

A Very British Coup

As Ronald Reagan shambled toward the stairway of Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base on Inauguration Day, Bryant Gumbel mused to Tom Brokaw that this seemed to him "quite remarkable." It turned out that Gumbel was mightily impressed that the 78-year-old Reagan had not sought to stave off retirement by mounting a coup d'état. All around the world, Gumbel said, leaders "cling to power," whereas here in the U.S. they head for the old folks' home without a whimper.

If Brokaw had had his wits about him, he would have reminded Gumbel that during many of his years in office Reagan retained in his employment at the National Security Council a young lieutenant colonel who spent much of his time formulating emergency regulations by which the United States could be brought under martial law in the event of any widespread public "disorders" such as protests against an invasion of Nicaragua. But no one was inclined on January 20 to talk about Oliver North or about the fact that no president in recent history was keener to erode public accountability and augment secrecy than Reagan.

These paeans to democracy came in the aftermath of the widely praised showwng on *Masterpiece Theatre* of *A Very British Coup* adapted by Alan Plater from Chris Mullin's novel of the same name. Introduced with visible distaste by Alistair Cooke, the play described the political consequences of a left-winger becoming prime minister in Britain and then falling foul of the security services, otherwise known as SIS or MI6, MI5, CIA, FBI and cognate bodies.

"We are at the second episode of *A Very British Coup*," Cooke began one evening, continuing, "[This is] a highly imaginative picture of what Britain might be like if it elected a prime minister from the extreme left wing of the Labor Party. Now this has never happened in the UK, as in this country the extremists both of the right and the left tend at the beginning of the campaign to make alarming, even impressive noises. But as it goes along the polls show the people moving more and more toward the center. The candidates who can't follow them fall by the wayside."

There were a couple of puzzling things about these remarks, most obviously the fact that Britain is presently run by a woman of the very extreme right, in the form of Margaret Thatcher. Secondly, Cooke could have added that as soon as the ruling class in Britain was persuaded that a left-winger had taken power, they immediately organized a very British coup against him in more or less the manner described in the play.

It happened there: There have been at least three occasions since the end of World War II when Western intelligence services organized successful coups within advanced capitalist countries normally regarded as democratic. All involved social-democratic leaders. In West Germany in the early '70s, Willy Brandt was forced to resign after allegations that perhaps he himself, and not just his main deputy, was a Soviet agent. In Australia in the same period, the Labor leader and prime minister, Gough Whitlam, was dislodged in a coup organized jointly by the CIA and Australian intelligence services. And in the UK—in the affair the prompted Mullin to write his novel—MI5 and the CIA, with input from MI6, effectively compromised the Labor leader and prime minister, Harold Wilson, with suggestions that his closest friends were Soviet agents and that he himself might very

ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn

well be the Kremlin's man.

These three instances demonstrate the old rule that the basic function of any "intelligence service" is always, in the last analysis, to suppress internal dissent, by the familiar device of announcing that "secret" information available only to the intelligence services reveals X or Y, the alleged subversive, to be disloyal.

Two relatively recent books show this process in chilling detail. The first was former MI5-man Peter Wright's well-known and crazed *Spycatcher*, whose sale was suppressed in the UK by Thatcher, and the second is David Leigh's well-researched *The Wilson Plot*, which describes the efforts to discredit Wilson.

The fact that the CIA and their British counterparts would have wanted to discredit Wilson shows their essential mania. Like all British Labor leaders, Wilson, unlike the character played by Ray McAnally in *A Very*

British Coup, had few radical instincts and these were quickly suppressed when he led a British Labor government into power in 1964. He excited Lyndon Johnson's fury by refusing to send British troops to Vietnam, but for domestic political reasons this was an option that no British prime minister could have contemplated.

But despite his surpassing moderation, Wilson was seen by the British and U.S. spymasters as a pawn and hireling of Moscow. In 1988 Leigh interviewed Leonard McCoy, who had been deputy head of the CIA's counterintelligence under James Angleton. McCoy recalled for him an Angleton briefing in the '70s, while Wilson was still British prime minister: "The speech he gave me was to introduce me to the sophisticated world of counterintelligence. It dealt primarily with the massive Soviet deception campaign. In 1959 the KGB decided it was going to create a worldwide deception operation and com-

pletely deceive the West.... Eurocommunism... Wilson as a servant of the Soviet Union... Soviet, Romanian, Albanian and Yugoslav ideological disagreements were all KGB deception operations.... Wilson was a Soviet agent."

Angleton's belief—for which there was never the slightest evidence—was that the KGB, seeking to advance their man Wilson into the prime minister's office, had murdered Hugh Gaitskell, his predecessor as Labor leader. Angleton, finally evicted by William Colby from his post in the CIA, poured out all this tormented nonsense to his intelligence allies round the world, and particularly in the UK, where it fanned right-wing hopes for a putsch.

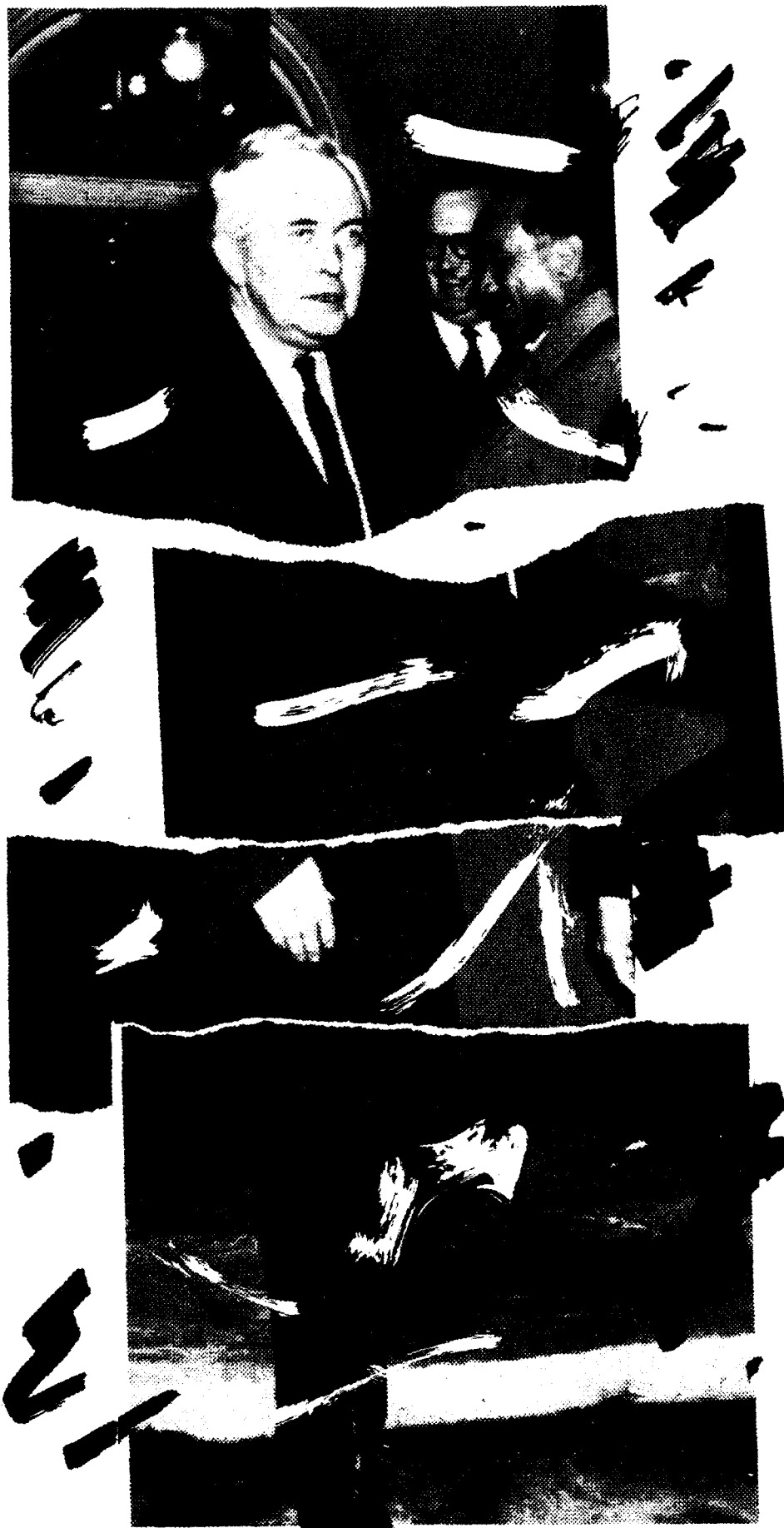
It may seem absurd to talk of a putsch in the UK in the early '70s, but then it may seem absurd now to imagine that Oliver North spent months with officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency figuring out how to lock up potential subversives, and particularly blacks, in concentration camps. Any ruling class turns to thoughts of putsches when its security is threatened, and such was the case in the UK in the early '70s, particularly after the miners handed Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath a tremendous defeat in 1973.

An unusually deranged—even by the standards of that tormented breed—newspaper proprietor named Cecil King began trying to rally upper-class opinion to a coup. Other conspirators, under the guise of possible emergency procedures in connection with Northern Ireland, even asked Cunard officials if they would be willing to yield the QE2 as a "floating detention center," as Leigh puts it, "apparently for the Cabinet." This was in 1975, and the request was made by three army and secret service people. (In 1982, during the Falklands war, the QE2 actually was requisitioned by the military.) Even the queen, in this 1973 period, began to ask whether Britain was about to be overtaken by revolution. The former Conservative prime minister, Harold Macmillan, assured her, correctly, that soon the pendulum would start to swing the other way.

unending smears about his personal life, certainly contributed to his sudden resignation as prime minister in the spring of 1976. There had indeed been a "very British coup."

So what is the moral? The first, noted above, is that ruling classes will do anything to protect themselves, and intelligence services exist in this instance to compromise, smear and otherwise incriminate anyone seen as a threat to the interests of these classes. Hence the abiding interest they have in compiling dossiers over the widest possible catchment area. The FBI spy who infiltrated CISPES, Frank Varella, has described how the FBI and the Salvadoran police share files on American and Salvadoran activists. Similarly, the FBI has kept careful dossiers on the Nicaraguan solidarity movement in this country, just as they did on similar solidarity movements in the past. Twenty years down the road it's not unlikely that some such an anti-intervention activist might be under consideration for some government job demanding "clearance," and once again the black-mailing powers of the intelligence services will come into play: the activist in question had "compromising contacts," may have been approached by "proxies" for the Cuban secret service, etc., etc.

In the States "a very special coup," along British lines, has not as yet been necessary. But the thing to remember is that it can always happen anywhere.



By Mark Crispin Miller

THE TEAM NOW (STILL?) IN CHARGE did a pretty good job with the inauguration. Like all effective "political" events within the culture of TV, that whole inaugural spectacle—Thursday night's "Gala," then Friday's ritual—said one thing over and over, made one point over and over, sent the same message over and over, just as the Bush campaign had done.

Of course, last week's inaugural "statement" was very different from the propaganda that got Bush elected. Throughout the fall, the message was "Dukakis weak—Dukakis shit!! Bush clean! Bush good! Bush strong!!" In absolute contrast to that divisive cry—and in subtler contrast to the imperial imagery of Ronald Reagan—this inauguration pushed the "kinder, gentler" theme repeatedly airing the promise of a new inclusiveness.

Rainbow simulation: For instance, the "Inaugural Gala," broadcast live from the Washington, D.C., Convention Center on Thursday night, was nothing more than one long ad for the boundless tolerance of the incoming regime. You could say that this "gala" was a great television salute to our diversity—if by "diversity" you mean the range of CD's available at Sam Goody's, for this was a vision of America's epic multiplicity as conceived, not by the idealists of the Enlightenment, but by the editors of *Billboard*.

You had your blacks: Nell Carter shimmying heftily through a very loud number from *Ain't Misbehavin'*, and, in another bit from Broadway, two black men doing (I swear), a spirited tap dance between choruses of "I Got Rhythm." You had your "brown" element: Julio Iglesias, tremulously crooning *en español*. And, to appeal to (or to advertise) our new leader's alleged blue-collar sensibilities, you had several C&W kingpins: the euphoric Oak Ridge Boys, conspicuously blow-dried, as was the hard-eyed Randy Travis, and—introduced by Chuck Norris—there was also a happy medley of past hits from Crystal Gayle and her big sister, Loretta Lynn ("Stand By Your Man" was, of course, adapted to the occasion), the two of them backed up by Loretta's daughter Sissy and another beaming relative named Peggy Sue.

And, since it takes all kinds to make a world, you also had your highbrow music, with Yo Yo Ma (please note race) playing Tchaikovsky, and there was even some ballet. Of course, you also had a few huge middlebrow attractions: one of those kitschy, tuneless numbers from *The Phantom of the Opera*, a peppy turn by Tommy Tune (a moment, perhaps, for the gays in the audience) and, best of all, a memorable appearance by the hoarse and bloated Frank Sinatra, who provided the only real entertainment of the evening by reverting to type, right before an au-



This year's model: the heartbeat of America—that's today's Danforth Quayle.

Watching 'democracy': the image of inclusiveness, the exclusion of reality

dience of millions.

After groaning hideously through a long version of "You'll Never Walk Alone," the old ruffian refused to walk anywhere, but hogged the stage, threatening to wreck the event's military timing by behaving

INAUGURAL

as he does at Caesars Palace. He rambled, fishing for applause, and then tried to launch into a second number, but the houselights stayed on, the orchestra wouldn't budge, and Ol' Blue Eyes started turning mean, so they cut fast to a commercial. At the height of this unexpected drama, the show's director erred by keeping George and Barbara on our screens, so that we saw the soon-to-be-presidential face slowly tightening in the crisis, the famed lips vanishing, the eyes beseeching, as if in a scene from *Godfather II*: "No, no, Frankie! Frankie! Not here! Not here!"

Deadly juggling: But even that gross gaffe did not allow Sinatra to stand out from the Gala's "diversity." Menacing as he was, he was just the show's MOR segment, fitting in neatly with the other genres: Broadway hits, "black" music (a half-century old), "Spanish" music (sort of), classical, country, country gospel, etc. True, there was no good rockin' that night, but the show's planners did not forget to stroke the televisually hip, featuring a segment by that agile, deadpan comedian who juggles meat cleavers and/or flaming torches on shows like *Saturday Night Live*—that ironist appearing shortly before dozens of little girls from Utah, wearing buckskin skirts and cowboy hats, came out and played violins, creating a sound that has never been heard by anyone not on acid.

Finally, in what the announcer

called "a stirring finale," there appeared the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and then, "from the Sioux Indian tribe, the operatic tenor White Eagle," a strapping longhaired fellow in a smart tuxedo. While these musical troops stood ready, Arnold Schwarzenegger lumbered on to salute both "de American treem" and "my frent," the president-elect: "I choin millions around de worlt in wishing you strength, courage and wisdom," grinned the bodybuilder—and before George Bush could realize that he's just been insulted, White Eagle was reverently intoning these lyrics:

We come from everywhere: We're called Americans.

From every distant shore, but what matters more

is we're Americans [sic].

United by the promise etched beneath the flames—

that says, beyond this golden door you enter,

everyone's the same.

When the whole thing was finally over, Bush took the stage, and, just in case anyone had somehow missed the point of all that heavily contrived "variety," he announced that, like his 40 predecessors, he too would be "the president of all the people." On the next day, the inauguration proper was also carefully arranged to advertise the new inclusiveness.

High Noonan: The speech, yet another propaganda masterpiece by Peggy Noonan, was laced with homey references meant to identify this administration as *not* imperially chilly, *not* mean and greedy, *not* bigoted, but folksy, civil, "caring": "We meet on democracy's front porch, a good place to talk as neighbors and as friends," etc.

The gestures of the day reinforced the new impression: Staff Sgt. Alvy Powell, a black Marine with a rolling bass somewhat like Paul Robeson's

sang *twice* at the ceremony; later that day, George Bush strapped on a guitar and good-naturedly feigned jamming with Lee Atwater's blues band (see accompanying story); on Saturday, George and Barbara chatted with a crowd of tourists visiting the White House; and throughout the whole event, there seemed to be Bush grandchildren planted everywhere.

All this showy warmth seems appealing by contrast with the Reagan prototype, and by contrast with Bush's own mean-mouthed campaign performance. The journalists have cheered the contrast lovingly, in part because it is so obvious a hook, and also because it lets them sound off knowingly about the man who is no longer king: suddenly Reagan was a phony all along, a mere figment of advertising (he never went to church, was estranged from his own children, etc.), whereas *this* guy is—and aren't we all delighted?—the Real Thing. Now the presidential spectacle is *not* contrived, presumably, but the mere revelation of an authentic personality.

Let us not pause here to ask why the press would never comment on Reagan's fraudulence *at the time*, and move on, as the press has done, to the Bush "difference." From what

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we know, it is indeed true that Bush has always been a very civil and considerate man, a conscientious note-writer and mailer of bouquets—in short, a gentleman, just as Prescott Bush intended. That soft gold aura of Old Money certainly does make George Bush something different from Ron of Hollywood: Reagan's natural constituents have always held Bush in suspicion precisely because of that "elitist" tinge.

However, while the new spectacle does have some basis in the presidential person, all the family imagery, etc., may be less a vision of real character than a necessary stroke of advertising—an effort to "position" (as the admen say) the latest product, to play up its incidental differences from the leading brand.

New! Improved! While supplies last: If we reconsider this inauguration spectacle without the ugly Reagan contrast in our minds, we must perceive that the whole show was fundamentally the same old thing—another Reagan-era celebration of rightist "values." Bush may have spoken softly, he may have worn a business suit rather than a morning coat, and, yes (as Reagan would say), Barbara Bush is, unlike the icy Nancy, most charmingly self-ironic.

And yet, for all her wry cracks about her own ugliness, her husband's inaugural bash was just as gross and vulgar a display of wealth as the fêtes of four and eight years previous—the show cost more than \$30 million, and while it went on 3 million Americans were bedding down in parks and doorways. Furthermore, all those gestures of inclusiveness turn out to represent the standard rightist vision: lots of country music, hordes of children and all the colored men blithely singing and or dancing, and tucked safely into uniforms.

And yet it was not the particulars within the spectacle that should concern us—for every journalist alive engages in the same sort of niggling decipherment. It is, rather, the fact of the spectacle itself that made that inaugural moment wholly anti-democratic, despite all those hectic, trivial portents of toleration. Within the culture of TV, there can be no real participation in the spectacle: George Bush inadvertently revealed this fact in mouthing one of Peggy Noonan's pieties. Addressing the inauguration's vast viewing audience, and, in particular (and predictably), "our children [who] are watching in schools throughout our great land," the new president said earnestly: "Thank you for watching democracy's big day."

The contradiction in that sentence, and the new president's unawareness of it, tell us precisely why, having lived through eight years of Ronald Reagan, we cannot hope for too much better from the spin-off.

Mark Crispin Miller's most recent book is *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*.