

EDITORIAL

IN THESE TIMES

"...with liberty and justice for all"

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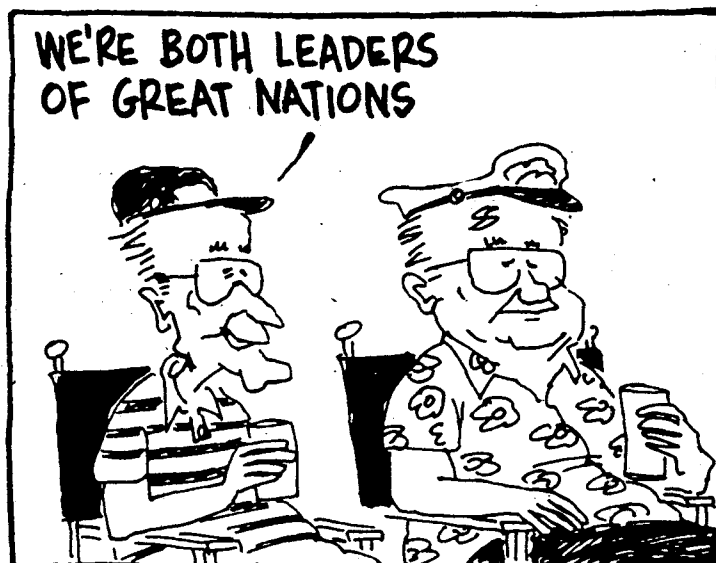
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The '80s have prepared the way for a new left politics in the '90s

It isn't often that a decade is as sharply defined as the '80s have been. Beginning with Reagan's attempt to bring back the glory years of late 19th-century imperialism, and ending with the most peaceful and widespread democratic revolution in history, the '80s will be looked back upon as a decade of wild extremes—and of crisis for the orthodox, both East and West. For the right in the U.S., the '80s began as years of almost dreamlike opportunity and ended in moral and political bankruptcy. For the left, the '80s brought retreat and disorientation, but also a revival of hope and opportunity. Above all, the '80s have been a time when the Cold War threatened to reach its logical—and catastrophic—conclusion, but then ended abruptly as Eastern Europe's dizzyingly fast democratization deprived the hardliners' rationale of all plausibility.

As we enter the '90s and the political verities of the past 40 years crumble before our eyes, the whole world seems up for grabs. In Eastern Europe, politics has suddenly become a public activity, one in which ordinary people bring down governments that just a few weeks ago seemed impervious to popular desires or needs. In Western Europe, the continued existence of the NATO alliance and a divided Germany promise to become central issues. And in the U.S., the military Keynesianism that has dominated the Cold War years can no longer be sustained as we enter what Sen. Jim Sasser (D-TN) calls "the dawn of the primacy of domestic economics."

There is not yet a new American left; in fact, the left remains in a state of confusion and disarray. Within the Democratic Party, the liberals remain a timid vacillating lot. Outside of the major political parties, the only significant political left forces are single-issue movements around the environment, abortion and Central America. The traditional "Marxist" left, long atrophied into a tangle of tiny sects, is entering a final agony. And yet the views that we at *In These Times* have put forward these past 13 years are now widely acknowledged to be popular and politically feasible, while the right,

which remains entrenched in office and in the media, has seen its most cherished ideas lose their political viability.

Consider the sacrosanct military budget, justified by the alleged need for a strong defense against the Evil Empire. This was never genuinely popular, but virtually nobody in public life had the courage to say that the emperor had no clothes. Now, however, it is no longer possible to justify the war machine, and the establishment is suddenly faced with the problem of holding back the wave of sentiment for new governmental priorities. As Sen. Tim Wirth (D-CO) says, support among his constituents "for maintaining the defense budget is zero." His state is the home of Star Wars and several other major military programs. "But," he acknowledges, "all people are talking about is the 'peace dividend' and how we're going to be able to spend that money on more important things like research, the environment and the homeless."

Or take the issue of abortion. While the right to choose was protected by the courts, the anti-abortion forces were on the attack and pro-choice groups were on the defensive. But with the Supreme Court nibbling away at *Roe v. Wade* and threatening to overturn it, the defenders of a woman's right to make her own decision were forced to enter the political arena. Not surprisingly, they found that the right's agenda was a loser with the public, and that the best defense of democratic rights is to be made in the political arena.

In short, and leaving out many issues, it seems clear to us that a left agenda, now more than ever, is potentially a winning one. The problem for the left is not a lack of principles and programs. These exist in the web of single-issue groups that now function simply to propagate their particular concerns and to lobby wavering legislators. The problem is the left's meager confidence in the American people, which all too often engenders a lack of will or seriousness of purpose.

It is difficult for the American left to think of itself as contesting seriously for public office. Since the mid-'20s, when the Socialist and Progressive parties finally collapsed, the left in this country has—at its best—functioned as a pressure group. This was true of the "Old Left" of the '30s and '40s, and it was true of the "New Left" of the '60s. There were many reasons for this, especially during the Cold War years when it may well have been impossible for an independent left to function as a political force in its own right. But we have begun a new era, which requires new political thinking. As we enter the '90s a new approach to politics should be on the left's agenda.

LETTERS

Safety in numbers

WHY SHOULD WE AMERICANS BE SO UPSET OVER the atrocious assassination of six priests in El Salvador when we seem insensitive to the murder of more than 1,000 Salvadoran men, women and children strafed and bombed with American-supplied munitions during the same week?

Did the tortured bodies of those six priests experience more pain than the murdered shantytown poor? Did their smashed brains hold more potential for life? Are their souls more precious to God than the souls of the 80,000 Salvadoran people, mostly innocent civilians, killed in this war prolonged by U.S. ambitions and munitions?

Of course, when six priests are taken from their beds, tortured and murdered, their brains smashed on the ground like so much excrement, it is, as the U.S. State Department said, "regrettable." So, too, are the deaths of thousands.

Perhaps the murder of six innocent priests is more horrifying because six are few enough for us to imagine, while imagination fails utterly when it comes to the slaughter of 1,000 or 80,000.

Americans should be thankful that the Bush administration now is speeding up the delivery of arms and munitions to the Salvadoran fascists so that the innocent can be killed in greater numbers, with greater speed and with, perhaps, less pain. The greater the number killed, the less noticeable it will be.

Meanwhile, in this season of peace, we North Americans can continue to sleep soundly, knowing that our government in its determination to dominate the affairs of Central America will leave no country undisturbed, no innocent life spared.

Nathaniel Hart
Grand Portage, Minn.

Amendment

IN REGARD TO THE CORRUPTION BROUGHT ABOUT by political action committee funds being needed for campaign contributions, why not just ban *all* political advertising and require the media to interview candidates for offices?

The only beneficiaries of television ads, for example, are advertising agencies and television stations. What does this have to do with democracy?

I suggested this idea to my state representative, and he replied that it is unconstitutional. OK. This issue is worth amending the Constitution for, I think.

Kate Bradley
Redmond, Wash.

Polish debt

I WELCOME THE INCREASED ATTENTION YOUR CONTRIBUTORS have paid to recent events in Poland. The articles by both Joanne Landy (ITT, Oct. 4) and James Petras (ITT, Nov. 15) served as useful correctives to the debate on Poland now underway in this country. Petras correctly indicts the Jeffrey Sachs "shock" treatment as a disaster for the Polish working class. Landy rightly notes the hypocrisy inherent in tying strings to U.S. aid in Poland.

However, both articles are only correctives to very narrow aspects of this debate.

It is just a drop in the bucket to suggest that no strings be attached to U.S. aid to Poland. And taking potshots at American Congress members or Harvard professors does not come near to tackling the real barriers to democratic change in Poland. The major stumbling block to a genuine economic takeoff is the crushing burden of debt under which the country now labors. The debt is somewhere around \$40 billion, up from around \$22 billion when Solidarity first emerged in 1980. This year alone, Poland will owe more than \$2 billion in debt servicing.

By what right do Western banks and financial agencies demand that Polish workers pay back these loans, given to an unelected government that reigned with terror backed by the Soviet army? It is our obligation as American supporters of democratic change in Poland to demand that the debt be forgiven—written off by the Western bankers who made this Faustian deal with Polish generals and bureaucrats.

The American progressive community and, in particular, the American trade-union movement should also recognize that Solidarity rules in Poland in name only. This is not the Solidarity of 1981—the Solidarity that held national congresses with elected delegates directly accountable to more than 10 million dues-paying trade-union members. This Solidarity has fewer than 2 million members—roughly equivalent to the membership of the Jaruzelski-sponsored "official" trade unions. This Solidarity has yet to hold a national congress. This Solidarity has yet to debate and decide, openly and democratically, on a national program.

Some 25 percent of the electorate boycotted the recent elections. The Solidarity candidates in that election were hand-picked by Lech Walesa, who rules inside the movement largely backed by the Catholic Church and his own personality. The Solidarity-sponsored organizations that do exist are riddled with debate and political factions. There are also numerous movements outside of mainstream Solidarity—of various political stripes.

One strong backer of free enterprise in Poland, a member of the "liberal" (i.e., laissez-faire) wing of Solidarity and an adviser to the Ministry of Industry, told me recently that he views the old trade-union membership of Solidarity as a "sleeping giant," one that he hopes "doesn't wake up." Rebuilding that trade-union membership, democratically, from the bottom up—waking that sleeping giant—is, however, a cornerstone of rebuilding a democratic and productive Polish society.

It is inside the working-class movement

that gave birth to Solidarity that the real future of Poland is now being fought over. The Western bankers and economists would love to see the old *nomenklatura* join with advocates of free enterprise inside that movement to kill the old Solidarity—while it still slumbers. Ignoring this internal reality is as dangerous to the American left as ignoring the disaster of the Stalinist movements themselves in the Eastern bloc and the Third World—a mistake the American left is still paying for.

Stephen F. Diamond
SSRC MacArthur Fellow in
International Peace and Security
Cambridge, Mass.

Unfair brush

I WAS DEEPLY OFFENDED BY A RECENT "IN SHORT" item where Luis Camnitzer is reported to have painted SUNY College of Old Westbury President Eudora Pettigrew with the Jesse Helms brush for opposing a blatantly sexist and demeaning invitation by artist Alfredo Garzon.

Despite the gains of feminism, American culture still degrades women at every turn—from economic discrimination to the law, from the arts to the military. To deride Pettigrew for opposing sexism so another male artist can promote the patriarchy is outrageous. If Pettigrew can be likened to Jesse Helms for her action, then Garzon can be likened to misogynist Larry Flynt for his.

The patriarchy censors feminism everywhere. It is the most important hidden movement in this country and manages to accomplish change while confronting the sexist educational system, sexist media and culture, sexist intellectuals, sexist religious institutions, sexist government, etc. Feminists are not the censors in this country. A casual look around will confirm that.

Shelley Bain
Des Moines, Iowa

Ludicrous mission

I THINK THE GIST OF YOUR "IN SHORT" ITEM (ITT, Nov. 15) about "Boy with Arms Akimbo"—the San Francisco Group that has plastered explicit pictures around San Francisco on cheap, grainy xeroxes as a form of guerrilla protest against the growth of anti-obscenity hysteria—is a nasty lie. I think you should substantiate the claims made (that Boy with Arms Akimbo is "most concerned with protecting, and promoting, photographs of sexually aroused pre-pubescent boys") or retract the article and apologize. I called some of the originators of the group, and they claim that no one from *In These Times* ever tried to contact them about their

actions. They also deny all of the charges made in the article. They seemed a little confused about the article and not nearly as disgusted as I am. Your readers should know that most of the people involved with Boy with Arms Akimbo are gay men. Perhaps this has a bearing on the vindictive tone of the story. Attentive readers who know nothing about the group may have been alerted anyway by the ludicrous claim that someone could make "political hay" by promoting pederasty, either in New Haven or in San Francisco.

I continue to be suspicious of a paper that seldom, if ever, has anyone writing in to complain about Alexander Cockburn, your best writer.

Aidan Wylde
San Francisco

Joel Bleifuss replies: Wylde is right. I was misinformed. Boy with Arms Akimbo are cultural guerrillas, not publicity-minded pederasts. More on the Boy in our next issue.

Unreal

YOUR SNEERING, MEAN-SPIRITED COVERAGE OF the David Dinkins mayoral victory in New York City (ITT, Nov. 15) is embarrassing and shameful. Never have I seen a better illustration of how far so-called socialists live from reality.

Michael Powell's analysis of the election reminds me of a friend who wished to register a protest against the Democratic Party machine—and voted for the Socialist Worker's Party candidate. She knew neither his name nor his politics. Her vote did indeed count—for Rudolph Giuliani.

Nowhere in your coverage is it acknowledged that progressives are substantially better served by Dinkins rather than a Giuliani victory. Nowhere does Powell credit the clear-thinking, hardworking progressives like Ruth Messinger who made the victory possible.

Just to be clear, it was not the San Francisco earthquake that has allowed David Dinkins to make history. (I have personally heard Giuliani whimper the same excuse.) It was the tremendous grass-roots effort made by those who got out the vote, worked on voter registration for the last year and educated the public tirelessly.

Fortunately, few people who live in the real world continue to read *In These Times*. You can all go back to your internal dialogue now and leave us to the business of trying to improve life in New York City.

You will cancel my subscription immediately. And you can try to answer this question for yourselves, because most of us already know the answer: which side are you on?

Shelley Herochik
Highland Park, N.J.

SYLVIA

