

# Chronicling the Fall

by Scott P. Richert

*"Folly is often more cruel in the consequences than malice can be in the intent."*

—Halifax

**Notes from the Underground:  
The Whittaker Chambers-Ralph  
de Toledano Letters**  
*edited and annotated by*  
*Ralph de Toledano*  
*Washington, D.C.:*  
*Regnery Publishing, Inc.;*  
*342 pp., \$24.95*

◆

The correspondence of Edmund Burke, whose letters help to illuminate his published works, was not available in a complete edition until 1978. Today, however, it seems that every aspiring journalist begins saving his correspondence even before his first word-processed piece is published. If current trends continue, we can look forward in the near future to definitive editions of the correspondence of Francis Fukuyama and Bill Bennett (ghostwritten, in the latter case).

John Lukacs has remarked that inflation characterizes modern life, and the explosion of published works of correspondence is just one sign of that inflation. Of course, inflated money is still worth *something*, and some of these volumes are actually worth reading. The recent collection of the correspondence between Lukacs and George Kennan, *George F. Kennan and the Origins of Containment, 1944-1946*, is indispensable for those who wish to rise above ideological categories and to place the Cold War in its proper historical context. The correspondence between two Ingersoll Prize winners, Shelby Foote and Walker Percy, is of similar interest to students of Southern history. Not all works of this type, however, are worth sacrificing the

---

*Scott P. Richert is the assistant editor of*  
*Chronicles.*



lives of trees. At an American Political Science Association annual convention a few years back, I attended a session devoted to the (then) newly published correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. The highlight of the panel was a paper by a Straussian Voegelinian (or perhaps he was a Voegelinian Straussian) expounding the esoteric meaning of Strauss's apologies, in his let-

ters to Voegelin, for writing on scrap paper.

Happily, *Notes from the Underground* is one of the more interesting works of this genre, even though there are no major revelations about the Alger Hiss trial. In fact, most of Chambers' comments on political events will surprise no one who has read William F. Buckley's *Odyssey of a Friend* (another volume of Chambers' correspondence), Allan Weinstein's *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*, or Sam Tanenhaus's *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*. But these letters, exchanged between two close friends on the anti-communist right, constitute a valuable period piece that gives depth and texture to an era that most people today view only through the distorting ideological lens of the Reagan years.

That era saw a different politician rise to national prominence on the strength of his anticommunist credentials. Whittaker Chambers and Ralph de Toledano began their correspondence in 1949, while Toledano was covering the first trial of Alger Hiss for *Newsweek*. Some of their earliest letters discuss Richard Nixon's speech on the floor of the House of Representatives following Hiss's perjury conviction, a speech which, in Toledano's words, "shook Congress and placed him in the center of the national political stage." Their last letters were exchanged a few days before Nixon was defeated by John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election and temporarily departed center stage. Along the way, their correspondence paints a picture of Nixon that is more subtle and complex than standard conservative interpretations. While acknowledging Nixon's political strength and his early devotion to the anticommunist cause, both Chambers and Toledano begin to doubt Nixon's devotion to his friends, a charac-

ter flaw that ultimately would lead to Watergate. In May 1959, Chambers, discussing Nixon, wrote to Toledano:

The world is rather sensibly ordered . . . among lions and mice . . . . But . . . I question the wisdom of . . . the Lion who seems not to grasp the workings of that order . . . . Or who forgets what mice meant to him in the inglorious days, and may mean again. . . . I think the Lion has forgotten that even summer days are interspersed with, and sometimes terminated by, the night of the hunter. Then the Lion may roar: "Mouse! Mouse!" but finds he is lord only of the closing jungle, or a veldt whose false peace dissembles the nets no mouse will gnaw him free of, while the treacherous forms circle softly in.

Chambers exhibits a similar ambivalence about Senator Joseph McCarthy. In a gloss on one of his own letters from 1951, Toledano writes that Chambers told him privately that "Joe is sometimes a rascal, but he's our rascal." In a letter from 1954, Chambers discussed the tactics of anticommunists. While clearly unhappy with those who seemed not to put up much of a fight, Chambers was also concerned about others whose tactics could be self-destructive:

Why is it that every time I move in at the risk of my skin and drop a grenade through the slit in the pill-box, our side rushes off into the bushes . . . while the others, who at least know what a grenade is when they receive one, swarm out shooting? The answer is: our side does not know the nature of the enemy, therefore, the nature of the war he enjoins, therefore, the nature of the tactics. So the simple tactic of exploiting an opening is inconceivable to them. . . . Senator McCarthy's notion of tactics is to break the rules, saturate the enemy with poison gas, and then charge through the contaminated area, shouting Comanche war cries.

**T**he supposed triumph of "conservatism" that culminated in Ronald Reagan's eight-year reign did much to obscure the political and intellectual history of the American right in this century.

Those who find it surprising that Chambers may have disagreed with Nixon and McCarthy on questions of friendship and tactics will be even more disturbed to read Chambers' comments on Hannah Arendt and Ludwig von Mises, two other heroes in the conservative pantheon. "Miss or Mrs. Arendt," Chambers wrote in 1953, "appears to be one of those Central European women who has read too much and has nothing to sustain it except an intensity which shakes her like an electric motor that is about to shake loose from its base." Responding to Chambers' perceptive assessment of Arendt, Toledano nonetheless pointed out that Arendt did have a base: "Mrs. Arendt is married to a man whose ex-ness is in a very dubious state. As a result, in attacking ex-Communists, she is protecting a vested interest."

While Chambers did not question Ludwig von Mises' ability as an economic theoretician, he roundly criticized Mises' *The Anti-Capitalist Mentality*:

I should consider it one of the most pernicious pieces of writing that the Right has produced. . . . By pernicious I mean the effect that follows when a mind, which speaks with authority in a special field (economics), uses that authority (but not the field it is based in), to offer a false study of our dilemma. The result of this (insofar as its silliness is not self-evident) must be to mislead thousands about the nature of that dilemma. . . . This grossly shallow man has left the field of economics for the field of mass psychology. He has proclaimed, rather than deduced, that the anticapitalist mood of our time is the result of "envy and ignorance." . . . Marx himself pointed out that poverty is never aware of its condition until wealth builds a house next door. In this sense, von Mises's capitalists are all Marxists; they have erected the unsettling contrast into the operating principle of the mass market.

Whether we agree or disagree with Chambers, his arguments with Arendt and Mises were not merely over tactics; they followed from first principles. And yet, like the Greeks who incorporated into their pantheon the gods of the peoples they conquered, or the Straussians who proclaim anyone that they admire a

"philosopher" (and anyone they dislike, a "believer"), conservatives over the past 20 years or so have held up mutually contradictory figures for emulation. (I'm certain it would not take very long to find an article in a back issue of, say, *National Review*, praising Chambers, Arendt, and Mises, without the faintest hint of irony or the slightest suggestion that the three represented radically different views.) For an intellectual (and even a political) movement to survive, it is as important to exclude certain figures as it is to include others. When the pantheon becomes too large, intellectual incoherence and political impotence are the likely results.

Lacking an historical sense, the American right has floundered. If it is to evolve into a serious intellectual and political movement, its leaders must reexamine their pantheon. But to do so, they will have to relive the debates over first principles that the "one big happy family" conservatism of the Reagan years sought so desperately to avoid, and that the current neoconservative hegemony forbids. *Notes from the Underground* reminds us that the American right once took first principles seriously. For that reminder, we should thank Ralph de Toledano for this book.

### Notes from the *Underground*

**"W**hen the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union, the 'evil empire,' collapsed, the question was asked: Would Whittaker Chambers still believe that he had left the winning side for the losing side? Long before that day, he had seen that the struggle was no longer between Communism and Western civilization, but one in which Western civilization was destroying itself by betraying its heritage. Were he living today, he would see in the flood and tempest, the fire and the havoc of nature, a sign that perhaps God was telling us something."

—from the Afterword by  
Ralph de Toledano

## Against the Pessimists

by Philip Jenkins

**America in Black and White  
One Nation, Indivisible:  
Race in Modern America**  
by Stephan Thernstrom and  
Abigail Thernstrom  
New York: Simon and Schuster;  
704 pp., \$32.50



**A**merica in Black and White is an ambitious project, at once a massively detailed review of race relations this century and a provocative manifesto for the future. As such, it demands comparison with Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), which did so much to place racial injustice at the center of American politics for decades to come. Unlike Myrdal's, however, the Thernstroms' book is neither a jeremiad nor a call for national self-flagellation; described by its authors as an optimistic work, it has already been widely attacked for its supposed complacency and callous racism. Yet it should be required reading for anyone interested in the national "dialogue" that Clinton has called for on race relations and that has acquired material form in his futile commission on race.

The Thernstroms' primary challenge to established wisdom is their emphasis on the progress blacks have made this century, especially between 1940 and 1970—before affirmative action policies were fully in place. As so often in history, war was the decisive catalyst for crucial change: the long defense boom beginning in 1940 significantly increased labor demand in Northern factories, while the many millions in uniform during World War II and Korea meant that employers were forced to open job opportunities to groups hitherto excluded: above all, to black Americans, most of them from the rural South. An additional factor was the virtual elimination of immigration between 1924 and 1965,

when employers were unable to meet their needs by drafting a cheap labor force from Poland, Italy, China, or India. In consequence, prospects for African-Americans improved dramatically in these years, whether in terms of income, housing, education, or health. Black progress, moreover, was overwhelmingly accomplished within the black community, under the auspices of black doctors, black clergy, black writers, and black artists. The era offers an inspiring story of self-reliance on the part of a people who had survived lynching and segregation, horrors which the authors make no attempt to conceal.

The Thernstroms lead us to reconsider the impact of the urban rioting of the 1960's, now conventionally seen as a second firebell in the night to which white America responded with critical social legislation. For the Thernstroms, riots in Watts, Detroit, and elsewhere mark the end of a triumphant phase of improvement; the causes of insurgency are discernible in a revolution of rising expectations, rather than in the hopeless poverty so often adduced. Concurrently, the end of residential segregation meant that the skilled and energetic black middle classes could now abandon the discrete areas into which they had traditionally poured their energies. By the 1970's, developments were aggravated by the collapse of traditional patterns of manufacturing, and thus of the cities in which the older industries were based. In a tragic version of economic musical chairs, blacks, having succeeded their various white ethnic predecessors in American cities, were the ethnic group dominating the nation's urban centers at the time when this economic disaster occurred. As a result, they suffered more directly than other groups from the consequences of social crisis, internecine violence, and epidemic drug abuse, all of which were inevitably attributed by whites to the moral weaknesses characteristic of the black race. In this way the "urban black underclass" was born, and with it the attendant myths that diverted white attention from the achievements of the black middle class, whose interests and attitudes are generally congruent with those of their white and Asian

neighbors.

The story as told by the Thernstroms is certainly not one of uninterrupted progress, but neither is it a tale of incessant woe in which the black spirit has been crushed consistently by systematic white oppression. Nor is the record of government intervention an account of noble officialdom rescuing hapless blacks from the nastiest excesses of the white power structure. Why therefore do we hear so little about black achievements, and so much about the crippling climate of racism that supposedly pervades the national life? One reason is that the civil rights establishment has a powerful vested interest in projecting a grim image. As in any decolonized African state, the new black regimes in cities like Detroit or Washington justify their existence by constant reference to the brutal tyrannies from which they have rescued their subjects, preserving hegemony through an elaborately cultivated nationalistic mythology and a repository of symbols and keywords. Progress, the black leaders insist, can only be made through corporate racial solidarity symbolized by a charismatic leadership that intuitively feels and expresses the spirit of the race—assumptions which uncannily recall the European fascisms of the 1930's. The misconception is honestly entertained, though in a few cases it certainly provides a comprehensive and nearly infallible means to escape the consequences of scandal or misdeed. The perpetuation of conceptual error is largely the work of a white-dominated media which immediately forfeit any limited critical faculties they might possess when entering the ethnic minefields—for instance, a year or so ago during the nonexistent wave of racist arson attacks on black churches, which galvanized public opinion for a few weeks and which the Thernstroms dismiss for the charade it was.

The authors' historical learning gives them a useful perspective on historical events. They know how much and how little can be gleaned from historical statistics; at every stage the picture they present is at odds with the accepted wisdom. Their combination of multiple approaches and methods permits us to oc-