

COMMENDABLES

Culture as Commodity

Ronald Berman: *Culture & Politics*; University Press of America; Washington, DC.

The government consists of people who, presumably, work to aid, assist, and otherwise cooperate with the people who foot the bill for such activities, namely, the taxpayers. There is, then, an essential employer-employee relationship existent here. Anyone who needs some extensive auto service probably wouldn't hire a lawnmower repairman to do the task, even though said repairman is capable of handling various aspects of internal combustion engines on wheels. A baker with a flair for chocolate chip cookies and other miniconfections isn't the sort of person to whom one would entrust the creation of a wedding cake. Mediocrity isn't so much the issue here; ability is the key concern. As ads for the hardware industry used to advise: don't use a screwdriver to do the job of a hammer. Even the most cursory examination of the Washington landscape provides a certain sense that those who operate our government—both elected and appointed officials as well as the numerous factotums who have gained employment through the ministrations of the former—are, by and large, lawnmower, chocolate chip, and screwdriver experts who are physically and intellectually dwarfed by all of the Capitol's noble edifices and the ideas chiseled there on: the executors and expeditors of the national will and interest tend to be makeshift employees.

The contretemps of Ronald

Berman while he was the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1971-1977) are instructive. Here is a man who is a pro—a scholar, a professor, a writer, a thinker—who found himself in the midst of squabbles initiated by obtuse, semiblind, deaf, and dumb politicians and their attendant hacks and flacks whose understanding of the humanities can be measured via an inverse relationship with the degree to which they can be humiliated—and when did a political type ever succumb to humility? What is most disturbing about Berman's case, which he reveals in a good-natured manner in *Culture & Politics* (strange bedfellows, as he shows), is that the lack of knowledge, understanding, and intelligence is not a deficiency limited to congresspersons who are interested in securing as many bucks as possible from the Federal coffers for the folks back home, but which is also abounding in the highest levels. Berman writes, for example, "The White House was under the impression that I was not a Republican," then adds, "I hoped they had Brezhnev on file under Soviet Union."

A nation isn't truly great because it has an awesome GNP or some other economically measurable attainment. What it creates and how it thinks are vital to its true stature, yet politicians, of both parties, tend to separate the two spheres à la Marx—the base (economics) and superstructure (arts and humanities)—and so scratch their little heads and figure that if money is being spent for the superstructure, they want a piece of it,

period. They can understand cash; culture is another matter. About the two national structures for the superstructure—the NEH and the National Endowment for the Arts—Berman writes.

The two Endowments will always be subject to political pressure, which must routinely be fought off. They will always blunder—the Arts Endowment will always make a grant for some absurd poem that everyone else hates, and the Humanities Endowment will always make some constituency unhappy by satisfying another.

We hope that those doing the fighting are of Berman's caliber and aren't merely some overpaid yet cut-rate pop guns. □

Higher Education

Mark Royden Winchell: *William F. Buckley, Jr.*; Twayne; Boston.

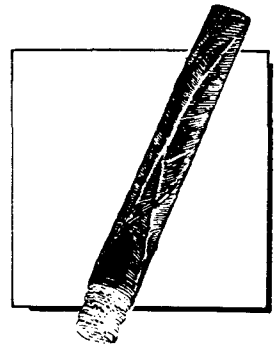
From the academy he came and to the academy he has returned, though not precisely in a Vico-like turn. That is, William F. Buckley, who needs no further introduction or description, arrived on the "scene" that he is so much a part of—nay—*director* of via his *God and Man at Yale*; now, 33 years later, Buckley has been distilled into a slim blue volume destined to find its way onto university library shelves across the land. Thus, it's not exactly a historical circle, cycle, or spiral in his case, but more of a transformation: Buckley has long since "made it"; now he is legitimate.

By and large, the Twayne volumes in the "United States Authors Series" tend to be more informational than ideological.

(Of course, one can argue that the selection of a subject, the use of adjectives, etc. constitute a more or less covert ideological stance, but that's really a case of picking at nits by those who probably haven't spent any time with the volumes.) Students turn to the books to find out what particular authors did during their careers; both personal and professional data are provided: they are more than encyclopedia entries but less than full-blown critical biographies. In a sense, then, the books can generally be described as being "adequate."

Mark Royden Winchell's contribution, however, is refreshing. Buckley is nothing if not opinionated and controversial; Winchell seems to have been infected by his subject: this volume is anything but pedantic Cream of Wheat. Consider, for example, the following passage:

When Dr. Fidel Castro (as he was known in liberal circles) rode down from the mountains of Cuba to deliver that *scepter'd isle* from the Mafia



to the Kremlin, American conservatives experienced an uneasy sense of *déjà vu*. Before Mao had taken over China, we were assured by the Owen Lattimores of this world that what we were witnessing was nothing more than agrarian reform. Now, a decade later, a new crop of savants was telling us that Dr. Castro was the George Washington of Cuba. It wasn't long, however, before

Señor Washington started sounding like Lenin and acting like Robespierre.

First-person plural is regularly used in academic writing for the purpose of maintaining a bit of distance and consequently creating a sense of studious legiti-

macy; in this case, though, the "we" bespeaks personal involvement. More books like this one—informed, sensible, polemical—will help counter much of the leftist blather that's passed off in classrooms as vanadium-clad truth.

IN FOCUS

Opening Philo's Box

Austin Ranney: *Channels of Power: The Impact of Television on American Politics*;

American Enterprise/Basic Books: New York.

Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering, and Ralph B. Levering: *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, the Presidency, and Foreign Policy*; The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC.

Philo T. Farnsworth was not a politician, yet it is tempting to blame much of what is wrong with American politics upon the inventor who made television possible. For as television news has triumphed over older forms of journalism and thus gained tremendous power over the public perception of American policy and policymakers it has often used that power in recent years to laud mindless rebellion, to undermine foreign policy, and to foster unprecedented cynicism about institutions. Many thoughtful observers have concluded that telejournalism has proved so destructive because of the ideological biases of those who practice it. But Austin Ranney argues in *Channels of Power* that the deleterious effects of television news result chiefly from the "structural" demands of a medium originally devised for entertainment. Sensational images,

shocking "scoops," and adversarial interviews, Ranney maintains, simply attract more viewers—and advertisers—than do accurate reports on the status quo or reasoned exposition of ambiguous events.

While Ranney's thesis is not without credibility, *The Kennedy Crises* provides evidence that ideology does play a significant role in skewing the national news. Though the authors of *The*



Kennedy Crises focus on the political influence of newspapers rather than television, what they have to say is germane to any discussion of telejournalism, since, as Ranney points out, the networks rely heavily on leading newspapers to define what deserves attention. Twenty years ago, the Kennedy analysts point out, the editorial "tendency to mute criticism of the president" made it easier for a Chief Execu-

tive to win public support at critical junctures than it is now. Journalists have become more antagonistic toward the government in part because of the way television's rise has effected "changes in the nature of the media." But more important, in the view of these three scholars, is the appearance of "different values and forces" in society at large. Ranney believes that "the advent of television is the most profound change that has occurred in all advanced industrial societies, including America, since the end of World War II." But so long as humans, not television satellites, must make moral and intellectual decisions about their society and its governance, the emergence of different "values and forces" for making those decisions must be seen as more important—and in this case more troubling—than Philo's opening of a new broadcast medium. After all, though Larry Flynt has made his national reputation through his use of printing presses, the difference between him and the Bible-publisher Gutenberg is more significant than the technological similarity.

Dostoevsky on the Couch

Joseph Frank: *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.

Because biographers are bound to the realm of verifiable facts in a way that novelists are not, their work has always been distinctly different from novelists'. But the best biographers have nonetheless shared with the best novelists the guiding conviction that the events of actual human lives, just like the fictive happenings posited in

novels, are embedded in some meaningful story, comedic, tragic, or pathetic. However in the 20th century, avant-garde "antinovelists" and nihilistic Freudians have challenged the notion of "story" as but another bourgeois convention, a childish projection of pattern onto the aimless flux of biological urges and coincidental events. The damage wrought upon serious fiction by these attacks upon "story" is perceptible in the writings of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and other writers who portray a meaningless and irrational universe by violating every stable conception of plot, character, and even syntax. The death of "story" has inflicted havoc upon biography too, though of a somewhat different sort. Lacking imaginative courage, many biographers no longer try to establish the spiritual and imaginative integrity of the events they chronicle. When they do venture beyond the sterile cataloging of dates, names, and documents, they do so not in search of the meaningful and unifying life story waiting to be discovered, but instead in search of "symptoms" explicable within some pseudoscientific theory of psychology.

The reader of the second volume of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky will be glad that the book, for the most part, tells the *story* of 10 years in the life of this great Russian novelist. This story of political intrigue, mock execution, imprisonment, isolation, and first love is narrated with analytical intelligence and careful attention to documentation, but also with the artistic and sympathetic imagination that makes storytelling without fictionalizing possible. Unfortunately, however, Professor Frank descends from story to reductive psychology when considering the spiritual rebirth that Dostoevsky experienced while in prison, awakening in him a