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POLEMICS & EXCHANGES

Charlotte Low Allen Replies:

Instead of refuting me, Mr. Cassell (Polemics & Exchanges, April 1990) has merely offered a loving paraphrase of George Gilder's book, with whole phrases lifted straight out of Gilder's exuberantly zany prose. Or rather, he has offered a paraphrase of the first and last chapters of *Microcosm*, for few readers have actually managed to "tunnel" their way quantum-style through all the techie-talk of the book's impenetrable and distinctly non-user-friendly middle. I did, and believe me, it was murder.

Most of Gilder's mind-over-matter observations in *Microcosm* are scarcely original. It seems pretty obvious that most of the value of human inventions, from paleolithic flint arrowheads to cellular telephones, has always lain not in their raw materials, but in the human vision and ingenuity that has gone into fashioning them. That is why van Gogh's *Iris* is worth 53 million times the cost of its oil paint and canvas. The notion that what we used to think of as solid matter is actually empty space and flying subatomic particles is something I learned in my high-school chemistry class. I learned about quantum mechanics and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in my freshman Western Civ class at Stanford (that was back before Western culture had to go). What's new about Gilder, I guess, is that he believes subatomic particles are actually eentsy-teentsy ideas, "a form of thought," as Mr. Cassell puts it.

Frankly, I have yet to see much of the "creativity" that the microprocessor revolution is supposed to have "unleashed." True, we have some wonderful new machines, but around them, our culture seems to be disintegrating into ignorance and anomie rather than crescendoing to that happy future Gilder foresees. I just can't equate Nintendo with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Part of the reason for the bland, crude, glutton quality of contemporary life seems to be a contempt for the past that is the cornerstone of all

modernist theorizing, including Gilder's, from the Enlightenment to this day. And, if "the law of the microcosm demands that we eschew all forms of materialism," as Mr. Cassell says, how come Silicon Valley moguls rush out to acquire fancy houses in Los Altos, concubines, and powerful cars?

Don't get me wrong—I appreciate computers. I am writing this reply on one (I scarcely know how to use a typewriter anymore), and when I am finished, I intend to fax it to *Chronicles*. But I refuse to believe that I am in the grip of "a powerful law of nature now at work in our world, one that has already changed us in ways we do not fully comprehend." I prefer to think that I have free will. I don't understand the current fascination with "powerful" and "remorseless" Hegel-style grand historical forces that are supposed to be running our lives. I thought that kind of determinism went out with Marx, but it now seems to be back in style with the end-of-history crowd. That is why, if I am supposed to be part of the "revolt against the microcosm," count me in.

On 'The Agony of Gorbachev'

May I subjoin to Mr. Ragsdale's admirable lexicographic efforts (February 1990) one further example? It is not mine: I take it from the advertising for *Nina's Journey: A Memoir of Stalin's Russia and the Second World War* by Nina Markovna.

"To a Russian, *glasnost* does not mean 'openness,' for which there is a specific word, *otkritost*. Rather, it means 'voice-giving.' In the past, when most people could not read, a man would walk from house to house, from street to street, shouting into a long horn, and in this way would 'glasit' the current news and information to the populace, hence the word *glasnost*."

So, *glasnost* is whatever comes out of the loudspeaker!

—R.W. Odlin
Sedro-Woolley, WA

WITH THE COLD WAR “over,” social engineers are scrambling for the “peace dividend”—the bonanza of cash expected to derive from a winding down of military expenditures that have been allocated to defend against the Soviet military threat. Regardless of the status of the Cold War and of the Soviet threat, and that is by no means clear, surely defense spending will decline in the next few years. The times are just that way. What shall we do with the money?

Of course, there will be no “extra” money to spend, since the federal budget has been operating at a deficit of hundreds of billions of dollars throughout the 1980’s. Our cumulative federal deficit is over \$2 trillion, almost 40 percent of our annual production of goods and services, our Gross National Product (GNP). The interest payment alone on the federal debt last year was over \$200 billion. This is one federal expenditure that is strangling our country. But as any social engineer worth his salt will tell you, it’s all a matter of priorities. It’s better to educate the ignorant and house the homeless than to pay off the deficit. After all, we’ve had a deficit for many years and survived, but if we don’t upgrade our “human capital” now, we are going to spend more later for social services to help or house the ignorant, the unemployed, the needy, and the criminal.

While our consciences are being pricked by this type of threatening rhetoric, we would be wise to review the growth of government social welfare expenditures since 1950. Total social welfare expenditures, including social insurance, public aid, education, housing, and health care, came to \$23 billion in 1950, about 8.2 percent of our GNP. In 1987 government spent \$834 billion, about 18.8 percent of our GNP. In other words, in 1987 we spent 36 times more on social welfare than in 1950. Of course, our population has grown, inflation has cheapened the dollar, and the economy as a whole has grown. Nonetheless, the amount of government spending on social welfare as a percentage of GNP

has increased almost 2½ times. Incidentally, U.S. military expenditure as a percentage of GNP went from 4.4 percent in 1950 to about 6 percent in 1987, with slight declines in the last several years. Soviet military expenditures in 1989 were somewhere between 16 percent and 20 percent of their GNP.

Most of the growth of government spending on social welfare has been at the federal level. In 1950 federal social spending was \$10.5 billion, about 3.7 percent of GNP, while in 1987 federal spending leaped to \$500 billion, about 11.3 percent of GNP. Federal spending on housing increased about 740 times, and spending on education increased 100 times. Undaunted, most social engineers would say that despite this increase in government spending, we still have a higher school dropout rate, a greater decline in educational achievement, and an increase in homelessness, drug use, teen pregnancy, violent crime, etc. They would say now, more than ever, we need to

strengthen the government programs to deal with these problems.

The facts suggest a simpler conclusion, namely, that government social welfare programs have been counterproductive. They have increased over the last forty years the number of Americans with psychological, social, economic, and even physical problems who are now dependent on government. The actual beneficiaries are the growing armies of bureaucrats, social workers, and suppliers who receive the salaries, government pensions, and purchasing contracts to administer these programs.

The proposition that the growth of government has weakened the initiative and sense of social obligation of our citizenry is validated by the experience of Eastern Europeans. They have experienced the realities of governments that promise free education, free medical care, full employment, inexpensive housing and transportation, and guaranteed pensions. And yet the superiority of our democracy and free



Andrzej Czezoł