

REVOLUTION ON THE RIGHT: THE END OF BOURGEOIS CONSERVATISM?

by Samuel T. Francis

In the early months of 1985, national headlines recounted lurid tales of an impending right-wing bloodbath in the United States. In New York City Bernhard Goetz admitted to the shooting of four Blacks who he believed were about to assault him on a subway car, and he promptly became a national hero. In the Washington area and in Florida, police arrested several individuals for bombing a number of abortion clinics, and in March someone fired a shot through the living-room window of the *bête noire* of abortion foes, Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun. At about the same time, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies were tracking down and sometimes shooting it out with a violent, anti-Jewish, neo-Nazi secret society called the "Silent Brotherhood," which was accused of committing murders and armed robberies in the Far West and was said to have constructed a nationwide underground network of like-minded citizens.

The sages of the Northeastern establishment waxed gleeful at these reports. After listening to Ronald Reagan talk for four years about Soviet-supported terrorism, they now divined that the real terrorist threat came from the extreme right, which the President and his allies like the Reverend Falwell were said to have insufficiently repudiated. After years of dribbling down their chins over Huey Newton and Ché Guevara, liberal pundits now began to whine about the wickedness of "taking the law into your own hands." After a full year of inventing excuses for not denouncing Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, they now stepped forward boldly to spit in the ugly face of extremism. Once again, American liberalism had proved itself to have the intellectual rigor and moral integrity of a street-corner card shark.

And yet the liberals may have some reason for their mewling. For all of their feeble efforts to implicate Reagan and Falwell in the outbreak of right-wing violence, the establishment left perhaps sensed that the new militants were in reality distinctively different from what has become the establishment right and that they may represent a new force in American politics, something almost unique in American history. The left believes, through its own bloody history, what conservatives find extraordinarily difficult to accept: that a cause becomes forceful when its adherents are willing to shed blood for it, and that the shedding of blood, by itself, galvanizes a cause, solidifies its followers, and induces its enemies to look about them. It is one thing to give money to a favorite candidate or a tax-exempt foundation; it is another to kill someone who disagrees with you. The former is a hobby; the latter, a revolution.

Of course there has been violence from the right before in American history—most recently in the Klan bombings and shootings of the 1960's and to a lesser extent in the

antibusing activism of the early 1970's. Those extremists, however, were quickly absorbed into less desperate movements led by George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and Ronald Reagan, just as left-wing extremists were absorbed by the New Deal of the 1930's and the McGovern campaign of 1972. What appears to be different about the pro-life bombers, the neo-Nazi conspirators, and the anonymous fans of Citizen Goetz, however, is that they are popping up precisely at the moment when the most conservative President of this century has just won a second landslide electoral victory and when a version of political conservatism seems to be gaining some momentum in the national mind. Proclivities to right-wing violence should have been mollified by the current trend, but they weren't. And it is this thought that really frightens the brahmins of the liberal establishment: there just might really be something loose in the dark corners of America that doesn't care about the symbolic flag-waving, is not bought off by the direct mail of Washington-based populists, and wears a lean and hungry look that cannot be placated by the normal give-and-take of consensual politics. And if that something is there, then the American left—and indeed many American conservatives—do have something to worry about.

American conservatism, especially in its political manifestation, has centered on the defense of a commercial society and the ideas, values, and institutions associated with it. Certainly there is more to philosophical conservatism than this, but the ideas of Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss, the New Humanists, and the Southern Agrarians have never played much part in our practical politics. The commercialist and bourgeois elements in conservatism have attracted many businessmen and that dwindling portion of the citizenry that still admires and respects business. The principal value that most American conservatives have always defended is the private gratification of individual interests. Hence, the strong libertarian and pro-business thrust of American conservative ideology from the Gilded Age to the present, rather than (as in Europe or Latin America) an ideology based on religious or ultranationalist themes. Yet it is precisely on such themes that the new militants of the right are dwelling, and it may be that they or similar groups are in the process of articulating something that has never existed in America: a national myth, rising above and overshadowing private interests, to which a revolutionary right can adhere and for which its adherents would gladly spill their own blood and that of others.

It should be obvious that the new militants are not particularly exercised by the pocketbook issues. The "Army of God" and similar groups that allegedly kidnap abortionists, blow up their clinics, and perhaps take occasional potshots at Supreme Court Justices speak for themselves. What they want is a government which is publicly and seriously committed to a moral and religious principle—the sanctity of unborn life—and which actually thwarts

Samuel Francis is on the staff of Senator John P. East. His most recent book is Power and History (University Press of America).

the gratification of certain human appetites (the desire to have unlimited sexual fun without any of the responsibilities nature has imposed). Bernhard Goetz, whatever his lawyers may tell us, was probably less motivated by fear for his wallet or dread of the pain of being beaten up again than by a desire to reassert his own dignity by standing up for himself. Certainly the anecdotes told about his efforts to rescue other victims of crime on earlier occasions reinforce the belief that he was not acting purely out of self-interest, and that is undoubtedly one reason why so many Americans express admiration for him. Nor is the Silent Brotherhood concerned about balancing the budget, human rights in Afghanistan, or the other abstractions that seem to titillate mainstream conservatives these days. In the home of one of the alleged members of this group, the FBI discovered a manifesto entitled a "Declaration of War":

By the millions, those not of our blood violate our borders and mock our claim to sovereignty. . . . Our heroes and our culture have been insulted and degraded. The mongrel hordes clamor to sever us from our inheritance. . . . All about us the land is dying. Our cities swarm with dusky hordes. The water is rancid and the air is rank. Our farms are being seized by usurious leeches and our people are being forced off the land. . . . They close the factories, the mills, the mines, and ship our jobs overseas. Yet the people do not awaken.

Although there is some economics (and no small amount of bigotry) in this declaration, its central message—"we have become a people dispossessed"—has nothing to do with OSHA regulations and bloated bureaucracies. It is hard to unravel fully the tangled passions that go into such a manifesto. But it may be assumed that here—in frenzied caricature—are some of the frustrations felt by middle Americans when their cherished symbols are threatened. San Antonio, for instance, used to be known as the "Alamo City," after the famous monastery nearby where American volunteers faced death from the bayonets of Mexican invaders. Present day Mexican invaders, armed with ballots, found the appellation degrading, and so the Texas metropolis is now known as the "River City." Similarly, in 1979 Atlanta, under the pressure of local Black politicians, changed the name of its "Forrest Avenue," named after one of America's greatest warriors, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, to "Ralph McGill Boulevard," after one of America's most swinish verbalists.

And every time a local government sets up a manger scene at Christmas or makes some other small public affirmation of the Christian identity and heritage of America, it is besieged by the ACLU to take it down. It is now almost impossible to have prayers on public occasions unless there are at least three clergymen of different faiths to make clear that we are not really a Christian nation but merely a conglomerate engaged in public relations.

All of these phenomena are instances of what the manifesto of the Silent Brotherhood prefers to call "dispossession," the chipping and stripping away at the traditional identity of America by militant minorities and special interests aided by spineless and hypocritical elements of the

majority. What the homicidal crackpots of the Silent Brotherhood have perceived, and what is utterly lost on some pundits, fund-raisers, and politicians who claim to speak for the mainstream right, is that, denuded of its historic, national, and religious identity, a people dies and becomes a population, a demographic and economic statistic whose character and identity are then defined in terms of exit polls and consumption patterns; that unless the real identity of a nation is conserved, the issues of budgets, bombs, and bureaucrats are irrelevant to its survival.

What may be evolving in the subway cars of New York and the basement laboratories of bomb-happy pro-lifers is a nativist and largely underground right-wing movement motivated by something other than getting and spending. To be sure, what became known as the "New Right" in the late 1970's was also moved by nonmaterial goals, but by the end of 1984 it was surely clear that parts of the Republican establishment, Northeastern academic neoconservatives, and Mr. Reagan's Kitchen Cabinet had co-opted the New Right and channeled its energies into support for the establishment framework of politics and policymaking. The conventional explanation was that economic issues took precedence over social issues. By opting for political violence, the new militants have ensured that they will never enter that framework. They or their successors may engage in politics, but it is likely to be a politics far more bitter, confrontational, and even violent than anything yet contemplated by any of us on the mainstream right, old or new.

Nor is the establishment capable of absorbing the militancy of the far right. The political framework of the establishment is essentially bourgeois in its design and functioning; it is able to assimilate and gratify private aspirations for material gain, whether of the left or the right, as long as left and right are based on constituencies with such aspirations. The bourgeois framework cannot absorb or respond to political forces that lack economic ambitions, are willing to kill people merely in defense of a national or religious or cultural identity, and reject and contradict the very nature of the bourgeois order. Irving Kristol has written that bourgeois society "roots itself in the most worldly and common of human motivations: self-interest," that it is "the most prosaic of all possible societies" and has little use for the heroic, the transcendent, and the romantic-utopian; and Kristol is correct that mainstream conservative politics in America is characteristically bourgeois.

The new militants, unlike the mainstream right, reject the old bourgeois order and, unlike the militants of the left, equally reject what is superseding the bourgeois system, the managerial regime of salaried technocrats and bureaucrats who promote a humanist and cosmopolitan myth. Although the militants of the right are themselves from the lower or middle income strata, they lack the economic and social autonomy that characterizes bourgeois businessmen and farmers, and one source of their frustration is that they are economically and socially dependent on the anonymous and impervious managerial system. Conservative rebels against the managerial establishment have generally sought a base in the bourgeois remnants of American society and have often succeeded in modifying or slowing down the liberal-managerial agenda. It has been possible to do so by appealing to bourgeois self-interest and common sense, but

it is not possible through such an appeal to challenge the establishment and its agenda frontally. It is not possible because there is no conservative myth in modern political culture that rises above private aspirations or mobilizes masses on a right-wing but nonbourgeois level. But the new militants are closer to the vision of Solzhenitsyn than Milton Friedman. Bourgeois self-interest is less important to them than the heroic, the transcendent, and the romantic. They do not seek to modify or to parley with the establishment, but to destroy it.

It is because they are postbourgeois and antibourgeois, because they have so little attraction to the prosaic ambitions of bourgeois civilization and so much scorn for the baubles of the managerial regime, that the new militants or their successors may be able to achieve what no other force on the American right has ever been able to do, to formulate a myth of the right around which it would be possible to mobilize a massive popular challenge to the myth of the left that has animated Western politics for the last two centuries and which has now even insinuated itself

into contemporary conservatism. "Myths," wrote Georges Sorel, "are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act. . . . A myth cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group, being the expression of their convictions in the language of movement; and it is, in consequence, unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions." The frightening significance of the perpetrators of recent right-wing violence does not therefore consist in their "descriptions of things," but in their "determination to act," in the irrefutable power of their convictions, and in the possibility that they may be able to conjure up that most formidable of all specters in the nightmares of establishments, a revolution from the right, a rejection of both bourgeois comforts as well as of managerial humanism and social engineering, and an affirmation of our national identity and its destiny. And if indeed this is the rough beast that moves among the fragments of our heritage, then we are well advised to sleep uneasily. cc

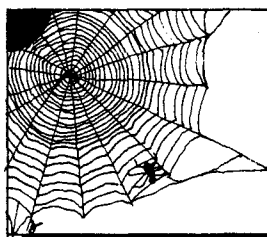
REVISIONS

The Enemy Within

The war in Vietnam has been over for a decade, but the war over Vietnam still rages. That the word now signifies an American failure is obvious. But analysts, politicians, and commentators disagree sharply over the nature of the failure and over who bears responsibility. Many of those who opposed the war said that America had to fail in Vietnam because military intervention abroad is always immoral and ineffective, especially when it supports a corrupt and authoritarian regime. This indeed is what is usually meant by the cries of "No more Vietnams!" that greet every suggestion that America use its armed might to prevent Communist subversion in other countries. But Richard Nixon has entitled his latest book *No More Vietnams* (Arbor House; New York; \$14.95) with something entirely different in mind. The former President compellingly argues not only that our objective in Vietnam was moral but that the military effort could and should have succeeded.

In making his case, Nixon joins the growing army of writers—Guenter Lewy, Peter Braestrup, Timothy Lomperis, Norman Podhoretz, and others—who are chal-

lenging received wisdom concerning the Vietnam War. They have amassed an impressive body of evidence showing that our troops won the war both on the battlefields and in the hearts of the South Vietnamese people. Their sacrifices came to nothing because America entered the war with no clear plan for defeating the North Vietnamese, be-



cause American intellectuals and newsmen misinformed the public about our enemies, our allies, and our victories, and finally because Congress refused to provide sufficient aid to the South Vietnamese after we withdrew. The failure, then, was not in the jungles and villages of Southeast Asia, but in this country's strategy rooms, editorial offices, and lecture halls.

Those who succeeded in stopping American "aggression" in Vietnam now rarely mention the country, unless their eyes are firmly fixed upon Central America or Africa. To confront present-day Indo-

china is to see a land that our former foes have turned into a mass grave and a tropical gulag; it is to contemplate the hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who drowned trying to escape from the new workers' paradise. It is to realize that "a Communist peace kills more than an anti-Communist war."

"No more Vietnams!" must not, then, mean paralysis in the face of Communist imperialism. It must mean instead, Nixon argues, that we learn how to fight "the Third World war" successfully. We must find ways to use our power—military, economic, and political—more effectively in stopping the spread of tyranny. That we have the material resources and technology to win, Nixon does not doubt. The "nagging question" for him is whether we now have the national will necessary to fight for freedom beyond our borders. This is an especially troubling issue given the willingness of journalists and academics to perpetuate the "Vietnam syndrome," always believing "the worst about the United States and the best about our enemies." Resolving this problem is a far more urgent task than updating our arsenal, expanding our foreign aid, or educating our diplomats. cc



COMMENDABLES

Thinking Clearly About War

by Gary Jason

James Turner Johnson: *Can Modern War Be Just?*; Yale University Press; New Haven.

There is nothing quite so fatuous as the nuclear pacifism currently fashionable among leftist theologians and their ilk. Visions of mushroom clouds (brought on by repeated viewings of *On the Beach* and *Dr. Strangelove*) cloud many minds. The result is the fuzzy-minded view that we must either accept the current MAD standoff with the Soviets, or else we must unilaterally disarm. Nuclear pacifism thus paralyzes the West, allowing the Soviets to replace pro-Western governments with proxy regimes.

Such fuzzy-mindedness and paralysis might be avoided if we relied more upon the "just war" theory, developed by philosophers and theologians since Augustine. Sketchily put, just war theory distinguishes questions about *jus ad bellum* (i.e., questions about what justifies resort to war) from questions about *jus in bello* (i.e., questions about which forms of force in war are justifiable). The consensus view has been that a war is justified if and only if there is a just cause (reason) for it, it is ordered by the right (proper) authority, with the right intent, as a last resort, with the end goal of peace, and the evil it produces is proportionate to the good. And a form of violence or weaponry is acceptable in a war if and only if it discriminates between combatants and noncombatants, and it is proportionate (i.e., not excessive) in the destruction it causes.

James T. Johnson has applied just war theory to questions about modern war. He is certainly well-versed in that tradition, having written earlier two books on the history of just war doctrines: *Ideology, Reason and the Limitation of War*, and *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War*. These books were intended for an academic audience. In *Can Modern War Be Just?* Johnson attempts to address the lay audience.

Essentially, Johnson's book consists of a number of previously written essays more or less modified to constitute chapters. In each essay/chapter he applies just war theory to some feature of modern war—either particular wars (such as Israel's incursion into Lebanon) or specific weapons (such as the neutron bomb) or specific issues (such as conscientious objection). The results of his inquiries do not fall neatly into the current liberal/conservative dichotomy.

Some of his arguments are nicely drawn, and persuasive. He neatly punc-



tures the ban-the-bomb balloon, rightly pointing out that unilateral disarmament is the real desire of people who want to ban the bomb, and that unilateral disarmament will increase—not decrease—the chances of nuclear war. He urges a move toward counterforce rather than counterpopulation strategy (i.e., developing weapons directed at the enemy's military power, rather than at his population centers). This latter point of view has not been popular with the professional "peace" activists, causing Johnson some puzzlement. He observes that "there is no small irony in the fact that some of the opponents of counterpopulation strategy on moral grounds have been vocally opposed to efforts to transform our national defense posture away from this strategy, alleging the creation of instability." He is surely right in thinking that there is a curious inconsistency in opposing nuclear holocaust yet opposing any move toward a less deadly strategy—such as President Reagan's plans to put a defensive net in space. Johnson also argues well for the acceptability of the neutron bomb and cruise missile.

However, on a number of issues his arguments are much less persuasive. Occasionally, such as in his discussion of Israel's incursion into Lebanon, his

arguments fail to convince because they are hopelessly brief and superficial—a consequence of addressing far too many issues in a 190-page book, a book which has, moreover, a great amount of redundancy. In other cases, Johnson doesn't fully come to grips with the issues. For example, he seems to urge that we pursue a "decapitation" strategy—develop weapons with the goal of wiping out the Soviets' command and control structure. But he himself notes that this will violate the doctrine of avoiding noncombatants (the Soviet leaders, after all, reside in Moscow).

Though his effort is not satisfactory in every respect, Johnson does seriously attempt to balance principles and respect facts. For this he is to be praised. cc

Gary Jason is professor of philosophy at Washburn University of Topeka.

Clear-Eyed Southerner

by John Shelton Reed

Edwin M. Yoder Jr.: *The Night of the Old South Ball: And Other Essays and Fables*; Yoknapatawpha Press; Oxford, MS; \$13.95.

These essays and columns by a distinguished journalist cover a wide range of topics, among them Sherlock Holmes, *I'll Take My Stand*, the King James Bible, and Flannery O'Connor. A good many have to do with the South, one way or another, and Yoder confesses that he likes the South, with all its faults, better than the Sunbelt, with whatever its virtue may be. He suspects, deep down, that the South is gone, or going—and certainly the settled, small-town South that he (and I) grew up with is apparently doomed. In an essay on W. J. Cash, though, Yoder has some sharp things to say about the role of intellectuals (most certainly including journalists like Cash—and himself) in keeping ideas (like that of the South) alive and breathing.

For the most part, Yoder's tastes are utterly sound, and the few I don't share (Henry James, for instance) I'm com-