



## A Philanthropic Journalist

by Thomas Fleming

If representative government requires a free press, as the founders of this Republic believed, then it is small wonder that the citizens of the United States no longer enjoy the benefit of free elections. For elections to be free, there must be a choice from among well-defined positions and characters: John Quincy Adams or Andrew Jackson, Lincoln or Douglas (or Breckinridge, for that matter). The degree of choice depends upon the degree of polarity, the sharpness of definition in the positions taken, the clarity of debate. In a small community, gossip and personal experience may be sufficient to inform the people on the respective characters of Cimon and Pericles, although in that case the available information did not prevent the Athenians from making the wrong choice. But in a larger country, governed according to the representative principle, these purposes can only be served by something like a press, and for such a press to do its job, it must consist of antagonists, not impartial observers, because it is only in the crude dialectic of the adversarial press that the sides of a debate or an election can be defined.

No journal or journalist is unprejudiced, but when newspapers used to declare, even advertise their party affiliation, readers were able to discount their partisanship. Today, the problem with America is not that the leftist press is biased—of course it is biased, more so, perhaps, than at any time in our history—but that there is only one set of biases that is represented, and when leftist journalists protest that there is no liberal bias in the media, they may even be halfway sincere, since they have never in their life been exposed to a conservative opinion.

The Anglo-American system has generally been a conflict

between two parties which, although they have gone by very many names, have been summed up by Clyde Wilson as the Court Party and the Country Party. The Court Party, since it represents the magnates and those who control the nation's treasury, has never had any trouble in buying itself a press corps of poets laureate and journalists looking for State Department sinecures. The gentlemen of the Country Party, on the other hand, have had to dig into their own pockets to fund journals of opposition and patronize the writers who like nothing better than to stick their fingers into the eyes of arrogant Cabinet ministers, archbishops comfortable in their heterodoxy, and foundation heads grown presumptuous from handing out other people's money.

In different ages the opponents of the Court Party might have stood in the ranks of the gentlemen who opposed the tyranny of Elizabeth I and her more moderate successors, or with Samuel Johnson and the defenders of King and Church against the Whig magnates. More typically, they may find themselves at different times in both camps, like Halifax the Trimmer, who always moved into opposition as soon as his own faction came to power. It was Halifax who said that "the best party is a kind of conspiracy against the nation" and compared the party spirit to faith without works: "They take it for a dispensation from all other duties." William Cobbett began life as a peasant radical and turned Tory without compromising his principles, and there is no more exemplary model for the modern reactionary radical than "Peter Porcupine," a true populist who, when like so many down-at-heels English journalists he came to America, stood up to the Jacobin press of Benjamin Franklin

Bache. Cobbett's modest ambition to leave his country no worse than he found it is the political equivalent of the Hippocratic injunction to do no harm.

Adversarial journalism has had a long history in Britain and America, and some of the best of it has been reactionary: the essays of Swift, Johnson, and Coleridge; and in America, the newspaper and magazine pieces of Mencken, Nock, and John T. Flynn, who had the honor of being repudiated by his liberal friends at the *New Republic* and rebuffed by the "New Conservatives" of Mr. Buckley's magazine.

Today there is virtually no opposition press of any substance in the United States. The so-called left consists of salaried apologists for the regime and whose only complaint is that the New Deal state has not yet absorbed every drop of private energy and every moment of private life. At the *Nation*, which passes for a radical publication, the editors sit around debating the wisdom of opposing Clinton with the same degree of servitude displayed by conservatives in the Reagan-Bush years. For anything like reckless candor, the *Nation* has had to import two Englishmen, whose freedom consists in fulfilling Kris Kristoferson's definition of having "nothing left to lose," although the most radical remarks are still provided by the expatriate reactionary Gore Vidal. But on the right, the token opposition is represented by Clinton-bashers who can criticize the mote in Bill's eye but not the beam in the eyes of Reagan and Bush, Kemp and Bennett.

"There you go again," some of the magazine's kindest friends and most generous supporters will say, "going easy on the likes of Gore Vidal, while attacking good conservative Republicans." It is as an answer to these friends that my remarks are addressed. My first observation would be that I have never claimed to be a Republican, good or otherwise. If I ever had a party, it was the party of Jefferson and Calhoun, Douglas and Bryan, Burton Wheeler and the Dixiecrats, and if there is anyone in the Senate I can at all admire, it is a senator of unblemished patriotism who opposed the Gulf War, a welfare-state liberal who proposed the first balanced budget bill, the Democrat with the most conservative voting record in the Senate even according to the skewed criteria of the American Conservative Union. I mean, of course, Fritz Hollings, who would probably rather not be praised in our pages. In saying that I admire Senator Hollings, I do not say that I necessarily agree with the political views reflected in his voting record, but that I honor him as a public man who has managed both to serve his constituents and to stick to his own guns. Of how many congressmen can either be said?

"Then what are you loyal to?" I have never claimed to speak for anyone but myself, but in this case I think it is permissible to speak of a We, consisting of my editorial colleagues, some regular contributors, and a significant body of faithful readers. For all our disagreements—religious, aesthetic, and political—most of us agree, first and foremost, that there is such a thing as truth, that some ideas can be tested, proved or disproved, and that not to tell the truth is the cardinal sin of the intellectual. "Not telling the truth" is not limited to deliberate lies, because one may know the truth and merely avoid telling it, out of cowardice or exaggerated prudence. It is possible to lie half-unknowingly, as when scholars or journalists prefer to accept fashionable opinion on such subjects as Bosnia or the *Dred Scott* decision without troubling to study the question seriously. Christians who compare *Roe v. Wade* with *Dred Scott*

and journalists who speak of Serbian war crimes in Sarajevo or the destruction of Dubrovnik are lying, whether they know it or not, because they are too lazy to redress their ignorance.

Our first job here, then, is to try to tell the truth, which means we cannot afford the easy-going contempt for history and foreign languages displayed by the editors of the *New Republic*. We are not perfect in this or any other respect; we do not come even close to realizing our own desire for accuracy, but this is a degenerate age, and none of us can escape the sin of *acedia*.

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Our second firm belief is that truth does not change from age to age and that despite variations in custom and culture principles of right and wrong, discovered by ancient Jews and Greeks and handed down to us by our ancestors, are as true today as when they were codified in the Decalogue or analyzed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* or declared by Jesus Christ. We are not about to change our minds on such questions as divorce, abortion, social security, homosexual rights, or the terror-bombing of Iraqi civilians, simply because some unlettered social scientist or mercenary journalist or bribed think-tank president gives us a new dispensation. The heavy weight of human experience is pressing down upon our shoulders, and if we were to shift the burden, we should be crushed, morally. With Martin Luther we must say: "Here I stand. I can do no other."

We are, first and foremost, on the right because we are *of* the right and believe we are *in* the right. To be on the right today must mean what it has always meant: an unyielding opposition to the principles of the French (and the lesser Russian) Revolution and a staunch defense of our residuum of a civilization that is both classical and Christian.

If neither the principles of Holy Scripture nor the languages and cultures of Greece and Rome (and their European successors) interest you, then you are reading the wrong magazine. If your only interest in our culture is that it belongs to white people, go subscribe to *Instauration*, and if you think that complex social questions can be boiled down to a few mathematical formulas of individual rights or plotted on a balance sheet, then you should be reading any of the mass of publications professing faith in free markets and closed minds. Ideologues should not so much as look at *Chronicles*, because it

could only confuse them.

To defend an entire civilization is a task too imposing even for our self-conceit, and we have limited our primary sphere of activity to “American culture,” which we do not construe according to any exceptionalist or Whitmanesque formula. Our American cultures only make sense as regional and provincial variations on some very ancient themes, but since this is where and when we are, we are determined to defend and discuss the particularities of American life with as much zeal as if we were pagan Romans trying to restore the altar of victory removed by triumphalist Christians.

One important part of our particular tradition is a suspicion of elite classes and a faith in the good heart and common sense of ordinary people. The principles of federalism and subsidiarity are universal and can be seen at work in every great civilization, but in the American context they have taken on specifically Jeffersonian forms. Individual liberty, household autonomy, states’ rights, and nonintervention in the affairs and wars of other nations—these are the best American principles we know, and to be a conservative American should mean a commitment to the restoration of the American order established by our ancestors and defended by Adams and Jefferson alike.

If the Conservative Movement or the Republican Party will stand with us in defending our birthright, we are their allies, but if they continue to expand the welfare state, call for drug wars that violate the sanctity of private property, and send American troops all over the globe like so many Janet Renos—social therapists armed with tanks and poison gas—then we say that George Wallace’s “dime’s worth of difference” has suffered from inflation.

“What hopeless idealists you are. Your futility is as charming as your vanity is offensive. Because the world is not to your taste, you refuse to cooperate with any practical plans that might improve the economy or limit the damage being inflicted by the left.” This is the most serious charge of all, but is it really so damaging? A small magazine cannot influence, much less carry, an election. We have no lavish foundation grants with which to bribe discredited Cabinet officials or lure celebrity professors whose falling academic stock or disordered personality makes them vulnerable to conservative blandishments, and if we signed onto the latest conservative manifesto and had our ticket punched on the way into “The Big Tent” to watch the one-ring circus, where the entertainment consists entirely of pitchmen hawking political vegematics and Ginsu knives, our presence would contribute exactly nothing.

In electoral strength, *Chronicles* is on par with *Commentary*, which is to say nowhere, although our themes unquestionably are resonating with that vast minority which might still threaten to overthrow the regime, which is why we can still scare the pants off the more thoughtful representatives of both parties. What we can hope to accomplish, by sticking to our guns, is to ensure that certain ground will not be given up without a fight. When, seven or eight years ago, we started to discuss the question of immigration, *Chronicles* was alone among conservative publications, except for the book section of *National Review* where Chilton Williamson and his friends were, for a time, holding the fort against the Republican one-worlders. Several well-wishers in those days advised me to give it up. After all, our “Nation of Immigrants” issue precipitated the biggest split in conservative history and provoked *National Re-*

view to threaten to “excrete” us from the movement. (NR staffers have always said it was Bill Buckley, but he, characteristically, was careful not to leave his fingerprints on the blade he stuck in our back.) These days, *National Review* and its sensible (albeit English) editor have brought his magazine over to our side, for which we are pleased and grateful. The most recent sign of NR’s return to the paths of righteousness is an article on Jack Kemp written by David Frum, a Canadian fifth columnist at the *Wall Street Journal*. Unfortunately Frum, a typical specimen of the *soi-disant* conservative, has carried his reverence for Martin Luther King to the point of imitating his style, and his article is “voice-merged” from what Jeff Tucker has written in *Chronicles*.

But immigration and Jack Kemp’s *gauchisme* are only two out of a large number of questions that we either raised for the first time or opened for discussion. The ethnic and regional conflicts, which almost ten years ago we were discussing, are now front-page news even in the *New York Times*. We were published in a piece entitled “Tears for Bosnia” several years before the breakup of Yugoslavia. We were the first Americans to talk about the Lega Nord and had the first American interview with Umberto Bossi. We were the first to combine the issues of trade, immigration, and foreign policy into a program of America First, just as *Chronicles* was the first publication of any kind to reassess the original America First Committee. National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* interviewed most of the contributors to our December 1991 issue without acknowledging the source. We don’t mind, though, because we are used to it.

These are the kinds of things an “obscure” magazine *can* do, if it is left free to follow its nose and sniff out significance, like pigs looking for truffles. “Well, why can’t you be content to be original, without being so cantankerous?” The most obvious answer is that we have a character defect that prevents us from lying and equivocating in one place in order to tell the truth in another. Candor is an infectious disease, and once it gets going it eats up every drop of common sense.

A more practical answer is that it is our job to be tough, particularly on those who presume to call themselves conservatives or right-wingers. This is not to say that we do not believe in compromise or that we have not trimmed our sails or damped our criticisms of faithful friends and fellow travelers. Compromise is a necessary part of statecraft, but the statesman, as opposed to the politician, has a vision of the nation and has his sights on long-term objectives. Along the way, he must be free to tack back and forth as he tries to catch the wind, which may not always be blowing in his direction. The politician, on the other hand, is in love with compromise as an instrument to power. He will make deals with anyone who serves his ultimate purpose—of getting and staying elected—and will betray his constituents and followers with the same alacrity as Republicans are displaying in their rush to repudiate the life issue.

When our friends ask us to moderate our criticisms and to compromise our ideals, they are asking for the politician’s rather than the statesman’s compromise. But we are mere scribblers and sit in no seats of power. What possible good, apart from securing millions in foundation grants, could be accomplished by a policy of compromise? At some point in the information and opinion chain, someone has to stand for something better than the *libido dominandi*, and since no one else seems to be willing to take it on, that task falls to us.

If a statesman is willing to embrace some part of our vision,

we expect him to make a series of compromises in the service of our shared ideals, and if he is unwilling to bend, he should find some other line of work. But if the compromising begins at our level, at the level of what our friend Mel Bradford used to call the higher journalism, then the statesman is left without a vision and the mere politician has not even the figleaf of ideology to conceal his greed and ambition. If we say no to all government health insurance, including the Medicare and Medicaid we already have, then it is conceivable that some young congressman of principle will hold out against the Clinton plan and, as evidence accumulates of all the failed national health systems in Europe, a movement might even take shape, successful enough to attract the stupid opportunists who are the vast majority in both parties and all factions. But if conservatives are willing to support the Republicans' moderate alternative to the Clinton plan, then they not only forfeit all right to criticize the compromise plan that is eventually adopted, but they will have to shut up and watch their moderate compromise radicalized by federal court decisions and subsequent congressional revisions. If anyone doubts this, he need only

consult the history of civil rights legislation since 1964. The only proper conservative position in 1964 was unqualified opposition, and we are forced to live every day with the results of Republican moderation. "A plague on both their houses," exclaimed John Llewellyn Lewis, when he realized the worth of both American parties.

The man who sticks to his guns has the satisfaction of saying "I told you so" *ad nauseam* and the indescribable joy of ridiculing all the pantywaists who have sold their souls not for a mess but for a mere scruple of porridge. It cannot be said that the pantywaists are inclined to forgive and forget. Journalists and politicians who know they are no better than prostitutes can appreciate our good will in painting scarlet letters all over their résumés, and over the years we have been accused of enough hate crimes to warrant an international trial under the Genocide Convention. But as Chesterton once observed, he liked being in hot water all the time, because it was a good way of staying clean, and so long as we can afford to buy soap and pay our electricity bill, we intend to stay in hot water. ©

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## The Journalist of Reputation

by William Baer

Who cares about his active crotch,  
the opium, the quarts of scotch,  
compulsive lies (a small faux pas),  
the Satan rites, menage à trois,  
deserted mistress, abandoned son,  
and all the other bits of fun?  
Let's give this prince of blackest lies  
the *Times* first page and the Pulitzer Prize.

He'd seen the corpses in the street  
rotting in the summer heat,  
but what's a couple million dead?  
it's best to leave the thing unsaid.  
He had his girls, and perks, and booze,  
and never put it in the news,  
He liked the tyrant and his "ism,"  
and "tough," "committed" journalism.