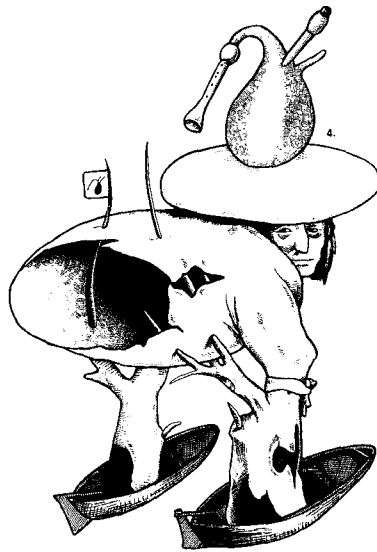


Syndicated King Lear

The jeremiads were not devoid of a certain poignancy. Anchormen and columnists filled their "spaces," both the psychological ones and those allocated to them during the prime time or on editorial pages, with outbursts of the most righteous anger witnessed since Lancelot went on rampage and King Lear filled theaters with the outrage of sorrow. The reason: they were not allowed to land on Grenada with the U.S. forces. "Those are *our* soldiers, the people's soldiers," went the lamentations, "and the people have the right to know what happens to them. And who else is destined by God, Constitution, and immutable laws of history to make people know other than the American journalist—the paladin of the First Amendment? The government's assertion that it wished to protect newspeople from the perils of battle is absurd and does not hold up in the light of the American military history, which is replete with tales of reporters who were killed in action."

While the latter charge is true, and the circumstances of journalistic valor are heartwarming in a nostalgic vein, something happened between the death of Ernie Pyle and the liberation of Grenada. During that time, the American soldier of every rank, rightly or wrongly, acquired a strange, often oppressive impression that although the American journalist may not be on the enemy's side, he is not exactly on the soldier's side, either. While it is difficult to formulate the reasons why this is so in a few sentences, it is apparent that the feeling reached its climax in Vietnam. The bitter complaints about the Administration's handling of the press during the Grenada crisis actually bared the sickly affliction that, for the last two decades, contaminates the relationship between American society and the freest press on the planet.

The litany of dangerously vicious inanities which followed the Administration's decision may well begin with that of a doltish female CBS correspondent



who, after President Reagan's first press conference on Grenada, felt personally abused by the President. She concluded that Mr. Reagan lied to her: he initially announced that he sent troops to save American lives; he subsequently noted that a Cuban menace existed (one that CBS News was unable to check in advance). The reflection that Mr. Reagan could have had the double objective of saving lives *and* annihilating the Cuban threat, and perhaps, had some other goals (like restoring a legitimate government to Grenada), and that *all* those objectives may have been equally valid (but not communicated to CBS at the network's schedule) never oppressed the lady's mind. She held the President guilty of misinformation.

However, she still has a way to go before she will reach the level of sophisticated chutzpah of her colleague, Mr. Walter Cronkite, the TV icon of phony bonhomie, who intoned:

This nation is founded on the belief that people have the right to know and that we participate in our government's actions. . . . These are our Marines, our Rangers down there. This is our foreign policy and we have a

right to know precisely what is happening, and there can be no excuse in denying the people that right.

We were always persuaded that *our* foreign policy is that of the President and the Congress, both duly elected according to the principles of representative democracy. If we do not like the kind of foreign policy the constitutionally mandated powers pursue, we vote them out of office. Actually, Mr. Cronkite's whining is at the center of the disease which might grow tumorlike into the flesh of the American civilization: the Cronkites and other press overlords seem to believe that the First Amendment is not a warrant for free expression, but for dictating, forming, and superimposing upon the government and the nation a policy deemed right by them. We thus have in the press the nonelected rulers who, in the best imperial tradition, claim that they have "their" Rangers and "their" Marines—like the Queen's Own Rifles. Mr. Cronkite conveniently forgets that *his* network is involved in a legal contention with a soldier, General Westmoreland, who accuses it of lying and until now has not been proven wrong. We know a gentleman in Connecticut who, during the Vietnam War, used to pass a clean piece of fabric over his TV screen each time after Mr. Cronkite's image had appeared on it. "I'm wiping off lies from my appliance," he noted, adding, "It's a purification reflex."

In the mourning rites, Mr. Cronkite was joined by Mr. Henry Grunwald, the lord of the *Time-Life Inc.* fiefdom who, in a more conciliatory and sober tone, tried to turn the tables around and prove that the exclusion of the press was not the President's sin ("In many ways he is the most open President we have had in a long time"), but someone else's, one who did "a real disservice to Ronald Reagan." Yet, in an essay, Mr. Grunwald couldn't resist forming a sentence that strikes us as even more mendacious than insidious:

The press has a serious quasi-constitutional function as a representative of the public.

One does know how to politely react to this kind of imperial usurpation. We do not recall making *Time* our representative in *any* area of public affairs, civic obligations, and social perception. Nor, for that matter, did we, as the part of the public, give any mandate to the *New York Times*, Rupert Murdoch (brrr! . . . what a disgusting idea . . .), NBC, or *Newsweek* to represent us in *any* possible way, on *any* given issue. Mr. Grunwald's intimation of "semi-constitutionality" inadvertently unveils the *totalitarian* mindset of the press lords: they apparently have already reached the verdict that democratic representation is achieved by subscription not by ballot. It will take a bolder and more determined Ronald Reagan to remind them that it is not so, and cut them to their proper size.

The *Chicago Tribune*, with its tradition of heavy-handed duplicity, brought some sort of relief to the dispute. In an editorial it duly ranted against the ban and "censorship," announcing:

. . . once the invasion was underway the Pentagon should have made prompt arrangements for reporters to reach the scene, or at least to board the ships lying offshore. Because of the failure to do so, Americans for three days received sketchy, confusing and unreliable information on the situation.

Thus, the *Tribune* assumes—actually, it holds as a self-evident truth—that once the press is on location, it provides non-negotiably reliable, never confusing, information. The editorial-page editors, however, omitted to check their own letters-to-the-editor department, wherein a retired U.S. Army colonel responded to some of the *Tribune's* own journalistic practices on the subject of Vietnam:

I had thought that the passing years had made me more tolerant of uninformed journalistic commentary on Vietnam, but Kenneth R. Clark proved

me wrong when he wrote about a "dispirited American Army" abandoning Saigon. . . .

The U.S. Army turned over the fighting to the South Vietnamese long before Saigon fell, and only a few advisers and the State Department people remained to be evacuated. The army that had been withdrawn earlier had abandoned nothing and had never been dispirited. It was maligned only by such people as Clark. His perpetuation of historical error and repetition of the doubtful lore of the antiwar faction exacerbates the open national wounds he refers to.

I don't know how Clark came by his impression, but I was in the U.S. Army. We may have been puzzled, but we were far from dispirited. To say otherwise is the final insult to those who served and the dead we are so fond of numbering in the press.

But we do not need to go back that far in order to pinpoint the American press's mendacity, unreliability, and supercapacity to confuse minds. We now have Grenada and can see what the media are doing to it, what they are choosing *not* to say, and how they are assiduously working to deconstruct the rightness of Reagan's policy and decision. The media would have the public—the people—believe that the U.S. efforts are as laudable of those of a giant who claims a victory by taking on an ant: it is regularly pointed out that Grenada has a smaller population and only slightly more square miles than the District of Columbia—as if storing modern arms for entire armies, organizing espionage networks, plotting terroristic activities, and building up sophisticated naval bases requires more space than that offered by Martha's Vineyard. Mr. Albert Xavier, "former editor of Grenada's only independent newspaper, the *Torchlight*" (thus also a journalist, but obviously not a liberal New York-style one) who "left Grenada after the Bishop government closed his paper in 1979," according to his credit line in the *Wall Street Journal*, has published there an article in which he unveils the

very scope of the subversion strategy invented in Moscow and Havana and centered on Grenada:

The plan to subvert the elected governments of the Eastern Caribbean and replace them with communist-leaning revolutionary governments was hatched in 1976. Off the western coast of St. Lucia lies a rocky islet named Rat Island. It was here in 1976 that Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard of Grenada, George Odum of St. Lucia, Tim Hector of Antigua and a few other lesser-known communist sympathizers met in secret conference to plan the political future of the Caribbean.

No one, to our knowledge, referred to Mr. Xavier's article in the bastions of the American liberal press: being unable to witness the shooting, this press feels absolved from the duty to analyze the fray's real and concrete cause. Maurice Bishop, a former London pimp, a Brechtian character who rose to the depths of communism from the underclass and who overthrew a legitimately elected government and committed Grenada to the global communist planning, has not been exposed to much scrutiny in the pages of our most informative organs, either—in spite of the American people's right to know. Mr. Xavier had something to say about that matter:

There is no doubt in the minds of West Indian political analysts that the plan to subvert the democratic governments of the Eastern Caribbean was coordinated by Fidel Castro, with Michael Manley as a willing ally. When Jamaica's current prime minister, Edward Seaga, won the election and turned out Mr. Manley, the Eastern Caribbean operation became more urgent. Thus, the full import of the Grenada episode will become clearer when the ashes have settled.

When the Cronkites, Grunwalds, et al., are swept into the dustbin of history, an excerpt from a letter of one John A. Phillips to his parents can serve as the most trenchant, perspicacious, and, in

the same breath, painful encapsulation of the "people's right to know" issue:

If by some bizarre turn of events here I get killed, please don't let anybody say anything leftist to the press, like (some other) families of Marines killed here.

Marine Sergeant Phillips has been killed in Lebanon, in the line of duty. □

Compassion Anyone?

Within a social stratum that may be described as *very* wealthy and *very* liberal, *The New Yorker* is venerated as the "Sovereign One"—which is the "in" synonym for the Lord in the new lectionary issued by those charming theologians from the National Council of Churches who have decided to rewrite the Book. Actually, for more than a decade, the magazine—nearly a sexagenarian—has been a sad spectacle of superannuated radicalism. Radicalism, as we all know, can be alluring, though never graceful, when it is worn by youth. To be a sixtyish radical and actually to take oneself seriously requires some sort of mental callousness, even if it is deeply embedded in that particularly American tradition that sees fun in senile kookiness, to which polite pity should be the proper response. Nothing better defines *The New Yorker* of today than its film critic—an elderly lady whose looks convey anything but sensual expertise—who salivates in lengthy, garrulous essays on the blessings of the sexual "revolution": her apotheosis of a movie that instructed teenage girls in oral sex is an odd exemplification of ludicrousness that renders both irony and skepticism helpless. This is why, as someone has already noted, the top-hatted Eustace Tilley (*The New Yorker's* emblem) has outlived his relevance: a representation of a revolutionary bandanna above a visage that reveals several costly face-lifts done in Manhattan beautification clinics would more accurately crystallize the truth.

In a recent elegant editorial, *TNY's* suave sages invited their readers to ponder the plight of the hungry and homeless—after the former had finished



savoring their filet mignon in their posh penthouses. After detailing the case histories of a half-dozen starving indigents, the editors displayed the careful fastidiousness that characterizes their style as they contemplated the question of moral responsibility. Discarding theory after theory, they finally settled on a satisfactory indictment which condemns everything without soiling anyone's tux:

The system—the same system that treats most of us well—has done them [the poor] in; it's the system that mires them in racism, that works to deny social mobility and to concentrate wealth, that keeps public schools inadequate.

No one, though, is really to blame for this state of affairs, least of all *TNY* writers who innocently enjoy the best that this malevolent system has to offer:

We usually are what we are through no fault of our own. And what some of us are is rich.

Something ought to be done about those nonrich people who aren't eating, of course, but apparently no one need forego such essentials as fashions from Fifth Avenue shops or subscriptions to refined magazines in order to donate

money to charitable institutions. "It's not almsgiving that's needed," we're assured, but something else: "The system must be changed before poverty will start to disappear. . . . We must change the system in such a way that new generations do not grow up poor." We do not understand this kind of social determinism. Are both poverty and wealth surgically detached from the quality of a human being? What *other* system do the editors of *TNY* have in mind? That one, perhaps, in which nobody has anything, but in which a handful of radical journalists who serve ideological thugs have more than anyone else? And how can this change be effected by readers who are deeply involved with fashion designers and luxury cars, or by investment bankers who are best at building portfolios? *The New Yorker* explains patiently:

We can vote for politicians who might raise our taxes, and for politicians who will make sure the bureaucracy works for poor people.

This we call the Metzenbaumian social ethics. The name is derived from one Senator Metzenbaum, a liberal multimillionaire who is a fanatical constructor of social programs paid for with skyrocketing taxes. He, naturally, is also willing to pay. Of course, even if he pays according to the highest bracket on the tax tables, he still has enough to eat filet mignon every night. The hardworking American, who *also* has to pay for the programs Sen. Metzenbaum promotes, is slipping ever closer to the poverty line as a reward for what he is "through no fault of [his] own . . .," that is, a carrier of the idea of self-reliance, work ethics, and human dignity. Sen. Metzenbaum does not ponder compassion, he serves it like a tennis ball—a dubious metaphor perhaps, but one that should be quite vivid for *The New Yorker's* readers. Its editors—that's another story. They deem systems in which compassion is enforced (by whatever means) as something much nobler than the homely capitalism of plumbers and grocers. □