



... WHO HELP THEMSELVES

We take too much for granted in America. Whenever we have a problem, we assume that somebody else is paid to solve it, somebody from the government. All the ancient burdens of the human flesh—poverty and envy, greed and arrogance—have been turned over to one or another bureaucratic agency. We sleep better at night knowing that somewhere someone is busy making life better for us. It means that *we* are off the hook. We do not have to give a quarter to the wino on the street (“Are there no prisons, are there no workhouses?”). If a cousin’s business fails, we do not rush in to offer a loan—what do we have a small business administration for? We do not even greet a newcomer in the neighborhood with an apple pie or a “hot dish,” although we may feel it our duty to alert the welcome wagon. By turning over our ethical responsibilities to organizations, we are free to devote our time and energies to our favorite subject: ourselves.

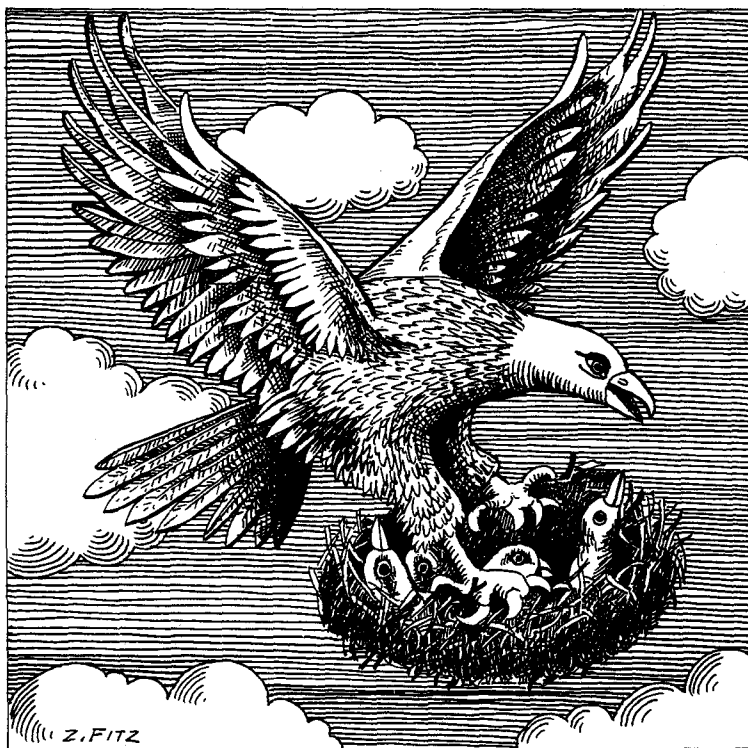
It has got to the point that we think it is positively wrong to do anything for ourselves. Families who attempt to

but God help the man who tries it. Even if we are defending our lives from a school of sharks in the subway, we will find ourselves up on charges of infringing upon what is now regarded as the government prerogative. Anyone who followed the press accounts of the Goetz case—the misnamed subway vigilante—would be convinced that self-defense is a doubtful proposition. Even where it is not prohibited by law, it is still immoral. Confronted with an attacker, our only option is to run. If we must use force, then it must be the minimum force necessary to give us a chance to escape. Why? Because the government has a monopoly on maintaining security and resolving conflicts, and “no one has the right to take the law into his own hands.” If that is really the case, if we really have come to believe that “the law is the true embodiment of everything that’s excellent,” then we are in a far worse state than most of us would like to admit. As the late Kenneth Patchen put it so eloquently, “It’s much later and lousier than anybody thinks,” if only because the government is doing such a bad job of protecting us.

By any index, much of America is no longer a very safe place to live. Our homicide rates are roughly five to 10 times higher than what prevails in Europe, while our robbery rate is about three times that of our neighbor to the north and nine times the United Kingdom’s. Things are not getting better. While the President takes comfort from the indications that rates of violent crimes may be leveling off, the fact remains that they climbed dramatically over the past 20 years. Between 1969 and 1982 the offense rate (per 100,000 of population) went from an already-high 328.7 to 555.3—an increase of almost 69 percent. However you measure it, by whatever standard of comparison you choose, “government” is not doing much of a job of protecting its people, and yet the legal system continues to exercise a monopoly on domestic security.

It is time to consider how much of our problem lies in the fact of that monopoly. Monopolies are almost never efficient. Relieved of the pressure to compete, to measure up to any standard but its own, an institution becomes ineffective and hidebound; its mentality becomes professionalized. Its priorities get redirected from accomplishing results to maintaining status. No longer compelled to serve the public, it comes up with new ways of measuring competence: paper-flow efficiency, performances on standardized tests, and professional expertise. It is a world where the highest law is the Peter Principle. If anyone ventures to voice a criticism, he is told that as a layman he could not possibly understand the problems faced by the professionals.

If you have ever butted your head against the hard rock of a public school superintendent or NEA representative, you



educate their own children may be subject to prosecution, and apart from government employees, hardly anyone is free to thumb his nose at social security and provide for his own retirement. God may help those who help themselves,

will understand immediately. The one statistic educationists cannot stand to hear about is the higher achievement rates of children who have been taught at home or in unaccredited religious schools. Sure, these kids can read and write, they may be math whizzes, but what about their souls? What about health and guidance? What about drivers ed? Most of the discussions of crime are carried on in the same professional tone, in the same atmosphere of unreality. Increasingly, police chiefs are becoming official spokespersons for city hall, part sociologist, part PR. Increasingly, police forces are picking up the sensitivity lingo and express tender concern for the rights of perpetrators. Many of them bristle at the suggestion that citizens should learn to do for themselves what, patently, the police cannot do. Fortunately, most ordinary policemen seem relatively immune to the gibberish that is thrown at them in criminal justice textbooks, but that is small comfort. Back before World War II most teachers resisted the jargon and phony science that already dominated the schools of education in what now looks like a golden age of public education. How far we have come in only one generation! The criminal justice system is at least halfway there.

To be able to resist an ideology, you must do so as a thinking and autonomous individual, but no bureaucracy can tolerate independent minds. It was for that reason that Gabriel Marcel called bureaucracy not only an evil, but "a metaphysical evil." It takes a full-blooded human being, living his own life and thinking his own thoughts, and it reduces him down to data that can be entered in on a form, information to be processed. To the extent we belong to such a system, we lose that much of our humanity. But, it is not only the victims of bureaucracy who lose their identity. Its agents may be even worse off. Concentration camp inmates or army recruits have their heads shaved and their names replaced with numbers; the poor are turned into welfare "cases," but as *victims* they may be inspired to resist. What of the guards, the drill sergeants, and social workers who actually collaborate in the very system that is dehumanizing them? Will they maintain their integrity against the institution that pays their wages? It seems too much to ask of ordinary men who join a police force, that they should resist the temptation to quit being cops and become criminal justice technicians.

Even if the legal system functioned perfectly, it might be less than ideal to invest it with the kind of universal authority it has acquired. In most societies, including until recently the U.S., many if not most problems were handled informally. If a man seduced your daughter, you did not automatically have the law on him. He either married her or risked getting shot if he hung around. You didn't have to worry too much about crimes like burglary or armed robbery, because most men knew how to take care of themselves and their families and, if they needed help, their relatives and neighbors would be happy to provide it. The right to repel violence with violence was among the first principles of Roman law. It had equal force in the Common Law. We did not have to borrow it from the Romans: self-defense is a virtually universal principle of human social life.

The fact is that in most societies, violent means are only rarely required. The mere knowledge that a man is willing

to defend himself is usually enough to discourage crimes against life and property. As Roger McGrath explained the case of the California mining towns he studied (see review in *Chronicles*, March 1985):

The citizens themselves, armed with various types of firearms and willing to kill to protect their persons or property, were evidently the most important deterrent to larcenous crimes.

The defenseless condition of the American citizenry must act as a positive inducement to criminals who know they can pretty much get away with anything. All they have to fear is the police and the sentimental attentions of a well-meaning judge.

There is much more to community security than armed vigilance. There has to be the habit of self-reliance and a sense of community identity. Bargaining with your neighbor over what he did to your car when he was drunk is quite a different affair from negotiating with an armed stranger. We fear the stranger and cannot deal with him as a neighbor. In our ethnically and racially diverse inner cities, it is hard, very hard, to develop a sense of neighborhood. Members of a real community are forced to cooperate for the common good. Traditional communities are integrated in a number of ways. Most people are related by blood or marriage; they may work together; they usually take part in common religious ceremonies. This ideal community may never be restored in urban America, but some elements of it are far from impossible. There are religious organizations and social networks which can serve to solidify community sentiment. Paul J. Lavrakas has found that programs of community security only seem to work if they are operated by already-existing organizations, like a church or retail merchants association. These institutions and organizations have the support of the neighborhood behind them and are able to act effectively in combating crime, if they are given the necessary guidance.

If families, neighborhoods, and community organizations used to be able to keep the peace with only minimal and emergency assistance from the police, what happened to this capacity for self-government? Did it disappear naturally, along with cultural and ethnic homogeneity? Partly. But it is also true that as the state has cast the net of its responsibilities ever more widely, we have lost the ability and the will to do for ourselves. Before World War I, Prince Kropotkin was already complaining that the modern state, by absorbing the social functions of family and community, was promoting a selfish-individualism. It is not pleasant to find yourself agreeing with a crackpot like Kropotkin, but the history of this century has proved him right. Step by step we have surrendered control over our families and communities. The predictable result has been the decay of those institutions—a decay that can be measured in the statistics on divorce, abortion, and crime. The only hopeful sign is the growing recognition that we have made a mistake. It is not just the testimonials of affection that have been showered—rightly or wrongly—on Mr. Goetz. Even criminal justice professionals are beginning to realize that nothing short of a revival of community responsibility can halt the rising tide of violence in American cities.

—Thomas J. Fleming



Progressive Pilgrim by Jay Mechling

"I write the wonders of the Christian religion, flying from the depravations of Europe to the American strand. . . ."

—Cotton Mather

Martin E. Marty: *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America*; Little, Brown; Boston.

One week after the 1984 Presidential election, while Ronald Reagan was still basking in the afterglow of a victory he takes as evidence that "America is feeling good about itself again," the National Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in Washington finally got a look at the 136-page draft of a "Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy." The document is strong stuff, calling the current rates of unemployment and inequities of wealth a "moral and social scandal." The draft pastoral letter already has stirred controversy equal to what greeted the bishops' May 1983 pastoral letter on nuclear war. The timing of the debate over the nuclear letter could have made it a part of the Presidential campaign, though its role in that campaign (indeed, the role of the nuclear issue itself) was much less significant by October of 1984 than most observers predicted. In contrast, the committee of five bishops who drafted the letter on economics purposely kept secret their draft until after the election to avoid making it a campaign issue.

This restraint was all the more remarkable in a campaign season filled

with talk about the proper relationship between religion and politics in America. While one side asked the television audience if they wanted the Reverend Jerry Falwell to be selecting the next justices of the Supreme Court, the other side wondered aloud what was happening to America if we could not allow little children to pray in school. President Reagan's comment at a prayer breakfast at the Republican convention in Dallas that "politics and religion are necessarily mixed" became something of the centerpiece of this public drama, prompting columnists like Garry Wills and William Safire to lecture the President on the American Enlightenment background for the separation of church and state. Meanwhile, the week preceding the election saw in major newspapers the appearance of full-page "public service" advertisements in which the Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation quoted Washington, Madison, Lincoln, *et al.* to the effect that "religion's influence on public policy has had a long and distinguished history." Everyone, it seems, is appealing to the authority of American history, of American tradition, to settle the question of religion and politics. Yet everyone who looks finds a different history or, at least, a self-serving history. Would it help to consult an American historian on this matter? What historian would dare enter this fray?

Enter Martin E. Marty, the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Modern Christianity at the University of Chicago, author of more than 30 books, general editor of the University of Chicago's History of American Religion series, and an editor and regular contributor

to *The Christian Century*. Marty used his *Christian Century* column last October to correct or add historical perspective to several of the popular misconceptions about the American tradition of mixing politics and religion, noting that American churchgoers were no more willing for their clergy to take stands on controversial issues in the 1960's than they are in the 1980's, about 17 percent in both cases. The election came only a few months after the May publication of Marty's *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*, his 500-page history of religion in America. The publication of Marty's most substantial historical statement to date might be a good occasion to ask both what are his views of our history and what are the ideological uses of that history.

"It is often said," writes Marty in his Preface, "that Americans have amnesia: they do not know who they are, nor do they know their past." Americans certainly have a sense of themselves as "a religious people," but (laments Marty and every American historian I have ever met) "few learn what this means or how we came to be such." The consequences of this elective ignorance are serious. If citizens choose to ignore or reject tradition, they are under its control nonetheless. "From the past come words, images, gestures, and choices that still inform and prod." Knowledge of American history in this light becomes more than an amusing pastime, more than a storehouse of trivia for parlor games. It becomes a patriotic duty and, not the least, a tool for defending ourselves against those who use selected words of the Founding Fathers to sell us something.

Folklorists and anthropologists realize that it is the storytellers who have the most powerful grip on a community's understanding of itself and of reality. It is the storytellers who give shape to the unordered flow of events, who (as Marty puts it) "put the name *chaos* on chaos" as the "first step in ordering." Marty's highly readable story

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