

SOUND AND FURY: THE WASHINGTON PUNDITOCRACY AND THE COLLAPSE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

Eric Alterman

HarperCollins / 352 pages / \$23

reviewed by JOHN PODHORETZ

George Will is the root of all evil. "The McLaughlin Group" is a leading cause of racial tensions in the United States. Morton Kondracke has the blood of 100,000 slain Iraqi soldiers on his hands. Robert Bartley of the *Wall Street Journal* sold America to the Japanese. These are just a few of the gems to be mined between the covers of Eric Alterman's *Sound and Fury*.

Sound and Fury is yet another one of those books that tries to explain the conservatives' domination of the 1980s by ascribing it to sinister magicians whose hypnotic powers held the nation in thrall. Only this time the magicians are not Ronald Reagan and his diabolical image machine, but guys who write newspaper columns and appear on television. Alterman contends that almost all of the nation's difficulties "derive from a common foundation: the deadly combination of right-wing belligerence and intellectual irrelevance that dominates our political discourse." His definition of "political discourse": articles that appear on op-ed pages and the televised pronouncements of their authors when they appear on TV.

Alterman calls these men "the punditocracy," a term whose gracelessness typifies his clunky and labored prose. (For the record, Alterman describes my prose style as "atrocious" and "self-infatuated.") The punditocracy comprises George Will, Charles Krauthammer, A.M. Rosenthal, Robert Novak, Morton Kondracke, Fred Barnes, William Safire, and (the token liberal) Michael Kinsley.

John Podhoretz, a visiting fellow at the Hudson Institute, is writing a book on the Bush White House to be published next year by Simon & Schuster.

While using most of these men as target practice (he offers some words of praise for Safire and Kinsley), he also flatters them by wildly inflating their importance and glamorizing them beyond all recognition. Life is just one long party for the punditocracy, as they trip the light fandango with Reagan Administration officials and drink deep of Fame and Power at inaugural balls and exclusive Georgetown parties.

Alterman cannot quite decide if they have been corrupted by fame and power, or whether they have been granted these bounties because they are ideologically committed to conservative causes. Their ascent coincided with Reagan's, and Alterman is disgusted by what he believes is the punditocracy's indecent intimacy with Washington's powers-that-be. In a chapter about George Will that runs twenty-three pages but takes as long to read as the unabridged Milton, he breathlessly recounts Will's supposedly scandalous behavior toward Ronald Reagan in 1980, when he helped Reagan prepare for his debate with Jimmy Carter and later had the President-elect over to dinner.

The fact that Will kept himself at a philosophical arm's length from the Reagan White House, attacking it from the right for insufficient anti-Communism and from the left for insufficient taxation, is barely discussed here. The same is true of Will's *persona non grata* status in the Bush White House. It is understandable that Alterman makes so little of Will's intellectual independence from Reagan and Bush, since it would completely invalidate his rather tenuous polemic.

Alterman is on somewhat firmer ground when he attacks "The McLaughlin Group" for infantilizing the American political debate. But he fails to understand one simple little point: "The McLaughlin Group" is a TV show. Its purpose is primarily to entertain (the same is true of syndicated columns, by the way, which tend to be snappy and lively pieces; nobody would read them if they were written by the likes of, say, Eric Alterman). Instead, Alterman treats "The McLaughlin Group" as though it were a Platonic dialogue, and would probably seek the fate of Socrates for the likes of his book's *bête noire*, Fred Barnes. Here is how he describes the influence of the "Group" on America:

When historians one day seek to understand how George Bush and Lee Atwater succeeded in making "liberalism" a dirty political word in 1988, they will need to look no further than the tapes of five upper-middle-class white guys sitting around a TV studio talking about how black families "are going to have to stop relying on government and politics to solve their problems."

One might have thought that the American electorate itself decided "liberalism" was a dirty word, and that George Bush and Lee Atwater merely uncovered this fact in time to make Michael Dukakis profoundly uncomfortable. That is, after all, what democracy is about—striking a common chord with voters, who then make you President.

But then, Alterman doesn't really go for all this democracy stuff: when writing about President Nixon's war with the media, he says dismissively, "Nixon was certain that he, not these self-selected Ivy League smarties, understood what the American people wanted from their president." Well, yes; Nixon had been elected by tens of millions of Americans and thus had some claim to representing them better than the nation's editorial pages—and especially the editorials of Alterman's favorite outlet, the *Nation*.

That the punditocracy agreed with Ronald Reagan on certain fundamental issues is impermissible in the World According to Alterman; for "alone within

that section of the media where our political discourse takes place, the pundits have the power and obligation to point to a naked emperor and observe that he has no clothes on." Note well the key word here: "obligation." Alterman believes the only honest political writing is for the purpose of exposing naked emperors. But what if the emperor is clothed and his critics are as denuded of wisdom and sense as Eric Alterman himself? His introduction, after all, praises the late I.F. Stone, friend to Communist dictatorships and possibly handmaiden to them as well.

Alterman writes about his opponents as though they have taken control of the political discussion in the United States. While it is certainly true that these men were the rising stars of Reagan-era journalism, they have been largely balanced (or canceled) out by

the editorializing in our major newspapers that appears under the qualifying phrase "News Analysis." These bylined articles, which physically resemble news stories but are actually nakedly subjective, are given prominent placement on the front page, not somewhere near the back of the front section. They are the expressions of American conventional wisdom, and for the most part they do *little but* point to the emperor and declare him naked.

What really comes across in this book is its author's rage that some opinions with which he disagrees have managed to receive widespread attention. Unwilling to engage these ideas seriously, he instead resorts to petty assaults on the characters of the men who hold them, substituting rumor for fact with the small-mindedness and ugly dexterity of a campaign spokesman. □

Quebec, it does the next best thing: it surveys with wit not unmixed with contempt, a long train of stupidities that have contributed to a world-class economic, political and constitutional crisis that may well require the partition of the country to resolve—civil war having been ruled out as "unthinkable."

October's "no" vote in a Canada-wide referendum on national unity only deepens the problem. Quebecois intellectuals and governments have over the years debated whether Quebec would be better off without Canada. But anyone who points out that virtually all of Canada's constitutional difficulties center on Quebec is indirectly raising another question: Wouldn't Canada be better off without Quebec?

Richler starts by describing Bill 178, a law that excludes any language but French from exterior commercial signs. Inside stores, English is allowed to appear, but only if it is clearly subordinated to French. Detailed directives have been promulgated regulating, for example, the size of letters on signs. One rule states: "The color of the French and English lettering should be the same. If not, the color of the French should be stronger. The language inspector will decide what color is stronger." The assumption sustaining the Quebec sign law seems to be that French will be preserved and enhanced by suppressing English and those citizens who speak it. Likewise, one can argue that arson is really a form of urban renewal.

Contemporary ethnic nationalism is best understood by looking at the religious history of the province. A half-century ago French Quebec was Roman Catholic not only in its religious practices, but also in its social organization. The health, education and welfare bureaucracies, for example, were staffed and administered by priests, nuns, and lay brothers and sisters. It is only in the last generation and a half—which is to say with astonishing rapidity—that that entire apparatus has been secularized.

The most unsavory aspect of Church-dominated society in Quebec was the contempt it taught for non-French, non-Catholic citizens. The term *maudits anglais*, damned English, was understood literally. The powerful English-speaking Presbyterian businessmen of Montreal were indifferent to these curses, not least

OH CANADA! OH QUEBEC! REQUIEM FOR A DIVIDED COUNTRY

Mordecai Richler

Alfred A. Knopf / 277 pages / \$23

reviewed by BARRY COOPER

Canadians are prey to many myths, but the most important of them is that what makes us truly, uniquely, profoundly etc. Canadian is Quebec. Two peoples, working in two languages, together, building on the northern half of the continent a more tolerant, more caring, more just nation than the U.S. Without Quebec, sing the full-throated chorus of Canadian intellectuals, we would simply be poor, cold, rust-belt Americans with a deep appreciation of hockey.

When the novelist Mordecai Richler attacked many of the underpinnings of

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that myth in an article in the *New Yorker* in September 1991, it was greeted in Canada—and especially in Quebec—with a tumult of incoherent anger. Richler drew attention to two dirty little secrets: the repressive language laws of Quebec and its history of anti-Semitism. Last spring he published it all over again as *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!*—with footnotes, a bibliography, and a host of new details that have only increased the rage and the incoherence of the response. To make matters worse, a week after it appeared in Canadian bookstores, it was the number-one bestseller in the country.

Richler is famous enough abroad that his words will carry weight at home, and, although his book doesn't aim to ridicule the government and politics of