

The Dictator of the World

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

"E avanti a lui, tremava tutta Roma!"
—Victorien Sardou, Luigi Illica, and Guiseppe Giacosa, *Tosca*

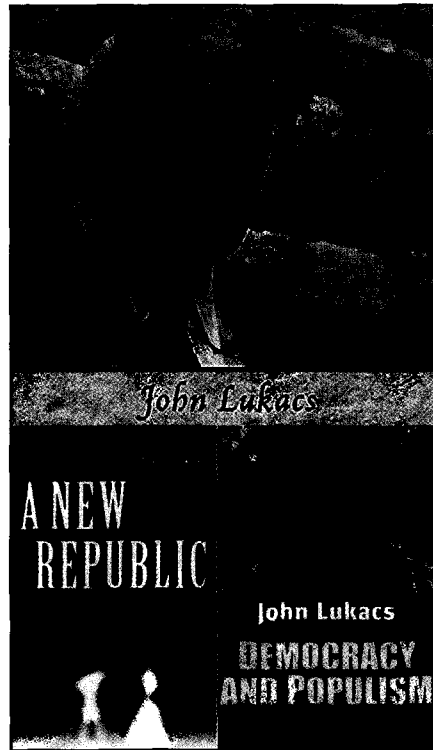
**A New Republic: A History of
the United States in the
Twentieth Century**
by John Lukacs
New Haven: Yale University Press;
457 pp., \$19.95

**Democracy and Populism:
Fear & Hatred**
by John Lukacs
New Haven: Yale University Press;
248 pp., \$25.00

At the time of its publication in 1984, John Lukacs's *Outgrowing Democracy: A History of the United States in the Twentieth Century* was recognized by discerning critics as a highly significant work combining a fresh originality, at once topical and historical, with the elements of truth and understanding from which an interpretive classic is made. Now reissued in revised edition 20 years later, the book carries a new title—owing, the author tells us, to his dissatisfaction with the original one. "What my [present] title attempts to suggest," Lukacs explains,

is that during the twentieth century (and perhaps especially during its second half) profound, grave—and often not too well recognized—changes have occurred in the conditions of the American state and of American life, on many different levels. These mutations have been less obvious, and less visible and less spectac-

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lar, than the great changes during the nineteenth century (the westward movement of the American state and of the American people; the Civil War; and mass immigration from Europe and Russia), but their consequences may have been at least as important and as enduring as those of the century before last.

All are related, in one way or another, to the passing of the Anglo-American Age from world history; the end of the bourgeois era in the history of the West; transformations in American thought and morals; the replacement of republican politics by those of an elective monarchy; the passage from a democratic order to a bureaucratic state; the acquisition by Americans of many of the worst habits of the European peoples; the decrystallization of the American national character by mass immigration from the

Third World; and the Americanization of the globe (which, ironically, Lukacs expects will persist beyond the decline of America's material prosperity and of her political and military power). In a final chapter, comprising the only fresh material written for the new edition, Lukacs contemplates a nation that, over the past 20 years, has wholly repudiated Secretary of State John Quincy Adams' warning, in 1821, that, should America "go abroad in search of monsters to destroy," she would succeed only in involving herself, "beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars and interests and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition. She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit." In the course of his narrative history of the United States since the 1880's, and of the interpretive account that succeeds it, Lukacs has managed to work in most of the grand themes of his long career: the end of the Modern Age; the spiritualization (or dematerialization) of matter, amounting to "the mental intrusion in the structure of events" (e.g., the atom bomb) and leading to abstraction, inflation, and unreality, even to the point of madness; the difference between what people believe and what they think they believe; the outdatedness of 19th-century materialism, of 20th-century progressivism, of the direction of American "progress" (indeed, of the notion of "progress" itself); and the possibility that the Democratic Age—no more than a brief interlude in the history of mankind—may be rapidly approaching its end.

As John Lukacs understands the course of American history, it was during the outwardly bland 1950's ("about 1955-

during changes, subjective as well as objective, in the national life of the United States occurred. In these years, the Eisenhower administration's refusal to support the Hungarian revolutionaries against the Soviet Union signaled the beginning of America's decline from her position as sole superpower, while Washington's part in forcing the British out of Suez at once advanced the dissolution of the British Empire and destroyed Churchill's grand strategy for an Anglo-American union. Also in the mid-50's, American manufacturing began its long competitive slide, coincident with the transfer of the economy from a productive to a service, administrative, and bureaucratic one. In 1956, inflation became entrenched—the same year that the outflow of gold began, until, by 1970, half of the nation's gold stock had been drained away. Simultaneously, the national infrastructure—notably, public transportation—began to erode. The mass-communications network grew ever more pervasive and ever more corruptive, as personal and family contacts withered, coincidentally with the weakening of the family and social structures and a decline in civilized morality. Yet, the fact of America's decline went largely unnoticed—not only by Americans themselves but by the rest of the world, much of which, impressed, intrigued, and tempted by the American example, aped her institutions and manners to the point where, as Lukacs puts it, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* no longer referred to a unique historical situation."

The operative word here is *aped*—as opposed to *conformed* or *yielded* to. As Lukacs notes, "In the history of the world the twentieth century was already the American Century; but much of the Americanization of the world was not dictated by the United States." Another generation in American politics was yet lacking before the change came, but, as early as the 1920's, the portents were discernible. In 1920, *The Americanization of Edward W. Bok* appeared—a semifictional "autobiography" by the well-known immigrant millionaire and public figure who was later to call the United States "the only first-rate civilization in the world." And it was during the 20's, Lukacs suggests, that "Americanism" . . . gradually changed its connotation from an ideology of becoming into an ideology of being. The transformation of an older patriotism to a newer nationalism was complet-

ed." Did this mean that the American people now wished to lead, or even to rule, the world? Not exactly, Lukacs believes. Here was yet another indication of the duality in the American national mind. "In one way they wanted to rule the world; in another they did not." At issue was the endemic conflict between notions of American exceptionalism and American universalism, between the isolationist ideal and the nationalist imperative; a conflict that had reached its climactic anticlimax in the year 1917, "the greatest turning point in the history of the Republic since the Civil War—indeed, in some ways since 1776, in some ways since Jamestown and Christopher Columbus."

It is at this point in the discussion that the added final chapter of *A New Republic* ("The Third Century," coterminous with Part III, "Dictatress of the World?") overlaps directly with John Lukacs's latest book, *Democracy and Populism*, of which it stands essentially as an outline, or redaction, or summary while providing the book-length treatment with many of its secondary themes, ideas, and mental grace notes—most of them marshalled in consideration of what Lukacs perceives as "a resurgent nationalism among the American people . . . [which] most of them [are] mentally, and spiritually, comfortable with."

"Hitler and Stalin are gone," John Lukacs notes on the penultimate page, "and George W. Bush will soon be gone, too." This makes for a startling conclusion to a fascinating book, whose general tone is nevertheless rather different. Insofar as *Democracy and Populism* has a main thesis overriding its marvelous thematic complexity, it appears to be as follows:

The "Left" has been losing its appeal, almost everywhere. It may be that in the future the true divisions will be between not Right and Left but between two kinds of Right: between people on the Right whose binding belief is their contempt for Leftists, who hate liberals more than they love their liberty, and others who love liberty more than they fear liberals; between nationalists and patriots; between those who believe that America's destiny is to rule the world and others who do not believe that; between those who trust technology and machines and others who trust

tradition and old human decencies; between those who support "development" and others who wish to protect the conservation of land—in sum, between those who do not question Progress and others who do.

The reasons for liberalism's slow fade, Lukacs suggests, include, chiefly, its accomplishment by and large of the agenda it set itself in the 18th and 19th centuries. A second is the marked decline of liberal and parliamentary democracy in Western countries, as the liberal understanding of democracy degrades toward populism and the unquestioned—or anyway unresisted—tyranny of the majority.

The history of the 20th century was not (Lukacs insists) the story of communism but of nationalism, taken neat or blended, in the United States as in Europe. Historically, the Republican Party has been more nationalist than socialist, and the Democratic Party, more socialist than nationalist—its nationalism both diluted and compromised by internationalist sympathies. It is their nationalist tendencies that have turned the Republicans into populists—since populism, very often, is the equivalent of national socialism. Hitler was no reactionary, no counterrevolutionist, but "a true revolutionary of the radical Right." Does this make the populist nationalism promoted by George W. Bush a type of "extremist" politics? In no way, Lukacs would insist. As liberal democracy devolved toward populism, popular nationalism served as the binding agent capable of holding classless societies together. "This, for instance, has now become the principal creed, as well as the principal asset, of 'conservatives' and of the Republican Party in the United States, confident as they are in reaping large political and electoral benefits from 'unpatriotic' and 'liberal' characteristics of their political opponents."

As for these "conservatives," who are they really? First and foremost, there are the Republican nationalists, taken as a party, or at least a substantial and influential wing of it. Secondly, there are the Bushite nationalists who staff the present administration, representing the crystallization of the GOP's most pronounced nationalist tendencies. Thirdly, there are the neoconservatives: mainly Jewish intellectuals from left-liberal backgrounds turned aggressive nationalists and "fellow-travelers . . . on the Right:

people whose former fears become transmuted in the pleasurable feeling that they are admitted to the company of nationalists and haters." Finally, there are the American people themselves, who have made the Republicans the leading political party in this country since Lyndon Johnson's presidency. During the two Reagan administrations, Lukacs writes,

A great mutation had occurred in American sentiments, opinions, ideas, beliefs, something that was unprecedented in the history of the United States, something that had finally crystallized at the time of Reagan's assumption of power. For the first time in their national history more Americans chose to identify themselves as "conservatives," many more than as "liberals."

A difficulty here, of course, is the preciseness, trustworthiness—even the truthfulness—of self-identifications. Another is the question of whether Americans know enough of history to have formed any accurate notion of what true conservatism is, and what it is not. Is the

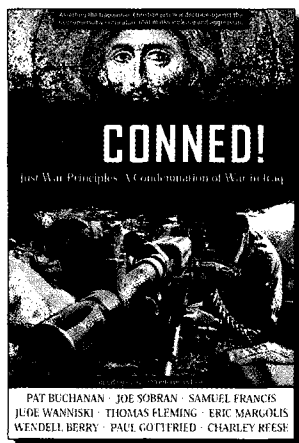
"militarization of the American presidency" (in Lukacs's formulation) a "conservative" development? The despoliation of nature by industrial corporations and suburban sprawl? The worship of technological and mechanical "progress" at the expense of tradition? A belief in "private enterprise" but not in privacy? A perfervid "Americanism" that crowds out an interest in, and knowledge of, other peoples? During the past 20 years, the divorce rate, the number of households managed by a single person, and the number of abortions performed has not decreased. (Incidentally: How can a public that makes Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Julia Roberts multimillionaires and defended the grossly adulterous Bill Clinton against impeachment—"It's only sex!"—be reckoned as "conservative" at all?)

The United States was created at the very middle of the Modern Age—a circumstance that, for a time, was a very great advantage to her. Increasingly, however, it proved a handicap, as Lukacs can only observe:

That handicap was the absence of intellectual traditions older than those of the so-called Enlighten-

ment—together with the persistence of the most dangerous idea and illusion of the Enlightenment, whether Parisian or Scottish: the limitless belief in Progress, resting on a shallow and mistaken view of human nature, the "homme machine" of the eighteenth century, with its jaunty and unthinking denial of its complexity and sinfulness.

If mankind is not to suffer a catastrophic fate, Lukacs believes, the American people must liberate themselves from the hubristic—indeed, blasphemous—idea that the United States represents, as Lincoln said, "the last, best hope of earth." If Americans are to enjoy a future that is in any sense of the word civilized, their public men must solve correctly "dreadful dilemmas: whether to prohibit or not the further and further applications of technology, whether or not to turn their backs on a diabolical notion of 'Progress.'" In order to do this, of course, they must be able to rethink the meaning of Progress, which means thinking about thinking itself. "That, and nothing else, means America being 'the ruler of its own spirit.'" c



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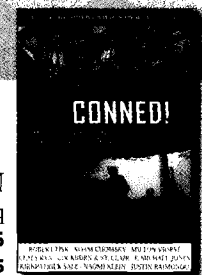
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Surfing the Void

by H.A. Scott Trask

Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It

by Thomas De Zengotita
New York: Bloomsbury;
291 pp., \$22.95



There is a scene in Oliver Stone's powerful and haunting antiwar film *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), in which Ron Kovic's mother is bending down before the television (this is B.R.—*before the remote*) and wincing. It is the Fourth of July, 1969, and long-haired antiwar protesters are surging through the capital with angry placards. Despairingly, she flicks the channel to *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, featuring guest host Sammy Davis, Jr.. Her face lights up, and she calls to her husband, who is just finishing the dishes: "Honey, it's starting, and Sammy Davis is on tonight!" All is now happy in the world. Mrs. Kovic has been mediated.

What makes the scene so damning is that her son Ron, her "Yankee Doodle boy," is just home from a combat tour in South Vietnam and a stay in the Bronx veterans' hospital; he is in the backyard drinking beer with a friend—paralyzed from the waist down. He remembers his mother's words before he went overseas: "Ronnie, you're doing the right thing. Communism has to be stopped. It's God's will that you go." So, for an hour at least, Mrs. Kovic has been rescued from a harsh reality—including all moral responsibility for her son's condition—by Rowan and Martin.

If media could perform that magic when there were only five or six channels, what is it capable of today, with five or six *hundred*? Add to that the internet, inexpensive DVD's and CD's, and so much else. Contemplate *that*, and you are ready for Zengotita's study of optional realities, self-deluding fantasy, and fragmented consciousness that *is* our mental condition today.

Perhaps the least that can be said by way of praise for Zengotita's startling and perceptive journey through the postmodern world is how well written it is and how enjoyable to read; yet the book's greatest strength—its genius, really—is how

much of what seems inexplicable about the way Americans are today is rendered perfectly, if frighteningly, understandable here. Why did Abu Ghraib not matter? (It's not just the myth of American innocence; it's relentless mediation.) How can George W. get away with his ongoing con job? (It's mediation, stupid.) You see, in an "ocean of representation," "everyone has their [*sic*] own reality." And politics is now mostly about "expressing your identity." Who wants to identify with torture? That's so *un-American*.

Have you ever wondered how American evangelicals can support a President who maintains a close financial, diplomatic, and strategic relationship with the Islamic dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, a kingdom as closed to the Gospel and hostile to Christianity as any on earth? How they can overlook Bush's carelessness with the truth? His distortions of language? The heinous practice of rendition? His nomination of a torture advocate to be attorney general? Is it that he and they are not really Christian? Perhaps, but there is more to it than that. The truth is that evangelicals (and many Catholics, too) are as mediated as any other group in our expanding collectivity. They have their own books and radio and television stations, their own leaders, their own reality; and, since Christians don't do the things Bush and his people do, then they don't happen, and that's that. Calvinist theologian R.C. Sproul has remarked on the total disappearance of logic from public discourse, education, *etc.* Zengotita has the explanation. The "flattered self" enjoying inexhaustible optionality in a "mediated world" sees no reason to accept any limits on thought or action. Why should he?

Gore Vidal has nicknamed our country "the United States of Amnesia" for the consistent forgetfulness that begins for most Americans the moment a story vanishes from the screen. Manifest incompetence by government officials, shifting and inconsistent rationales for policy, saying one thing and doing another, predictions that turn out wrong—all are readily accepted by the American public. References to even the most recent past incur such retorts as "Can't we just move on?" or variations on "That was then, this is now." The President and his defenders constantly speak this way, as did Clinton before them. In the age of remote control and satellite TV, the past ceases to be; in an age of public performance and spectacle, no powerful figure is responsible for what he said or did before *now*.

"Only when there's crisis and scandal can politics compete with sports and entertainment," observes Zengotita. This explains why Rumsfeld and Cheney lost no time in exploiting the traumatic footage of the Twin Towers to unveil their new foreign policy of regime change, preventive war, and global dominion. And it worked, because "the grievance, instantly iconic, gave Americans permission to ignore the history of our involvement in the Arab and Islamic worlds." "Systematically conditioned by media to avoid anything they couldn't understand in a minute," the American public was ready to accept the most simplistic and reassuring explanation offered. And so the political script from which the President and his people read, post-September 11, was that of the "revenge movie." You know how it goes: The movie opens with the hero minding his own business when he (or those under his protection) is rudely assailed by "evil" men bent on robbery and rapine. The hero then has license to engage in systematic and satisfying carnage for the rest of the film. (The audience can't get enough.)

According to Zengotita, the phenomenon of Princess Di

brought into high relief the way successful politicians must address the identities of their constituents, how they must reflect back upon the flattered selves of spectators the attention they are giving the celebrated.

That explains President Bush's hold on the electorate: He has managed to convince them that he is one of them; that "their indifference and ignorance," which he shares, is really a sign of virtue; that their "antipathy to all things intellectual and refined," which he also shares, is an exhibition of common sense; and that their desire for overseas mayhem is justified.

Recall "Bush the Bold," decked out in a flight suit, landing on that aircraft carrier; remember how he dared the insurgents to "bring it on"; think of how he "sneers and gloats" whenever they catch a terrorist; notice how he exhibits his "bratty temper" whenever he is asked a challenging question (which is rare). Zengotita explains that we are witnessing Bush the "method actor" trying to "perform who he is, or thinks he is," and to fulfill the role of righteous gunfighter whom the American people expect to ride out of American fantasy lore. Here, a reference to Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter*