because of the publicity given to the first such cases), how journalists encourage terrorists, and so forth.

Meanwhile, it is discouraging to see that an impressive number of American journalists consider acts by our government to strike back against terrorists as somehow immoral. The *Chicago Tribune* ran a three-part series in May on the American response to Libyan terrorism. It is a model of how

not to analyze foreign policy. The *Tribune's* authors (Nicholas Horrock and James O'Shea) began with an account of a public opinion poll taken at the request of the Holloway Commission on terrorism in December 1985 to determine the attitudes of the American public on the matter. Horrock and O'Shea continued:

Although they couldn't have known it, these ordinary Americans . . . played a key role in setting the Reagan administration's policy on terrorism—a policy that last month sent American aircraft to bomb Libya, a sovereign nation . . . that was not formally at war with the United States.

You get the idea: Reagan bombed poor, innocent Libya—which, after all, hadn't done us the favor of formally declaring war, thereby eliminating all doubt about their role in international terror—because the people interviewed months earlier by the Holloway Commission indicated they'd like firm steps taken against terrorists. One might have hoped that Horrock and O'Shea would point out that terrorism is adopted by countries like Libya precisely because it is an unconventional, low-intensity form of warfare; the countries that engage in terrorism don't want to be openly identified with it, but they do want the results that they gain from it. The *Tribune's* journalists avoid this matter; they want to portray Reagan as bombing Libya simply because the poll—of which the President was most

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