

EDITORIALS



BAD CHARACTERS

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

When the pundits and the politicians begin to conjure with what in 1987 they are pleased to call the character issue, tune them out. Once again they are indulging in their favored pursuit: to wit, burning incense before their own enhaloed personas. It is unthinkable that they could be deeply concerned about character. Few of them have it. In fact, few of them even want it. In American politics character has too frequently been an impediment to greatness.

The character issue should more accurately be addressed as the gossip issue. If character were at issue in Judge Douglas Ginsburg's recent fall, surely more indignation would have been shown toward those Harvard faculty members who smoked dope with colleague Ginsburg in the late 1970s and then ratted on him. To be sure, Ginsburg's errancy manifests a flawed character, but what is the flaw? That at a party of Harvard profs he immediately took refuge in a cannabis paradise? That he was not personally strong enough to resist the criminal folkways and mores of the Harvard Law School? That, for trusting in the honor of his liberal colleagues, this conservative academic was a political simpleton? There is, indeed, a question of character here, but few in American public life are going to subject themselves to derision from their peers by meditating on what that question might be.

In America for well over a century there has been a tension between moralism—or Puritanism, as it is known—and that peculiar brand of 100-percent American optimism that scoffs at the possibility of evil. Today the moralists are in the ascendancy when the topic is acquisitiveness; the scoffers are in the ascendancy when the topic is a "victimless crime," to resort to a 1970s misnomer. On the weekend that Judge Ginsburg's Supreme Court nomination went down in a volley of

moral indignation—abetted by, of all people, the Senate bartender, Senator Edward Kennedy—a *New York Times*/CBS Poll revealed that a majority of Americans thought Ginsburg's past offense was an insufficient reason to disqualify him from the Supreme Court.

I take leave from the majority here. Were Judge Ginsburg a repentant bohemian of some sort, say an ex-jazz musician whose early years were spent in a drug subculture but who for decades has lived an irreproachable life, I would excuse him. Alas, this law professor as recently as 1978 indulged in a drug that is (a) subversive to Western culture, (b) anti-social, and (c) always taken to sozzle the mind. That last point is particularly significant. A beer or even a scotch and soda can provide refreshment. Marijuana only provides escape and an acrid fragrance reminiscent of various incinerators I have known.

No, the stories that the press retails these days about a public figure's private life do not constitute data from which to make character judgments. They constitute gossip, that is to say: personal or sensational stories ferreted from behind the scenes. When ex-Senator Gary Hart and Senator Joseph Biden went down it was not because they had displayed bad character but because their candidacies had become ridiculous in light of their bizarre antics—a renowned skirt-chaser brags of his prosaic life and challenges the

press to prove otherwise, a legendary orator is caught lifting his oratory from other spellbinders.

If what is called the "character issue" really were about character, not so many of the giants of our time would be pertly declaring marijuana use by a public figure "irrelevant." Nor would they be saying one's private life is irrelevant to one's public life. Those who think most carefully about free government have realized that it rests on a moral basis. In the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, Thomas Jefferson's colleagues declared that in a "free government" the people must adhere

"to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality and virtue. . . ."

Thus with such proven libertarians as our guides we can all safely admit that private vices and virtues are indeed relevant to government. Character does matter in choosing leaders. The problem is how much does it matter? How, bearing in mind the imperative of privacy, do we discover a candidate's character? And what constitutes good character? Having listened to the idiot babble surrounding the so-called character issue of 1987, I have come to the conclusion that the pundits and the politicians have not a clue. □

WHO'S TO BLAME?

As even the most casual observer must have noticed, the Republic has emerged from the comparative tranquility of the middle 1980s into . . . ah . . . troubled times. There has been the epic crash of the stock market; and, though not many Americans were heaved into a debtors' hoosegow because of it or even suffered a loss of discretionary income, it has cast a shadow. There are the trade and budget deficits. Again, these are deficits that have been with us from time out of mind (which for most pundits means over a year) but they now loom large on the national anxiety index. And there is Attorney General Edwin Meese. He has allowed such nefarious deeds to be perpetrated at the Justice Department that all progressives of good conscience are agreed: for the good of the Republic he must be put to death or at least sent to Leavenworth.

America, then, in the last days of the Reagan tyranny is in a hell of a mess. How does one explain it? After all, the economy has experienced the longest peacetime expansion in American history. At this very hour the "misery index" (inflation plus unemployment) is down to 11 percent compared with 20.6 percent in the last days of the Carter Enlightenment. Enemies abroad have ceased to stride and many have

been on tiptoes since misfortune befell their colleagues in Grenada, Libya, parts of Africa and Southwest Asia. Particularly in those last two places, Soviet stratagems have been sorely tested and at very little expense to the American taxpayer. Even international terrorism has now somewhat abated.

How, given all these recent accomplishments, has the Reagan regime allowed the Republic to collapse into such a dreadful state? Every day the headlines scream of new infamies. It began with the dastardly Iran-contra business, foul play in Nicaragua that continues and gets worse, the Bork & Ginsburg atrocities. All the aforementioned contretemps have brought America back to a case of what in the late 1970s a great President referred to as "paralysis and stagnation and drift." I know. Last month I addressed nearly two hundred lawyers from a leading progressive law firm in this great city. Every one of them is blue about the Administration's present condition, particularly about this fellow Meese. Has the Justice Department ever seen the likes of him, I was asked. Not since Ramsey Clark, I responded, which did not cheer them up!

So I undertook an analysis of the present malaise. I have gathered extensive data. I have consulted widely. It is my conclusion that the eruption of



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calamities afflicting us is no accident. Our present woe is the result of the machinations of a foreign power. That will come as no surprise to the faithful who repose so uneasily at the far ends of the political spectrum. But the right might be surprised to hear that the foreign power of which I speak is none other than South Africa, working through its National Intelligence Service (NIS).

How do I know this? I wish I could answer with a dramatic story that would thrill my colleagues in the press.

I wish I could say Bill Casey told me while we played poker with Bob Woodward a few days after Casey's brain surgery at Georgetown Hospital and while his bodyguards were off bowling. But the real answer is simple logic.

In the tranquility of the middle 1980s America's constituency of conscience, as the Hon. George McGovern used to refer to all forward-lookers, had very little on its agenda of disquietudes. There was their autumnal concern for the homeless. There was concern for the farmers. There were brief outbreaks of horror over hunger in Ethiopia, the decline of the American Midwest,

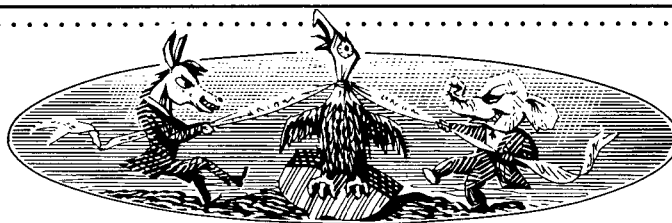
various sorts of domestic abuse, and something about the feminization of poverty.

All these middle-1980s horripilations followed the nuclear freeze and the Reagan budget cuts, remember? Of course, most are misfortunes that any conscientious citizen might want to alleviate. But they did not cause the requisite amount of disquiet that concerned Americans crave. They did not threaten the legitimacy of American government. Thus the constituency of conscience affixed its concern on our government's policy toward South Africa. Soon there were tremendous

demonstrations on campuses and at every South African consulate. South Africa had to respond.

Surely, its intelligence agents orchestrated the news stories that have diverted attention from Johannesburg to all the above-mentioned furors. Weigh the evidence for yourself. Ever since the mysterious revelations of the Iran-contra story South Africa has faded from the headlines, much to its own benefit and to the benefit of Amy Carter's academic record. Otherwise fundamental conditions here and, for that matter, in South Africa, are little changed. □

CAPITOL IDEAS



DOLE'S BITTER MEDICINE

by Tom Bethell

The correlation of political forces is of exceptional interest as we enter the election year. The October stock market drop inexplicably gave the Beltway tax-eaters the excuse they were looking for to howl for more revenues. "Deficit reduction" was their war cry—a thinly disguised appeal for tax increases, phrased in a way that nonetheless continues to dupe the unwary. Among the Republican candidates, Sen. Robert Dole of Kansas is conspicuous for his eagerness to please the Beltway crowd. That's why the liberals love him and call him a "pragmatist." Launching his campaign, Dole said in Iowa: "The American people are ready for bitter medicine. The credit card is due." He received swift praise from Anthony Lewis, the left-wing *New York Times* columnist. "A formidable candidate," Lewis noted. "Sensible, knowing in the ways of Washington."

Dole is the Republican who wants to administer castor oil to the electorate. His reasoning is obscure, but he believes quite fervently that we have been on a binge of late. "The deficit is the issue," he keeps on saying. By that he means he wants to raise our taxes. "I think [Walter] Mondale had a point," Dole told Sidney Blumenthal of the *Washington Post*. In 1984 Mondale promised the Democratic convention in San Francisco that he would raise taxes if elected. Dole's only quarrel is with

Mondale's forthright *boast* that he would raise taxes. "If I had been Mondale I wouldn't have addressed it quite that way," Dole said.

Call it deficit reduction and you will soon have the dimwitted GOP establishment on your side. The Beltway will applaud. And the liberals will deliver a sly ovation right along with the Republicans. The liberals are completely confident, with good reason, that the Democratic Congress will obstruct all spending cuts (except for defense). Thus deficit reduction will mean, in legislative reality: Tax Increases. On this issue, at least, Dole stands shoulder to shoulder with his Capitol Hill colleagues, Sen. Paul Simon, Sen. Albert Gore, and Rep. Dick Gephardt. They all think it would be a good idea if a greater portion of the national income were sent to Washington so they could re-route it back to favored constituents.

Dole says that he "never understood" supply-side economics, but what he means is that he never liked it. "There isn't an easy way," is Dole's Doleful Refrain. Actually, if a legislative obstacle prevents the citizenry from engaging in trade with one another, then the removal of that obstacle really will make life easier for all. High rates of taxation do constitute just such an obstacle to trade. Their removal (the No. 1 item on the supply-side agenda) is indeed the easy way—helpful to all (even to tax-collectors). The reduction of high tax rates is objectionable only to those who believe

that the appeasement of envy should be the first concern of policy.

In 1980 Dole accused the supply-siders of peddling snake oil. Now he has some bitter medicine to sell us. He will hold the spoon and we are supposed to swallow. For a long time he went around telling the following Doleful joke. "The good news is that a busload of supply-siders went over a cliff. The bad news is that there were two empty seats on the bus."

Sidney Blumenthal hints that Dole's seemingly embittered outlook on life may date from the wound he received in World War II (he has little use of his right arm). "I'm certain when it first happened I was bitter, like anyone would be," Dole recalled. "Why me?" and he added: "I don't really accept it yet." Dole refuses to wear clip-on ties or loafers, instead laboriously tying his own ties and shoelaces. "He doesn't want to be let off that easy," his brother explains.

There is no easy way, in other words. Dole went through much pain and suffering for the American people. Now it's our turn, if I read Dole aright. In the White House Dole gets to play doctor and we the patient.

George Gilder, the author of *Wealth and Poverty*, worked as a speechwriter for Bob Dole in his 1976 vice presidential campaign. Gilder recalls being summoned into the Doleful presence, there to find one of his speeches spread

out all over the floor. Pointing accusingly at the pages and glowering at Gilder as though he were an incontinent dog, Dole repeated in his harshest voice: "Bad! Bad! Bad! Bad!" When Gilder told the other staffers about this later, their general reaction was that he had gotten off lightly.

A few months ago Gilder wrote an article about Senator Dole for *Life* magazine. Gilder told of Dole speaking (this year) to Iowa farmers and being asked what he thought about the value of the dollar.

"I don't know anything about the dollar," Dole said.

A week later Dole spoke to the Society of Financial Analysts in Philadelphia and was asked the same question.

"I don't know anything about the dollar," Dole repeated. All in the room groaned. Gilder said that the latter of these two scenes was cut from the *Life* article, on the grounds that it was "too devastating" to Dole.

Right now Dole is the media's favorite among the GOP candidates. They like his neatly edited sound bites, his scornful cracks, and of course they like the fact that he can be relied upon to implement the liberal agenda under cover of fiscal responsibility. They like his wife, Elizabeth Dole, knowing as they do that she worships at the shrine of Women's Issues. (That is, the aggressive extension of affirmative action into as many areas of life as possible, with

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