

dicker wasn't in trouble yet, DeWald told him, but he would be if he planted a cereal crop on the land, which would be a violation of the "Swampbuster" act. According to DeWald, the local conservationist also talked to Widicker, reiterating that grass seed on the converted wetland would be okay, but that even a nurse crop, or cover crop, in the grass seed would count as a commodity crop and would be a violation. Widicker seems to have agreed to the stipulation.

He was serious about seeding that fresh dirt, though, before it blew away again, and the ditch, too, the more he thought about it—but the crew didn't have a seed drill. Widicker happened to have one, and also some grass seed mix that included a little barley. Barley is a common cover, used to protect unmaintained grass from harsh sun and wind as it gets a foothold in the soil. Widicker himself seeded the highway ditches and then turned to his little patch of slough.

Well, that barley did him in. When it was discovered, the SCS informed the ASCS (Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, another USDA arm), which has little flexibility in the penalties it must impose. The ASCS informed Widicker that he would have to give back the \$7,300 in commodity price supports they had already given him (plus \$225 in interest), that he would not receive the remaining \$12,500 that he had been promised, and that any Farm Home Administration loans he had might be endangered, along with his Federal Crop Insurance.

Widicker appealed to the local ASCS board in Fessenden, fifteen miles north. His protest was predictable—that he had never intended to *harvest* the barley, as the rest of the field was in wheat, and that in including it in the mix he had simply been following the USDA's long-standing, ecologically sound prescription to include a nurse crop with grass that won't receive much maintenance. According to him, the local board sympathized, but still, Congress had made the law and Widicker had broken it. There was no turning back.

Then Widicker went to the ASCS office and got them to appraise his little former slough. They found the barley there so sparse that it would have produced only twelve-hundredths of a bushel per acre, and the little patch of wetland would produce slightly less

than a quart of barley.

Now, maybe there's no moral here, except that the government never kids around, and Leo Widicker should have known that. There are also some who find modern farm programs, in their pachydermal incomprehensibility, laughable, and perhaps those people are right—perhaps farmers *don't* deserve special aid, any more than other artifacts of American culture, such as Avon ladies and Good Humor men. There are some who might say that Leo Widicker didn't *lose* any money, he just didn't get all the government handouts he'd counted on, and they may be right.

But there is a farm program, farmers have learned to count on it, and it hit Leo Widicker with a nuclear fly-swatter. Dave DeWald admits that the penalties are too stiff. He says that in the 1990 farm bill Congress will attempt to pro-rate the violations, make the punishment fit the crime, so to speak. For now, though, that barley Leo Widicker may have planted knowing he was breaking the law but planted because he's a conscientious husbandman—that quart of barley, about enough to make a pot of soup—may cost him his farm.

Jane Greer writes from Bismarck, North Dakota, where she is editor of Plains Poetry Journal.

Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

The Grand Illusion



Twenty years from now, when future historians look back at the 1980's, some of them may be tempted to call it the "Decade of the Grand Illusion." For not since *les années folles*, as the French still call the giddy 1920's, has the Western world lived in such a state of deceptive euphoria.

The besetting sin of all democracies, the Achilles Heel of the democratic system, as students of history have known since the age of Ancient Greece, is a chronic reluctance to face facts. This unwillingness is encouraged by the perennial vice that lies at the heart of the democratic system, and for

which the ancient Greeks also coined a valuable term: demagoguery.

Nothing has contributed more to enhance the Grand Illusion of the 1980's than the sudden collapse of the Marxist myth and the dramatic disintegration of the Soviet Empire. This astonishing development caused people on both sides of the Atlantic to look back upon the Reagan years as a kind of Golden Age, not unlike the *Grand Siècle* of Louis XIV. But just as the spendthrift character of Louis XIV's overly splendid reign was, less than a century later, one of the contributing causes of the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* and the onset of the French Revolution, so the fanciful illusion that a country can go on living permanently above its means, accumulating enormous budget deficits and astronomic balance-of-trade gaps, has so weakened the public's perception of what urgently needs to be done if the U.S. economy is to be saved from shipwreck, that it will probably take more than one major shock—like the present Gulf crisis—to awake the American people from a trance that seems to have paralyzed the national will.

Underlying the Grand Illusion of the Reagan years was the simpleminded belief that the United States could go on consuming almost one-fifth of the planet's petroleum output, could continue manufacturing gas-guzzling cars, and, since gasoline was cheap and would axiomatically remain so, did not need to undertake any serious program of energy conservation. Many persons in Great Britain, Holland, and Norway—the three main beneficiaries of the North Sea "oil glut" (now already beginning to run dry)—may have succumbed to this heady illusion, but I think it fair to say that few Frenchmen "fell" for this alluring myth. This is not to suggest for one moment that in France the number of demagogues roaming the political landscape is proportionately less great than in the United States. French socialists, led by François Mitterrand, were a hopelessly irresponsible lot during the early 1980's, and their wild debauch—in nationalizing banks and various industrial sectors—led to three successive devaluations of the franc; but at no time did their ideological aberrations encompass the grotesque belief that cheap gasoline is an inalienable birth-

right.

I remember, a year or two ago, reading an article by Charles Krauthammer, in which he pointed out that a one-cent tax on imported petroleum could produce one billion dollars of revenue for the U.S. Treasury, and that a one-dollar tax could bring in 100 million dollars per annum—enough, he claimed, to wipe out the federal government's annual deficit in three or four years. To the average Frenchman, who now has to pay close to six francs (roughly \$1.20) for one liter of high-octane gasoline, this sounds like straightforward common sense; translated into gallons this amounts to a price of \$4.80 at the pump.

What to an American might seem an intolerable hardship has, for the French, been a blessing in disguise. Thirteen percent of the French budget is financed by the tax on gasoline, and this is one of the reasons why in recent years the French government's annual deficits have been relatively small. But the long-term benefits have been even greater, for the high cost of imported fuel has prompted successive French governments to invest heavily in other forms of energy and to develop ultra-modern means of mass transportation that, in these fields, have put France not just years but decades ahead of a negligent United States.

The shock produced by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait last August was not for the French the first experience of this kind. In 1956, when Nasser nationalized the British-and-French-run Suez Canal Company, the French were suddenly faced with a crippling shortage of fuel, simply because their traditional suppliers—Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—could no longer ship petroleum through the Suez Canal. The pipelines that now cross Turkey and Syria did not yet exist, any more than did supertankers capable of economically transporting petroleum over the far longer route around the Cape of Good Hope.

Even though the French had by that time begun to tap the oil resources of the Sahara, the dangerous shortage of fuel during the Suez crisis had a traumatic effect on the nation and its political leaders. The first visible consequences began to appear in 1958, when General de Gaulle, partly for military reasons, decided to step up

research in the field of nuclear energy. He may not already have realized that one day he would have to say good-bye to a French Algeria and a French Sahara, but he was too hypersensitive about his country's "independence" to be willing to allow France to go on being almost totally dependent for its energy needs on oil imported from North Africa, the Middle East, or—supreme humiliation!—the United States.

Thus was born a state-subsidized company called Framatome, which has since grown into the world's largest designer and producer of nuclear power plants. In 1974, when Europe was hit by another "petroleum shock" (caused this time by the creation of OPEC), France, with only one nuclear reactor in full-time operation (but with six others nearing completion), still had to rely on petroleum for 80 percent of its energy needs. Today, with 53 reactors in operation, France's dependence on petroleum has dropped to around 35 percent—a ratio no other industrialized country comes close to matching.

Although a nuclear power plant costs almost twice as much to build as a power plant based on natural gas, and three times as much as a turbine plant using fuel oil, a nuclear plant generally has a longer life expectancy, ranging from five to fifteen years. But its main advantage, as Jean-Claude Leny, the present head of Framatome, explained last November to *Le Figaro*, resides in the fact that when the international price of petroleum reaches 30 dollars a barrel, it costs 50 centimes (roughly 10 cents) to produce one kilowatt-hour of electricity in a fuel operated power plant and only 20 centimes in a nuclear power plant. Every increase in the international price of petroleum above the 30-dollar level further favors nuclear power. Which is why Leny confidently predicts that "to cover its needs, America will have to build from 100 to 150 nuclear power plants between now and the end of the century."

This, however, is not the only reason for believing that France today is better prepared than most industrialized countries to cope with the world's latest "petroleum shock." The progress France has made in railroad transport, particularly in the field of high-speed trains, has been no less spectacu-

lar.

Fifteen or twenty years ago one of America's first ecologists, Barry Commager, was already pointing out that it requires six times as much energy to transport someone over the same distance in an automobile as in a train. Glib comparisons of this kind can be misleading, for much depends on how many persons there may be in the car, exactly how powerful and fuel-consuming it is, and how well filled in comparison is the passenger train.

Statistical experts employed by the SNCF—the *Syndicat National des Chemins de Fer Français*, as the state-controlled French railway system is called—are more modest in their claims. They have calculated that the electric energy equivalent of one liter of gasoline can carry a train-borne passenger over a distance of 42 miles, if the train is only 65 percent full. (If the proportion of seat occupancy nears 80 percent, which is now the case of many high-speed French trains, then the distance increases correspondingly.) The same amount of gasoline (roughly one quarter of a gallon) can propel a car transporting 2.5 passengers (a statistical average used so as not to disadvantage the automobile) over a distance of 25 miles, and the same amount of kerosene can carry an airbus passenger almost 12 miles only. Broadly speaking, and allowing for the fact that even in economy-minded France few cars can cover 100 miles on a gallon of fuel, the energy-expenditure ratio makes train travel twice as economical as travel by car and four times as economical as travel by air. And this is without taking into consideration the enormous quantities of fuel wasted every day by traffic congestion on overcrowded highways and the "stacking-up" of airliners around a busy airport.

Today no Frenchman in his right mind would think of flying from Paris to Lyon—a distance of about 260 miles (or slightly more than the 200 miles that separate New York and Washington, D.C.). For, by boarding the high-speed TGV—*train à grande vitesse*—at a railway station in the eastern part of Paris, he can get off in the very center of Lyon exactly two hours later, without having had to take a bus or a taxi to one of Paris's two airports, with all the delays involved in checking in, handbag examination,

and, for those carrying suitcases, the tiresome wait at the luggage conveyor-belt. He can do it, furthermore, in any kind of weather and at roughly half the cost of air travel.

Constructing new railway lines capable of carrying trains traveling up to 185 miles per hour is, of course, an expensive business. (Slightly less than two million dollars per mile was the cost of building the Paris-Lyon line, expressed in 1989 dollar-franc currency values.) But it is less expensive than building superhighways, which eat up twice as much land.

Indeed, the experience of the past ten years has shown how farsighted were the rulers of France when, in the 1970's, they decided to modernize the French railway system. It used to be axiomatic that railway companies always lose on passenger traffic and only make a profit transporting freight—the classic example in the United States being the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, mainly used for transporting coal northward from the mines of West Virginia. But France's TGV's have knocked the props out from under this assumption. By the end of 1984, just three years after the opening of the Paris-Lyon run, the TGV's were already showing a profit. In nine years—from 1981 to 1989—the number of passengers using this line increased from 12.2 million to 18 million per annum, and the figure keeps rising.

This is merely the beginning of a long-term program that is to extend into the next century and embrace other European countries. But already today any Parisian who wants to can reach Bordeaux (360 miles away) in just under three hours, paying 290 francs (about 60 dollars) for a fare that on a plane would cost 640 francs (close to 130 dollars). And he or she can do so, furthermore, while comfortably seated in a train that does not begin to shake and rattle almost uncontrollably as the speed approaches 80 miles per hour, as happens on the antediluvian Amtrak trains that ply (plow would be an apter word) up and down our Eastern Seaboard. Similarly, four or five years hence, it will be possible to reach often fog-bound Strasbourg, on the Rhine, in less than two hours, without fear of being delayed by bad weather.

Last May, during a trial run on the new line between Paris and Tours, a

TGV hit a top speed of 321 miles per hour, establishing a new world record, ahead of anything yet attained by the Germans or the Japanese. But the most sensational and telling statistic has come from Brussels, where it has been estimated that road congestion in the twelve member countries of the European Economic Community already costs them 3 percent of their gross international product: no less than 100 billion écus (about 140 billion dollars) every year. (To which might be added another 75 billion écus—roughly 105 billion dollars—for damage caused by traffic accidents.)

If I have run on at length about this problem of fuel conservation, it is not because I have any particular predilection for nuclear power plants, passenger trains, or state-controlled enterprises. But I do earnestly believe that in these two fields we have a great deal to learn from the French.

The current mania for privatization, total privatization and nothing but privatization, is not necessarily an infallible panacea for every economic ill, and may well turn out to be, like so many

other economic fads, just one more grand illusion.

If Jack Kennedy had been the truly great, farsighted President so many Americans still fancy him to have been, he would have realized that a national railway board, geared to an ambitious program of modernization, was urgently needed to pull our country's antiquated railway system from the marshy bog into which it has been allowed to sink. The two necessary conditions for the successful operation of high-speed trains are relatively flat terrain (tunnels cost a lot to build and force engine drivers to slow down) and a high density of population. Both conditions exist along much of the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, where the dismal backwardness of commuter train systems—two to three times slower than the French and ten times less punctual—is, in the land of Thomas Edison and Theodore Roosevelt, a national disgrace.

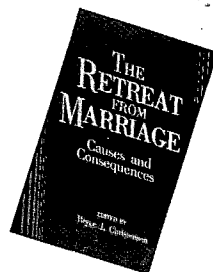
Historian and biographer Curtis Cate has for many years been a resident of Paris.

The Retreat From Marriage

Causes and Consequences

Edited by Bryce Christensen

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LETTERS



Buzzards and Dodos

George Core (Editor of the *Sewanee Review*) Talks With George Garrett About the Quarterlies

Shortly following his appearance on a panel about book reviewing at the annual Miami Book Fair, this interview with George Core took place in a 15th-story hotel room high above downtown Miami, its boarded-up storefronts and decay, its winos and druggies mercifully out of sight. A quiet, light-filled room with a view of Biscayne Bay and Miami Beach beyond that. An occasional jet gliding toward Miami International Airport. Oddest and seemingly most incongruous of all, flocks of buzzards soaring on the air high above downtown Miami. What brings them here? Neither of us, George Core or myself, has ever seen buzzards in an urban setting, though we have both read about them as a fact of life in the cities of Third World nations.

It's all of it, high and low, a far cry

from Sewanee, Tennessee, the lightly populated, 10,000-acre domain of the University of the South, isolated and beautiful atop a mountain, where in a gray gothic-style building the *Sewanee Review* has its offices.

We are still talking about the themes of the panel on book reviewing and the news of the day.

"Isn't that a chilling story about that Bret Easton Ellis?" Core asks. "Reading between the lines, I found that it sounds absolutely repulsive. Yet what comes across in the press is that the wife of the CEO of the company that owns Simon & Schuster is another Mrs. Doubleday suppressing a work as great as *Sister Carrie*, which is nonsense, of course." This latter-day Mrs. Doubleday tried to carry out a public service—at great expense to Simon & Schuster; but her efforts were immediately thwarted by Random House, which to its immense discredit and obvious greed is now publishing this wretched book, which might make the Marquis de Sade blush with shame.

"We are faced with the fact that reading is a dying art. People read this kind of trash, this new novel, *American Psycho*, that certainly is worthy of being suppressed if anything ever has been. We are going to be in bad shape if Jesse Helms starts deciding the artistic taste of the country. I also think we're going to be in bad shape if work as bad as this Bret Ellis novel, work that bad, *isn't* suppressed occasionally.

"It's not really being suppressed, of course; it's being rejected. But what happens is that the word *censorship* comes up and a great many people get exercised. You shouldn't censor art once it is in the public domain. But if you couldn't censor books in some form and at some stage before they are available to the public, then everything would see print in one form or another. The book reviewer ought to be prepared to say that something is rubbish. George Woodcock once said about some very bad book he reviewed for

me that it was a waste of good trees."

Speaking of the earlier panel discussion, Core says: "The operative word in all that conversation was 'entertainment.' I would have been happier if they talked about being lively and entertaining, but not about simply providing entertainment for their readers. What a lot of these people don't understand is that book reviewing ought to be a department of criticism. It shouldn't be entertainment or news or something else that is ephemeral by definition.

"I think a lot of people start reading quarterlies by reading the book reviews; then they go on and read the fiction and the essays and the poetry. Some of the quarterly editors haven't figured out how important the book review is in the economy of the magazine—if for no other reason than that they have to get ads. And they have to keep getting review copies."

* * *

A native of Lexington, Kentucky, George Core was educated at Transylvania College, Vanderbilt, and Chapel Hill. He served as an officer for four years (1960-1964) in the U.S. Marine Corps. He is editor or coeditor of some five scholarly and critical books dealing largely with American literature. Forthcoming are *The Literalists of the Imagination: Southern Letters and the New Criticism* (L.S.U.), a study of the criticism of Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Warren and other New Critics. Some years ago, together with the novelist and critic Walter Sullivan, he wrote *Writing From the Inside* (Norton), a textbook on composition. Core has reviewed for numerous publications and was senior editor of the University of Georgia Press from 1968 to 1973, when he began editing the *Sewanee Review*.

"The experience I had at the University of Georgia Press was enormously helpful in terms of editing the magazine. I picked up a fair amount of information about design and produc-