

The Political Vocation

by Paul Gottfried

Human Dignity and Contemporary Liberalism

by Brad Stetson

Westport, Connecticut: Praeger;
186 pp., \$55.00



In his book on declining social morality and the transformations of liberal ideology, Brad Stetson goes after deserving targets. He unmasks the liberalism that holds the media, universities, and the publishing industry in thrall and stresses the will to total domination that accompanies liberal concerns about racism, sexism, self-actualization, and the costs of low self-esteem. For Stetson, these concerns are the basis of an attack against individual responsibility and self-constraint upon which an older, authentic liberalism rested.

The new liberalism seeks to establish the state "as a highly qualified, desired, and efficient supplier of what people need, whether morally or materially." Behind this expanded state lies a "normative vision" which Stetson calls "anthropocentrism," a belief that individuals can do as they please since technology and scientific political management will make the gratification of individual desires possible without the imposition of attendant social and moral duties.

Stetson has much to say in his study that is both correctly stated and transpar-

ently true, especially in his comments regarding liberal ethical theory as an elaborate justification for its exponents' vices. It makes sense for theorists to create "universally" applicable arguments to excuse their private weaknesses and for the unrepentantly weak to be drawn to vocations that allow them to ignore and excuse their faults. Stetson's invective against those who misrepresent human dignity expresses a proper sense of moral outrage, and I found myself respecting the author in spite of his failure to break new ground.

For the major—perhaps the exclusive—source of Stetson's critical commentary is movement conservatism. Hence the tedious quotations from George Will, Robert Bork, William Bennett, Dinesh D'Souza, and other conservative celebrities, all of whom assure us that American liberalism lost its way in the 1960's and that multiculturalism, "radical feminism," and a derailed civil rights movement—not the government—are the real causes of America's undoing. Stetson quotes George Will on the danger of conservatives' "blanket disdain for government and hence for the political vocation," and adds his own gloss: "in strongly reacting against statism, [conservatism] risks disabling government, which is an important vehicle for character formation." Moreover, Stetson (again echoing Will) expresses admiration for liberals who participated in the civil rights movement. True to current conservative rhetoric, he attacks excesses and derailments without criticizing the movement itself and trots out such obligatory clichés from "Dr." King as "the content of their character, not the color of their skin."

Stetson fails to consider the *content* of the "liberalism" that he abhors. Instead, he merely provides contemporary illustrations of human depravity. Depravity, of course, is as old as sin, and it is not surprising that a depraved but literate society should create a rationale for its vices. More noteworthy is the overshadowing role played by public administrators, judges, cowed or opportunistic politicians, and their media lackeys in extending the power of the state into every human relationship. But Stetson is reluctant to blame the government for the social disintegration that disturbs him. Such criticism, when it does show up in his book, is directed specifically at the "liberal state," a creation (Stetson explains) of recent times, not to be con-

fused with the "government," which we must not in any way "disable." Unfortunately, most of his well-intentioned distinctions are unfounded. The "liberal state" and the neoconservative "government" bear more than a slight family resemblance, and the civil rights movement of the early 60's became the statist juggernaut of the 70's without losing its base of support or abandoning the intentions of King, who favored both reparations and affirmative action for blacks. The "liberal state," moreover, did *not* begin the project of modifying social behavior in the 60's and 70's: it was moving in that direction as early as the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Though Stetson may view favorably the beginnings of this process to create a more "democratic citizenry," these may fairly be seen as preliminary stages of the "liberal state."

Like other conservative critics of contemporary liberalism, Stetson never explains why ordinary people accept bullying control over their lives. While the liberal state and the media do raise self-esteem for certain marginalized "victims," they also vilify white, Eurocentric, heterosexual Christian civilization and treat white Southerners as the descendants of bigoted sadists. Though the liberal dispensation makes occasional exceptions for repentant Southerners (in particular for a lecherous but liberal President from Arkansas), it fails as a rule to grant equal dignity, the right to collective self-expression, or even equal protection under the law to members of every group. Clearly some victims are worthier than others; for every one discovered and courted by the therapeutic state, a designated victimizer is identified and punished.

The "liberal state" is more than a perverse Santa Claus, enabling its subjects to behave like irresponsible adolescents. It also judges and damns, shakes down "sexist" and "racist" corporations for hundreds of millions of dollars, and inflicts standards of political correctness upon a disintegrating society. Whatever else it may be, the liberal state is about the exercise of unaccountable power. But why should it give back its power, particularly if it has not met formidable resistance, least of all from "conservatives" like Mr. Stetson?

Paul Gottfried is a professor of humanities at Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania.



Full Circle

by Loxley F. Nichols

Landscapes of the Heart: A Memoir

by Elizabeth Spencer
New York: Random House;
346 pages, \$24.00



One of two epigraphs with which Elizabeth Spencer introduces her memoir of growing up in northern Mississippi is taken from the closing sentence of her story, "A Southern Landscape." The narrator, looking back on her hometown from a far remove in place and time, acknowledges her need "of a land, of a sure terrain, of a sort of permanent landscape of the heart," those "things you can count on" like the "gilded hand on the Presbyterian Church in Port Claiborne . . . still pointing to heaven and not to outer space." Miss Spencer's "terrain" is distinctly Southern in flavor. In speaking of what it means to be "Southern," she reminds us that, while a matter of chance rather than choice, it is an identity that marks one for life, no matter where one later resides. In the memoir as in the story, however, "sure terrain" is not only those landmarks or modes of behavior that remain as predictable and unchanging as compass points on the globe; it is the art of writing itself. As Spencer makes clear, writing is the act of *making connections* between the inner and outer worlds of experience, between the past and the present, between the transitory and the permanent. Writing is the constant, the link, by which experience can be made whole. Of her own childhood discovery of the wonder of writing, Spencer recalls, "I stumbled on an amazing truth, which came as a total surprise. A word, one or two or three or more, actually *connects* inner to outer. It joins what is seen to what is there within that sees it. It fixes what is felt."

Elizabeth Spencer's life is her journey from the sheltered world of Teoc, the working plantation of her mother's family, and her home in the tiny hamlet of Carrollton into ever-broadening paths and branching by-ways. Her "circled world" of family and community, which in her early years offers stability and protection, becomes in her adulthood a con-

stricting and entrapping one. Returning home after a two-year sojourn in Italy with the intention of settling in the South for good, Spencer is greeted by the stony silence of parents who can tolerate neither her career as a writer nor her life as a single and independent woman. Although tensions are further heightened by conflicting reactions to the murder of Emmett Till, this family disagreement seems more excuse than reason for Spencer's dictatorial father to sever his tie completely with the daughter he cannot dominate. Devastated by rejection and by the sudden death of her "favored" Uncle Joe, owner of Teoc, Miss Spencer, though gravely ill and at five-foot-eight weighing only 98 pounds, takes ship once again for Rome, this time with no thought of return.

The initial break, the first taste of exile from the "circled world," comes surprisingly early, with her entrance into first grade:

From then on, life changed in a certain way I could not define, and at home in the afternoons and on weekends I did not feel the same. I missed something but did not know what it was. . . . You can go somewhere, anywhere you want—any day now you'll be able to go to the moon—but you can't ever quite come back. Having gone up a road and entered a building at an appointed hour, I could find no way to come back out of it and feel the same way about my grandfather, ginger cakes, or a new book satchel.

Though Miss Spencer offers a number of such trenchant reflections, perhaps even more effective are her descriptions of the individuals who populate the various milieux she has inhabited. These portraits are often no more than brief tableaux, but Miss Spencer's selection of detail is so acute that the essence, if not the whole, is conveyed, as in this cameo from Spencer's graduate school days at Vanderbilt:

I came into [Donald Davidson's] office one day, a shy, frail, dark-haired student, to ask timidly if I could request his direction for a thesis on William Butler Yeats. As we were talking, a slim, sensitive-looking man entered from the hallway through the open door of the

office. He was wearing a checkered vest and a black velvet jacket. He had an extraordinary face, not at all handsome but arresting, his brow being so high that his features seemed rather minimal beneath it. Mr. Davidson introduced us: "Miss Spencer, this is Allen Tate."

The rest of the encounter is equally dramatic in its rendering of Tate's "sensual, softly slurred" voice and the subtle give-and-take between Tate and Davidson over Miss Spencer and her thesis project. Elizabeth Spencer had been drawn to Vanderbilt by her interest in the Fugitives and the Agrarians—Donald Davidson, in particular. While her profound admiration for the scope of Davidson's intellect and the excellence of his instruction never wavered, their disagreement on racial issues finally proved too deep to be ignored. It was Davidson who set Spencer up with David Clay, the editor responsible for the publication of her first book. Yet, after the publication of her third novel, based on a racial incident from her childhood, Spencer never heard from Davidson again.

Spencer was befriended by, or at least acquainted with, a host of other writers and intellectuals, including Caroline Gordon, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Eleanor Clark, John Cheever, Walker Percy, William Faulkner, her cousin Stark Young, Elizabeth Bowen, Katherine Anne Porter, Ralph Ellison, and Alberto Moravia. Her most important and enduring friendship, however, continues to be with Eudora Welty, whom she met during her college days at Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi. Spencer's comments on such individuals, while deft

LIBERAL ARTS

IF ONLY IT HAD BEEN A ROCK STAR . . .

"Like many teen-agers, Chalk Wessell had a hero, but in his case it wasn't a rock star or an actor. It was cult murderer Charles Manson."

—from the Louisville
Courier-Journal
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