

evidence were needed, the degeneration of the Philippines should be sufficient argument against crusading democracy.

In *After Apartheid*, libertarian authors Kendall and Louw dispense with the "unitary state" presumption. In place of "one man, one vote" they suggest a system that would enable citizens to express their political will at several different levels: in short, "one man, many votes." On the economic front, the authors advocate deregulation, removal of prohibitive standards requirements, and a general "devolution" of decision-making to the private sector. Finally, they insist that all apartheid laws must be repealed immediately.

After sketching the history of apartheid, as well as outlining South Africa's current political and economic landscape, Kendall and Louw propose a canton system of decentralized and depoliticized administration, following a Swiss model. Under this system, the federal government would be strictly limited and constitutionally defined, leaving education, transportation, judiciary, regulation, etc. at commune level—with the cantons. Each canton would have its own legislative body,

and perhaps even its own constitution. The residents of each canton would determine their own social and legal arrangements; everything from communism to pure free enterprise to racial domination would be permitted within the cantons, but none would be federally imposed. Freedom of movement would be guaranteed by the constitution and enforced by the federal government, so that no one would be made to live under an offensive system.

This is a remarkably fresh and hopeful book because it not only explodes the widespread mythology about South Africa (e.g., that apartheid is an aberration of capitalism), but also proposes a solution that has a genuine chance of success. One indication of the potential of the canton proposal may be gleaned from the book's dust jacket, which carries endorsements from South African leaders including Winnie Mandela, Zulu Chief Buthelezi, and the late Alan Paton.

The authors' analysis, however, is flawed in several respects. While admitting the reality of the Marxist threat and of Communist influence in several of the black political parties, Kendall and Louw tend to underestimate the

role of Communism in, for example, the ANC. Since the authors are proposing a solution for the internal strife of South Africa, and not looking at the situation in geopolitical terms, this oversight, though significant, is not fatal.

Also, except for a few passing references, the authors ignore the role of the Christian Church in South African politics and society. In a nation as Christian as South Africa, religious institutions must play a central role in any effort to dismantle apartheid. Unless there are profound changes in Christian attitudes on race issues (and these changes have been taking place), any political or economic reform, no matter how sensible in itself, is just so much tinkering with the machinery. On the other hand, if the churches can provide moral and theological moorings for the canton proposal (as they have in the past for apartheid), and if they can avoid the perilous extremes of intransigent traditionalism and revolutionary liberationism, there may yet be hope for this troubled nation.

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## REVISONS

### THE NATIVE AMERICAN

In the business of literature, which has since the 30's been dominated by more recent immigrants, Gore Vidal, old-line WASP, has emerged as the champion of a distinctly American civilization, or what he thinks is left of it. The mantle assumed by Emerson and Lowell and William Dean Howells has fallen on Vidal's rather unlikely shoulders. In *At Home: Essays 1982-1988* (Random House, 303 pp., \$18.95), the tireless Vidal has collected six years' worth of pieces from *The New York Review of Books*, the *TLS*, *The Nation*, and even *Architectural Digest*. Most of them do indeed have a longer shelf-life than, say, *The Nation's* newsprint, and are well worth reading or re-reading. Here are pieces on some of his standard heroes (Tennessee Williams and, with all irony, Richard Nixon; I should say antiheroes), and standard villains (Mr. and Mrs. Reagan: Laurence Leamer's book *Make Believe* sets him off). He is

still mocking the millennialists in one breath while harping with another on the end of the world he fears he will see. He is still obsessed with America, bemoaning the crumbling empire it has become. He is still taken with American writers, and among the best pieces in the book are appreciations and some criticism of Henry James, Howells (whom Vidal is quite right to complain is ignored), and Frederic Prokosch. Vidal can still write, too, and very well.

Vidal can afford the luxury of criticizing his own business with the authority of an insider. In a very funny passage in his piece on Howells, he tries to imagine the route a literarily-ambitious Howells would take today. "Today, if the son of an Ohio newspaper editor would like to be a novelist, he would not quit school at fifteen to become a printer, and then learn six languages and do his best to read all the great literary figures of the present as well as of the past. . . . Rather, he would graduate from high school; go on to a university and take a creative writing

course; get an M.A. for having submitted a novel (about the son of an Ohio editor who grew up in a small town and found out about sex and wants to be a writer and so goes to a university where he submits etc.)."

Vidal's complaint about modern American literature is that "what tends to be left out of these works is the world. World gone, no voluntary readers. No voluntary readers, no literature—only creative writing courses and English studies, activities marginal (to put it tactfully) to civilization."

There is, of course, threading through these essays, the usual hatred of Christianity (and Judaism, and Islam), and the frequent defense, oblique and direct, of inversion. There is also a certain preoccupation with autobiography and self-defense—but then he has led an interesting life, and kicks, generally, those who have kicked first. And to his credit his first concern, whether he is tactful about it or not, is always civilization, especially the odd civilization of the American Republic. (KD)

## Letter From Washington

by Samuel Francis

### Tabula Rasa



If George Bush accomplishes nothing else in his lifetime, he has at least earned a secure niche in future editions of *Trivial Pursuit*. Not since Martin Van Buren trounced the Whigs in 1836 has an incumbent Vice President been elected to the White House. The lackluster record of Andrew Jackson's successor perhaps does not inspire optimism about the new administration, but, as most Americans who bothered to vote probably realized, it will beat the socks off what Michael Dukakis would have offered.

Among those voters who cast their ballots for Mr. Bush were most American conservatives, who had never previously supported him but who finally signed on with enthusiasm. Having wasted their ammunition in combat for Jack Kemp, Pat Robertson, Robert Dole, and Pierre DuPont, conservatives now came to imagine that Mr. Bush's fusillades against Mr. Dukakis represented their own victory, and they gladly galloped off with him to pump their last rounds into the Democratic corpse.

But despite the Bush victory, the fact is that American conservatism is beginning to resemble downtown Beirut in its political and philosophical disintegration. Mr. Bush himself is nothing if not an incarnation of the large yacht club that has spawned Lodges and Rockefellers, and for all the bravado at "morning in America" and "we're ready to lead," the Taft-Goldwater-Reagan wing of the GOP, along with the Old Right, the New Right, the neoconservatives, the First, Second, and Third Generations, the libertarians, the evangelicals, the Southern, Catholic, and Neo-Medieval Rights, and the many-splintered school of Leo Strauss, all were dispatched to the showers.

No doubt most of these grouplets will survive in the recesses of their own political, philosophical, and tax-exempt caverns, and the nether portions of the

federal government may provide a source of relatively honest income for many. But none has much prospect of setting the pace of the Bush administration. Mr. Bush's main campaign advisers and Cabinet officials are not known to be the sort of men who will snooze their afternoons away while the guardians of the damp brow and the pure heart march off with the government.

The political decline of the American right is matched—perhaps even caused—by its philosophical decomposition, and no text better illustrates the disintegration of the conservative mind in the last few years than Professor Charles R. Kesler's introduction to a recent anthology of conservative essays. *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought*, edited by Mr. Kesler and William F. Buckley Jr., is a revised version of a collection originally published by Mr. Buckley in 1970. As the new title suggests, the current edition purports to pronounce an orthodoxy to which the American rights should adhere.

But the tablets Mr. Kesler offers are etched in a strange tongue. While his anthology retains selections from such major conservative minds of the present and recent past as Russell Kirk, James Burnham, and Willmoore Kendall, Mr. Kesler seems to regard most of these as rather like museum pieces, exhibited mainly for their quaintness. He makes it his business to redefine American conservatism in such a way as to exclude from it what once were considered its representative voices.

It is Mr. Kesler's contention that the Declaration of Independence, or rather five words from it, is the "central idea," as Abraham Lincoln called it, of our political tradition. The success of liberalism, Mr. Kesler thinks, is due to the liberals' misappropriation of this idea, with the result that "it has become easy for modern liberals to seize the moral high ground on virtually any issue." Conservatives may gain power if, like the left, they "know the magic words needed to unlock our highest traditions." His counsel, then, is to resist the left not by rejecting its incantations to equality but by sealing them,

and by relegating to the back shelves those formulations of conservatism that do not center on equality or which interpret the Declaration and the American tradition differently.

"The American republic," writes Mr. Kesler,

claims to be based on self-evident truths, first among them that "all men are created equal." Properly understood—meaning an equality of rights, not of virtue, wisdom, or talents, an equality reflecting man's humanity, i.e., his place in nature and the universe—this *is* self-evidently true. But it has not fared well with the majority of conservative thinkers over the past few decades.

Yet Mr. Kesler nowhere explains why the Declaration should be taken as the defining document of the American tradition, let alone why the "created equal" formula should define the Declaration itself. Had he found space in his 450-page collection for M.E. Bradford's essay "The Heresy of Equality," he would have afforded his readers an opportunity to learn how the Declaration may be read in other ways. (He and Mr. Buckley included two essays by Harry Jaffa, Mr. Kesler's mentor, but could find no room for Mr. Bradford's article, itself a reply to one of those by Mr. Jaffa.)

Nor does Mr. Kesler explain in what way it is "self-evident" that all men are created equal. Were it so, why does anyone deny it, and why are there not only conflicting conservative understandings of what the slogan means but also different liberal and socialist interpretations? If the phrase means "equality of rights," what are these rights? Is that the same as "equality of opportunity," and is it possible to have real equality of rights or of opportunity unless there is first equality of condition? Does not a serious commitment to "equality of rights" as the ideal around which political, legal, social, and economic institutions are to be built drag us ineluctably toward a leveled