

COMMENT

The United States is unique in its public commitment to the Deity. Ever since our country was founded on a claim of natural rights endowed by our Creator, our greatest leaders have made reference to Divine Providence a central element of our public discourse. Even our most skeptical public officials have deemed it appropriate to acknowledge, as Justice William O. Douglas once wrote, that Americans are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.

Despite the prominence of the Divinity in our official rhetoric—and His enduring influence over the conduct of many American citizens—the Creator of our lives and liberties now enjoys a less prominent position among those who shape our culture. Our professors and pundits are likely to scoff if accused of accepting the Nietzschean dictum “God is dead,” but their guidance would effectively divorce His influence from our public lives. Rather than acknowledge the primacy which we accord the Creator in our constitutional documents, these sages have magnified the “wall of separation between Church and State” from a microscopic comment in one of Thomas Jefferson’s letters into a juridical doctrine intended to relegate religion strictly to our private lives. One might think that the self-appointed apologists for our diminishing secular morality believe themselves capable of inflating their own importance by attempting public diminution of the role of Divine Providence.

The elevation of “separation of Church and State” to preeminence in our constitutional catechism has had paradoxical consequences for public discourse. In earlier generations, the invocation of scriptural references in political rhetoric would prompt a rhetorical flourish of a competing religious reference. Today, invocation of biblical support for a position routinely earns a “sectarian” label for the argument. Such arguments are admitted to have “potential appeal” for “some segments” of the American people, but before the position can gain serious treatment in forums of public discussion, they must be recast in “purely secular” terms. The Bible can never be cited for its enduring message, but must be interpolated according to today’s allegedly “caring and sensitive” needs.

This trend continues unabated as what even our most skeptical commentators must concur are moral questions gain increasing prominence in our politics. We thus conduct a truncated public debate: the Supreme Court affirms that abortion is a religious question, then denies the relevance of religious responses to its decisions. Debate over capital punishment addresses questions from rehabilitation to retribution, but religious conceptions of justice (that might guide even deliberations about rehabilitation along different paths than those traversed by modern psychology) are treated as so sectarian that arguments about just retribution rarely gain a public hearing. We revert to an old discussion about the possibilities of “selective” conscientious objection, while we



sever our public rulings from the Creator of all conscience, to the extent that even Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church appear unwilling to assert (perhaps even they have become unfamiliar with) teachings about justice and war that have guided civilization for over 1500 years. Ignoring these intellectual roots, the American people confront modern questions of war and peace as if the fear of violent death had never had any influence on human thought before the detonation of the atom, and as if religion had nothing to say that might expand the horizons of those who believe that the only important questions center on preserving life in this world. And, rather than attempting to counter this mind-set, today’s more prominent clergy seem to have their voices, as well, suitably attuned to the gospel of contemporary secularism. Trendy clergymen spouting militant liberalism can gain the endorsement of the secular choir almost because they defy the religious heritage that provides their initial claim to moral stature. Those who laud such defiance as an indication of “courage” lack the insight to see that such secular praise really merits religious censure because it abandons God for the idolatry of this world. Similarly, the cacophony of the antinuclear faction among our contemporary clergy is heralded by establishment commentators so uncertain of moral norms that they can hail these charlatans as prophets. These sages are so isolated from real Scripture that it never occurs to them to ask whether those who would limit American defenses in the face of growing Soviet armaments are acting as evil shepherds leading their flocks astray.

Religious arguments, of course, have had a few moments in the secular sun in recent years. One notes, however, that they are accorded public recognition only if they concur with the "trends" identified by the "progressive" gospel. Clergy who address questions such as the role of religion in education, the moral condition of events that pass as modern entertainment, or the virtues that can be nurtured through economic liberty receive the ultimate contemporary denunciation: these questions "have not kept up with the times." God's arguments, too, are supposed to succumb to the moral myopia that views "newer" and "better" as synonyms. This moral myopia could be sustained as long as the "progressive" prelates of modern morality could shape public discourse around very popular civil-rights causes and a very unpopular war. Once the moralistic fervor that inspired advocates of these causes became wrapped in the ambiguous consequences of their success, and the outrages of abortion and Soviet armament could no longer be ignored by any morally sentient beings, religious arguments reentered American politics.

The movement to curb the consequences of legalized abortion in the United States has been the most productive vehicle for those who wish to analyze today's fads in the perspective of enduring standards. The Catholic Church, speaking through the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, succeeded for a while in establishing abortion as "its" issue. But even in this position, its leadership has been characterized by bad political judgment and isolation from its own roots. The Church secularized and Americanized its arguments to gain support for its opposition to abortion, concentrating its argument on the

"right to life" of the unborn, although that right was seldom traced beyond the Declaration of Independence. Truncating the argument in this fashion serves secular purposes, but it limits the ability of the clergy to speak to their congregations on the broader dimensions of the abortion debate. It also prevents abortion's other opponents from incorporating different dimensions of religious arguments into the political debate. To cite only the most obvious example, proponents of abortion have aligned their arguments with the movement to "liberate" women from traditional notions of virtue. One steeped in a religious argument should remember that "liberation" from one of this world's passions frequently is achieved by enslaving the spirit through different passions.

While nonsecular arguments have found a voice on what has been labeled the "religious right," the Catholic Church in the United States has moved to defuse its seemingly strong identification with some of the less socially acceptable opponents of abortion. Using the debate surrounding various drafts of the pastoral letter on nuclear weapons, the staff of the United States Catholic Conference has done its best to merge opposition to abortion and opposition to nuclear weapons as the new "prolife" position. The tactic enables the Catholic bureaucracy to denigrate the contributions of Representative Henry Hyde (who believes in serious consideration of the Soviet menace) even as it "moderates" the abysmal record of Senator Edward Kennedy (who regularly supports public funding of abortions). The new "prolife" position has the dubious merits of compromising the Church's traditional teachings on abortion and communism and aligning it with those who respect neither its traditional *nor* its compromised positions.

Every thoughtful adult recognizes that religious leaders have a great deal to say in the numerous areas where politics involves moral questions. One expects, however, that when people speak in the name of religion, they will speak from the enduring word of God, rather than from the preachings of the poseurs who would recast His message by replacing prophecy with progressivism. The work of God depends on a tradition much older than the doctrine of natural rights that sustains American liberty. Given the contemporary alternatives—a regime of natural rights or a regime that denies both natural rights and their Creator—it is hardly surprising that the Divine Word is returning to our politics despite the best efforts of leading sages to isolate it. Religion reenters our politics even as it becomes increasingly polarized. Those engaged in the developing discussions of religion and politics must be fully aware that the Creator does not wear the moral blinders of our time. His message is one of eternal salvation, not one of a comfortable life on earth.

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Mindless Intelligence

James Bamford: *The Puzzle Palace: A Report on America's Most Secret Agency*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

by Samuel T. Francis

James Bamford's rather massive account of the National Security Agency (NSA) is one of the most recent examples of a genre that was invented only in the past generation but which has already produced small libraries. This genre may be called the "intelligence exposé," and its characteristic conventions are: (1) the revelation of what was hitherto secret or the confirmation of what had been suspected or alleged but not known for certain; (2) the use of leaks from purportedly knowledgeable or authoritative but always anonymous sources as the means of revealing or confirming the information; (3) the allegation that what is revealed or confirmed is of unparalleled scandalous, criminal, or abusive nature; and (4) the argument, generally insinuated throughout the text but explicitly developed in the peroration, that unless "real reforms" are forthcoming and the revealed abuses brought to a speedy termination, the republic will be subverted and the citizenry delivered to the most degrading servitude. Sometimes those who excel in this genre do not allow its conventions to stand in the way of making valuable contributions to public knowledge of what the intelligence community is, what it is supposed to do, and what it has or has not done. Often, especially in the early days of the genre, they dwelt simply on what the intelligence agencies were not supposed to do but allegedly did anyway, and the result was a body of literature that was self-flagellant, sensationalist, and generally not very accurate. Another result was the virtual ruination of the Ameri-

can intelligence community in the mid-1970's.

Alas, Mr. Bamford's tome is not up to snuff. In the gay old days of the 1970's a journalist could make his reputation and his fortune by revealing assassination plots, surreptitious mail-openings, surveillance of celebrities, human-experimentation programs, and a surfeit of other penny-dreadful schemes at the expense of the CIA and FBI as well as at the expense of a serious regard for truth and national security. But those days are gone forever, it seems. The best that investigative journalists can come up with now is some rather hoary information about the CIA's use of ex-nazis as intelligence agents in the aftermath of World War II (that the CIA might have had a need for agents who knew something about Eastern Europe and had recourse to the people who had been tyrannizing large portions of it for the preceding 10 years or so is unthinkable to them). Mr. Bamford has had to make do with the NSA, the largest, perhaps the most important, and certainly the most boring component of the American intelligence community. What the NSA does is collect Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), which in turn is composed of Communications Intelligence (COMINT), Electronics Intelligence (ELINT), and Telemetry Intel-

ligence (TELINT). It does so through what is called "National Technical Means" (NTM)—the satellites, radar installations, spy ships, giant antennae and platforms, computers, and other highly sophisticated, expensive, and secret interception and decipherment equipment that are centered at or commanded from NSA headquarters at Fort George Meade, Maryland. What NSA does not do—and here is Mr. Bamford's problem—is collect Human Intelligence (HUMINT), intelligence produced by human beings. Because NSA has never been involved in HUMINT, it has never had to put up with the foibles of human agents (at least of our human agents) to the extent that the CIA and FBI have, and consequently there is very little in the way of scandal, crime, or abuse in which Mr. Bamford can wallow. Because NSA's activities involve the development and use of some of the most advanced technology in the world, it has long been the most secretive and protected of the intelligence services. The novelty of Mr. Bamford's book is that he has managed to put together some 400 pages about an agency of which almost nothing is publicly known. Quantity, of course, has nothing to do with quality, or value.

NSA and other parts of the intelligence community are said to be all adithier over *The Puzzle Palace*, and rightly so. Regardless of how valuable the information in the book might be to our enemies, the mere fact that Bamford was able to get so much of it should be profoundly disturbing to those whose job it is to prevent such information from getting out. It means that NSA, whose very charter in the form of a 1952 Presidential order was classified beyond the Top Secret Level, is full of security risks and that some distinguished alumni of the agency have been talking about things they should not have.

That NSA—like most governmental organizations these days in the United



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