

Substandard: The End of an Illusion

by Thomas Fleming

The sale of *The Weekly Standard* should put paid to any lingering illusion that the neoconservative empire was anything but a Potemkin village. Allegedly, Rupert Murdoch sold the magazine for one million dollars to Philip Anschutz, the billionaire owner of Clarity Media Group, but the price seems either much too high or much too low. Too high, because only a fool would pay so much money for a property that does nothing but lose money without adding a glimmer of insight to political discussion. Too low, because if *The Weekly Standard* actually did enjoy the influence that its editors have been so loudly and insistently claiming, \$50 million would not be nearly enough. For Anschutz, a million is the equivalent of the buck it takes to seal a contract. It's a rich man's walking-around money—in other words, chump change. If you were to believe the neoconservatives, *The Weekly Standard* has been the brains of the American Empire, but it went on the block for a lousy million. Some brains! Some empire!

Murdoch sank untold millions of his ill-gotten gains into TWS. I suppose that is the proper shorthand, since "The Standard" properly means the *Evening Standard*. (It's funny that, for all its supposed influence, the magazine does not have a well-known acronym or nickname.) Not long ago they were claiming a "growing circulation" of 60,000, and that may well be the case—though no one should ever accept anything an editor says about circulation. In misleading advertising lingo that publishers love to use, TWS snookers would-be advertisers with this classic canard: "More than 65,000 politically active Americans nationwide receive the magazine each week." Note the key word *receive*, as opposed to *subscribe to* or *pay for*.

I once told Pat Buchanan that Bill Kristol had declared him politically dead in the pages of TWS. "That guy," Pat snorted, "he never gets anything right." Unlike the stopped clock that is correct twice a day, *The Weekly Standard's* editors have never got anything right, from weapons of mass destruction to the presidential aspirations of Steve Forbes to "John McCain's Moment," which Bill Kristol was proclaiming last September. TWS has never contributed anything to American political commentary. When they are right, it is because they are saying what everyone else has been saying, and, when they are original or distinctive, they are wrong.

But, as the Frum person declared in a postmortem interview, TWS has influence. Does it really? Is it influence to run after a parade, shouting, "Me too, me too!" and then claim not only to lead the parade but to have started it? It would not be so bad if their platitudinous conventional wisdom were at least some form of knee-jerk conservatism or capitalist greed, but it is neither. Bill's father, Irving (popularly known as "the godfather"), was famous for giving "two cheers for capitalism." (They can't even be clever without imitating someone—in this case E.M. Forster.) But Irving's politics have only evolved from his original Trotskyism to a cross between Swedish socialism and Taiwan's state capitalism. Fred Barnes unwittingly spilled the beans, as he so often does, when he called for big-government conservatism. Fred was not sufficiently acute to realize that he was uttering a contradiction in terms, and *The Weekly Standard's* ideology is, at best, *New Republic* lite—an insipid brew that neither cheers nor inebriates.

TWS's not-so-secret weapon was neither its ideology nor its "writers," but Murdoch himself. It's like the old Henny Youngman joke about the man who crossed a lion with a parrot.

"What does he say?"

"I don't know, but when he talks I listen."

Not only is Murdoch a very powerful man, whose whims have to be catered to, but he also owns major newspapers

and two television networks. Who would listen to TWS's platitudes—as poorly expressed as they are predictable—if the editors were not trotted out to tell their lies on FOX News?

The Weekly Standard did only two things. On the positive side, it provided a living for writers who cannot write and intellectuals who do not think, but it also contributed to the senile dementia that has afflicted the conservative mind since the election of Ronald Reagan. Bill Kristol did not destroy conservatism all by himself. His father was a much more destructive force, but it would be a grave mistake to attribute too much blame to the Kristols and Podhoretzes. They were welcomed with open arms by the unprincipled leadership of the conservative movement. Generally, parasites do not destroy a healthy organism. Of course, there were still good people working for Heritage in the 1980's and writing for *National Review*, but the lightning success of the neoconservative *putsch* was as revealing as Hitler's Anschluss (the annexation of Austria that met with so little resistance).

No one knows, exactly, what Philip Anschutz (no. 89 on the *Forbes* list of the richest people in the universe) will decide to do with *The Weekly Standard*, but whatever happens, he has already done us a big favor in revealing the low, low price of the emperor's new clothes. Ever since Obama's election, the conservative chatter has been all about new ideas and new strategies, but the very fact that they are saying this shows how bankrupt the conservatives really are. With this set of rookies heading for the showers, perhaps a few remaining veterans might come out of hiding and show us some of the stuff they had when they won the pennant in 1980. Perhaps, but probably not.

Thomas Fleming is the editor of Chronicles.



STATE NULLIFICATION, SECESSION, AND THE HUMAN SCALE OF POLITICAL ORDER

February 4-7, 2010 • Charleston, South Carolina

James Madison, “the father of the Constitution,” taught that, being a sovereign political society, an American State has a “duty” to its citizens to block acts of the central government judged to be unconstitutional. Jefferson introduced the term *nullification* to describe this act and argued further that a State could lawfully secede from the Union.

Over the last century, by incremental steps, the central government has broken free of what Jefferson called “the chains of the Constitution.” Many Americans are reluctantly coming to the conclusion that the central government will not reform itself and perhaps (like an ever-growing cancer), is incapable of doing so. Neither national political party is disposed to challenge the never-ending consolidation of power to the center; neither party, for instance, has asked whether Congress has any constitutional authority at all to enact a nationalized healthcare plan.

If some semblance of constitutional government is to be restored, change must come from the States themselves, acting in their sovereign capacity to protect their citizens from runaway centralization. For the first time in over 140 years the doctrines of State nullification and secession have once again entered public discourse. The aim of the conference is to recover an understanding of this neglected (Madisonian and Jeffersonian) part of our tradition and to explore its intimations for today.

TOPICS

- How did the central government, to which were delegated only enumerated powers, become the greatest concentration of financial and military power in history?
- Are State nullification and secession constitutional?
- Fifteen states peacefully seceded from the Soviet Union (“the evil empire”). How did they do it?
- Learn about the Second Vermont Republic, a serious secession movement in Vermont, and why thinkers as diverse as George Kennan, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Walter Williams have supported it.
- Is Aristotle right that there is a human scale to political order, as there is to all other things? If so, how big is too big?

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Aliens and Knaves

Forty-five years ago, radio humorist Jean Shepherd wondered why filmmakers invariably portrayed alien invaders as intellectually light years ahead of human beings. Wasn't it possible, he mused, that extraterrestrials might be a tad slow on the uptake, perhaps even slovenly of habit?

At 30, director Neill Blomkamp seems far too young to be familiar with Shepherd, but his first feature film, the alien-invasion opus *District 9*, nevertheless honors Shepherd's notion. Blomkamp's aliens are an entirely hapless lot. They unaccountably park their saucer-shaped ship over Johannesburg, South Africa, a choice that makes no sense at all. Everyone knows alien invasions begin over New York or Washington, D.C., or, when the Alpha Centaurians take a wrong turn, London. It stands to reason that, if you were from somewhere north of the Eagle Nebula, you would have to be a complete dunce to hover over Johannesburg unless, of course, the director telling your story grew up in this city and wanted to put across a glancing allegory about what he had witnessed there as a child before his parents fled to Canada to escape the turmoil and crime that engulfed South Africa during the years before and after the African National Congress gained power in 1994.

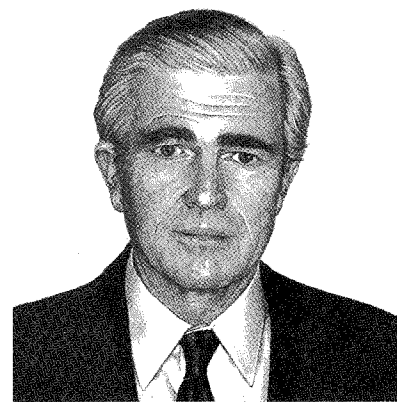
Upon their initial arrival in 1982, the aliens had refused to emerge from their vehicle. After three months, an exasperated South African government sent up some reconnaissance helicopters to find out what these reluctant visitors wanted. In a swift montage of simulated television-news commentary intercut with faux newsreel footage, we learn that the ship harbored confused, starving aliens. Taking pity on them, the government moved them into a camp, which quickly became a tin-hut shanty enclave similar to the Soweto District in Johannesburg, notorious for its squalor and petty crime.

The aliens are seven-foot tall bipeds encased in exoskeletons, equipped with antennae along with other inscrutably disturbing appendages, capable of leaping fifteen feet off the ground from a standstill, and in possession of ray rifles that instantly splatter their targets into gobs of watery gelatin. Yet, despite these physical and technological advantages, they are so lacking in tactical wherewithal that they have allowed mere humans to keep them corralled in their garbage-strewn district.

Twenty-eight years later, the South African citizenry have long lost their pity and awe for these creatures and now refer to them dismissively as "prawns." And, it must be said, the prawns have more than earned the contempt heaped on them. They have become addicted to cat food supplied to them by a Nigerian warlord who barter tabby treats for their formidable weapons. Meanwhile, the respectable citizens increasingly complain of the prawns' disgusting ways. They are inveterate dumpster divers; what's more, they patronize Nigerian prostitutes who, for the right price, have overcome whatever natural reluctance they might once have had to engage in interspecies sex. Furthermore, the prawns have been known to mug the young, both black and white, for their Nikes—which is odd, since they walk in an ostrich-like toes-up gait quite unknown to Nike's market researchers.

Here as elsewhere, the needs of Blomkamp's allegory trump narrative plausibility. Oddities keep cropping up. The alien ship transported what must have been a million prawns, since their numbers have grown to 1.8 million post-arrival, and yet the vehicle is clearly no larger than the new 52,000-seat Yankee Stadium. Of course, there's standing room to consider, but still.

Despite its inconsistencies, *District*



District 9

*Produced by Key Creatives
and WingNut Films
Directed and written by
Neill Blomkamp
Distributed by Sony Pictures*

9 has become the critical darling of our mainstream press. Why? Well, it seems to align with our politically correct thinking on racism and immigration, issues before which the considerations of simple storytelling must fall by the wayside.

When the script gets down to serious business, it becomes difficult to know whether to laugh or groan. Since the South Africans want the prawns to disappear, the government hires a private contractor, the Haliburton-like Multi-National United (MNU), to relocate them 200 miles outside of Johannesburg, an initiative meant to parallel the infamous forced removal of blacks, coloreds, Asians, Indians, and some doubtful whites from Cape Town's Sixth Municipal District in 1968 on the grounds that it was a slum and conducive to interracial strife. To manage the fictional eviction, the head of MNU chooses his son-in-law, the stunningly inept Wikus (Sharlto Copley, giving a weirdly unaffected performance), a natural patsy wholly unsuited to the task. We watch in horrified amusement as he walks through the prawn ghetto, eviction notices in hand. At his side are armed mercenaries and, of course, a team of slaving television commentators hoping to film scenes embarrassing to the government. The journalists