

IN DEFENSE OF ELITISM

William A. Henry III

Doubleday / 212 pages / \$20

reviewed by DIANA WEST

It's impossible not to mourn the passing of a man who could write the following sentence: "The unvarnished truth is this: You could eliminate every woman writer, painter, and composer from the caveman era to the present moment and not significantly deform the course of Western culture." So writes William A. Henry III in his brave, posthumous book, *In Defense of Elitism*, a densely packed, frequently brilliant, occasionally chaotic work that challenges the prevailing orthodoxies of -isms and rights groups.

Henry, the Pulitzer Prize-winner and *Time* magazine culture critic who died last summer at 44, mentions having shared this gem with "several dozen male and female acquaintances who are learned and cultured, in most cases as a vocation, and they have all agreed with me, although each and every one asked not to be quoted." A recurring theme in Henry's book, in fact, is the chorus of silence with which his peers affirm his clear-eyed arguments. Even the book's inscription, to "the friends who egged me on," must stipulate "especially the handful willing to say so in public." This is not a point Henry dwells on. But time and again, he mentions requests for anonymity from people who agree with him, colleagues and contacts who refuse to let their names stand alongside his. The silence of Henry's circle, among whom, undoubtedly, number many best-and-brightest types, is a reminder not only of the intellectual repression of our day but also of the aptness of the word "brave" to describe a book such as this one.

According to Henry, "elitist" is now as damning a pejorative as "racist." Society has degraded the elitist concepts of individual

responsibility, merit, achievement, and learning itself. Since World War II, competition between the intellectual forces of elitism and egalitarianism has become disastrously one-sided—and "egalitarianism has been winning far too thoroughly. . . . We have taken the legal notion that all men are created equal to its illogical extreme, seeking not just equality of justice in the courts but equality of outcomes in almost every field of endeavor."

Henry makes a quirky champion, given his meticulously listed credentials. "I am not a right-winger," he writes, "and I hope I am not a nut." As proof he offers the facts that he is "still" a Democrat and an ACLU member, and has received awards for his civil rights writing from assorted victimish groups (he lists them all). He also relates that he "hurriedly crossed the room" to avoid being introduced to Pat Buchanan, adding in the next breath that his wife and he "have donated copiously to the electoral opponents of Jesse Helms."

Henry doth protest too much. A few



glimmers of old-fashioned liberalism—from-on-high do come shining through in the author's mouth-puckering distaste for anything even remotely populist, be it the "self-celebration of the masses via . . . camcorders" or state government. On taxes, Henry writes that "Democrats have an effective elitist message to offer in raising taxes—to wit, noblesse oblige." (Now, *there's* an idea . . .) But these are throwaway lines, unsupported by the solid intellectual framework of his book, which stands squarely on the works of such conservative thinkers as the frequently cited Charles Murray, Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, and Gertrude Himmelfarb.

Unencumbered by the stultifying rhetoric of sensitivity, Henry simply writes what he thinks. On multiculturalism: "The troublesome aspect of multiculturalism is not the opening of 'our Anglo-Saxon heritage and values' to the recognition of other achievements. It is the systematic validation of black failure and Hispanic racial isolation, accompanied by a rationale that forbids polite society from labeling those things what they are." On romanticizing Indians (whom, when the mood strikes, he calls Siberian-Americans), Henry warns: "Admire the Indians if they embody values you cherish. But don't reinvent their culture, or anyone else's, to suit your need for emotional black and white."

Just as quotas are meant to guide minorities to equality in the present, Henry says, "multicultural theory is meant to give them a sense of equality about their past." The problem is that some cultures have more to offer than others. Past grievances, past conflicts, are no rationale for the fictionalization of history and the unending redress of such present-day programs as affirmative action. (It must be said that although Henry excoriates affirmative action, he also falls back on his liberalism to blame "cynical white male managers" for its failures.)

In perhaps the boldest passage of the book, Henry allows for "the possibility of difference" among the races:

Perhaps it would mean that, in a society sans affirmative action, somewhat fewer blacks than whites would go to college, fewer would become lawyers or doc-

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tors, fewer would run large corporations. Would it matter? Arguably not, as long as everyone who is qualified has a chance and more than a few minority candidates actually continue to make it. America's doors will never again be closed to blacks. Perhaps it's time to stop thinking of blacks—and having them think of themselves—as a category. Let them rise or fall as individuals. That would be, in the moral and metaphysical sense, an affirmative action. The measure of a just society is not whether a demographically proportional share of any group succeeds, but whether any individual of talent can succeed regardless of what group he belongs to.

Henry's special peeve is the \$150 billion a year taxpayers spend on higher education. "Despite the seeming elitism of fostering self-improvement and learning," he writes, "the true effects have been to help break down the distinctions between the accomplished and the workaday, and to promote pseudo-scholarship based on gender anxiety and ethnic tribalism." His modest proposal? Reduce—through removal of federal subsidies—the percentage of high school graduates who go on to college from nearly 60 percent to 33. (Britain, France, and Japan typically send only 10-15 percent of their young people to college.)

His take on feminism prompts him to ask questions about a working mother demanding job flexibility for child-rearing:

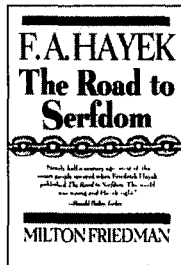
Why, pray, *should* an employee with divided loyalties be treated the same as one who will give his or her all to the job? And on the philosophical plane, how can the very people most apt to say that childbearing is a private matter when the subject is abortion then reverse themselves and insist that it is a societal matter when the subject is their personal need and convenience in the workplace?

Bravo. In the great debates of our day, there are those who look askance at liberals-come-lately. But not only is the work of such figures worthy on its face, it is also to be prized precisely because of its source. William Henry's name may now be mud among the left's true believers, but think of all those friends he left behind, sitting on the fence. □

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THIEVES' WORLD: THE THREAT OF THE NEW GLOBAL NETWORK OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Claire Sterling

Simon and Schuster / 304 pages / \$23

reviewed by DAVID BROOKS

In 1991, Soviet Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov charged that Western banks and intelligence agencies were engaged in a treacherous global conspiracy to destroy the Soviet Union by undermining the ruble. These rantings were greeted with general hilarity by Western diplomats, academic experts, and those of us in the Western press corps. We took them as a sign that the Soviet Union had finally gone gaga.

Now comes the Italy-based investigative journalist Claire Sterling to say that Mr. Pavlov may have been right. Sterling brings a lot of prestige to this argument. During the Cold War, she did invaluable work on the KGB, world terrorism, and the Mafia. The heart of *Thieves' World* is a recounting of this strange episode in the death of the Soviet Union.

Sterling presents a series of documents in which Western businessmen offer to buy huge quantities of rubles in exchange for dollars. In 1990, five men were arrested in Geneva trying to broker a swap of 70 billion rubles for \$4.6 billion. A British businessman named Paul Pearson was arrested at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport on January 23, 1991, with a contract signed by the government of the Russian Republic for a swap of 140 billion rubles for \$7.8 billion. One hundred and forty billion rubles was equal to all of the cash in the Soviet Union at the time. The owner of a condom factory in New York with six employees signed a letter of intent with the republic's prime minister Ivan Silaev to buy 300 billion rubles for \$50 billion. An organization called New Republic

Financial Group, with declared capital of \$17,000, offered to buy 140 billion rubles for \$5 billion. If these offers were genuine, the Soviet premier was right to be alarmed.

The first question is why anybody in his right mind would want to own rubles, which were then in free fall. Sterling quotes Russian investigators, who noted that the unidentified "buyer company" behind one Western businessman "could use its ruble account to make massive purchases of raw materials, recyclable products, and fixed assets—the whole national wealth—at extremely low prices." Sterling notes that it was roughly during this period that Soviet gold reserves, estimated at 2-3,000 tons, disappeared.

The second question is how these dubious and seemingly small-time Western businessmen could get their hands on such quantities of dollars, or even credibly argue that they could. Sterling implies that these were nar-



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codollars, traded for rubles, which were used to buy raw materials, which in turn were sold for hard currency on world markets.

This is certainly a plausible version of events. In the first place, it is impossible to underestimate the scale of corruption in the former Soviet Union. Billions of dollars do indeed flow to Russia in exchange for raw materials. Whenever Russian or Lithuanian customs authorities launch one of their periodic crack-downs—during which time they actually police their borders—they seize huge quantities of metals, lumber, military hardware, and such.

On the other hand, there are crucial links in the story for which evidence is lacking. The Soviet Union in its final days was filled with shady Western businessmen who talked big but could deliver nothing. Sterling's documents show only that deals were struck, not that they were actually carried out, which is the exception in that part of the world. Furthermore, there is no evidence that any Western government participated in the offers, let alone knew of them; Sterling merely argues that the intelligence agencies must have been aware of what was going on. And why would a Russian factory manager possessing, say, aluminum sell his stock for rubles, when so many other businessmen were offering dollars or marks?

In the end, Sterling's account must be taken as informed speculation.

The ruble scam is the heart of this book, but Sterling does not begin to discuss it until page 167, two-thirds of the way in. The preceding text is a meandering and overwrought narrative that spans the globe, from Russia to Italy, Belgium, Uzbekistan, Philadelphia. EC politics are described. The P2 scandal is summarized. Trade policies are discussed. One has the impression that for much of the book, Sterling merely collected clippings and wrote to fit them in. (Indeed, many of the sources refer to Italian newspapers.)

The upshot is that the Mafia, the KGB, the Triads, the Colombian drug cartels, and other criminal organizations have formed a world criminal alliance, something between a rogue's U.N. and what Sterling calls "secret criminal brotherhoods in planetary communion." The leaders of this criminal conspiracy