

# VIEWPOINT

By S.M. Miller

**A**N INTERVIEW WITH CONGRESSMAN Barney Frank (D-MA) in the Dec. 22, 1988, *New York Times* and Tom Wicker's column the next day questioned the nature of present-day liberalism. Frank and Wicker both call for a more pragmatic attitude that accepts the absence of congressional or popular support for liberal issues like gun control. They would drop advocacy of such issues and concentrate on the popular "bread-and-butter" issues.

But the challenge that we of the left face is not as narrow nor as clear-cut as Frank and Wicker imply. It is more complex than simply determining what issue to focus on or what specific position to take. A good illustration of the fundamental nature of the difficulties of the left is the gap—if not a chasm—between the old-time liberal religion of production, growth and employment and the new sentiments of neighborhood, environmental protection and grassroots democracy.

**Inherent contradiction:** Traditional liberalism focuses on jobs and income, economic questions that involve mainly processes of production. Unions were the agents of this kind of liberalism, campaigning on the job for higher wages and in the political arena for economic growth. Today, the left's significant gains are in organizing people in community-based activities that seek to improve the consumption side of life—maintaining or improving neighborhoods and services, reducing taxes and utility bills, preserving the value of homes, cleaning up waste dumps. The production approach is about jobs and making income; the consumption strategy is about the household and the spending of income, the off-the-job satisfactions and problems.

There is a special difficulty, if not poignancy, for the left in this split between production and consumption orientations. Despite efforts at economic organizing, particularly around plant shutdowns, the left's current claim to political importance revolves around its ability to organize and mobilize in response to issues that affect consumption (see story on opposite page). These concerns frequently oppose production or job interests.

Managed trade—a better political term than protectionism—may ensure employment for those in threatened industries, but may also raise prices for their products as international competition decreases. Calling for protected firms and industries to invest and reduce costs may eventually result in better prices, but there is no guarantee. Investments may not be effective or, if effective, the reduced costs may pass not to consumers but to shareholders through higher profits. The production concern of promoting employment opposes, at least in the short run, the popular interest in containing prices, a consumption issue.

Similarly, the concept of comparative worth has intrinsic merit but increases personnel costs that must be offset by increasing local or state taxes or by reducing governmental services. In non-progressive tax systems, which are used in most localities and states, the burdens of such changes can hurt the very people the left tries to organize.

The clash between the protection of jobs or the environment, between production

## To win, the left needs more than pragmatism

and consumption, has no easy resolution. Preventing polluting firms from moving in or continuing production threatens, for example, jobs in the plant. This problem complicates political activity based on organizing people around household and consumer grievances. Groups like Citizen Action, ACORN and San Antonio's COPS cam-

has had trouble recognizing. (In the '80s economic growth in Western Europe resulted far less in increased employment and lowered unemployment.) Our unwillingness to look at the Reagan record, including foreign policy, in a balanced way stunts our political effectiveness.

We are unclear about what our goals and ambitions are and what our actual practice is. Our practice shows that the operating objectives of today's left do not envisage possibilities of large-scale transformation of society. Rather, we hope to make the society more mixed, more livable because of greater government spending and more democratic through promoting local, populist activities. Our politics are coalitional and electoral, which mainly means working within the Democratic Party, rather than building a strong, continuous, independent organizing presence around an evolving agenda and deepening political education.

**Long-term goals?** That is where we are, even if many of us want to carry the label of "socialist" and want to think that we are working for profound change. In fact, we operate in and for a mixed society, but

### The DEMOCRATS:

#### Planning a party

paign against utility price hikes or increased taxes, struggle to get traffic lights and paved streets or to maintain fire stations that are threatened with closure. They also push for legislation requiring early warning about plant shutdowns, but such production-oriented activity is emphasized less than consumption-oriented actions.

To put the challenge bluntly, progressive proposals along the production front frequently clash with these groups' popular base or constituencies. This political dilemma never gets resolved. The efforts at coalition-building—bringing together many diverse groups around a political candidate—may bypass the problem temporarily, but may also result in diminished organizing efforts during electoral off-seasons.

The clash between production and consumption orientations is the surface of the deeper left issues of how we understand both the contemporary U.S. and ourselves. The U.S. is a mixed society, not a one-dimensional nation. The Reagan years heightened grave problems through despicable treatment of many and yet made remarkable economic gains in growth, employment and low inflation—an achievement that the left

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largely ignore the tensions that result from working in this society at this particular time. Only occasionally do we recognize the gap between the operational goals demonstrated in our daily work and the larger goals we profess. We have short-term poli-

cies—a gain in many ways because we are now political actors—but don't discuss their internal contradictions, such as the conflict between production and consumption strategies and tactics. Nor do we address longer-run issues: what do we want that is reasonable to pursue in this society, and how do we move toward it?

Raising these issues is not to condemn what we do. But it does point to our reluctance to confront the economics, politics, sociology and philosophy of this mixed society—and the left's role in improving it. As we are working in and for a better mixed society, we should deepen our understanding of it and us. Part of our task should be critical examination of current positions in many realms, and part in the development of new ways of thinking.

Much of left thought and action today is warmed-up liberalism: expanded social programs, active government and expanded government spending, low interest rates, more regulation of business. A progressive supply-side economics is emerging but it is not integrated and may be in partial conflict with the rest of the progressive agenda. In sociology, we are only beginning to examine the changes in social structure and the implications for progressive objectives and politics. We may welcome attention to family issues, but funding child-care programs is only a partial response. In philosophy, we have failed to modernize with a compelling case for greater equality and fairness. In politics, the ethos of positive feminism, environmentalism and mutual aid has not been fused with traditional left demands. We do not call, for example, for less materialism and commercialism in American life or lift those desires into electoral and progressive politics.

Barney Frank's critique is too limited and 1992-oriented. We of the left have a broader task of self-examination.

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IN THESE TIMES, MARCH 15-21, 1989 17

## Revolutionaries and Functionaries: The Dual Face of Terrorism

By Richard Falk  
Dutton, 222 pp., \$17.95

## The Culture of Terrorism

By Noam Chomsky  
South End Press, 269 pp., \$12.00

## The Other Face of Terror: Inside Europe's Neo-Nazi Network

By Ray Hill, with Andrew Bell  
Grafton (London), 312 pp., 3.5 pounds sterling

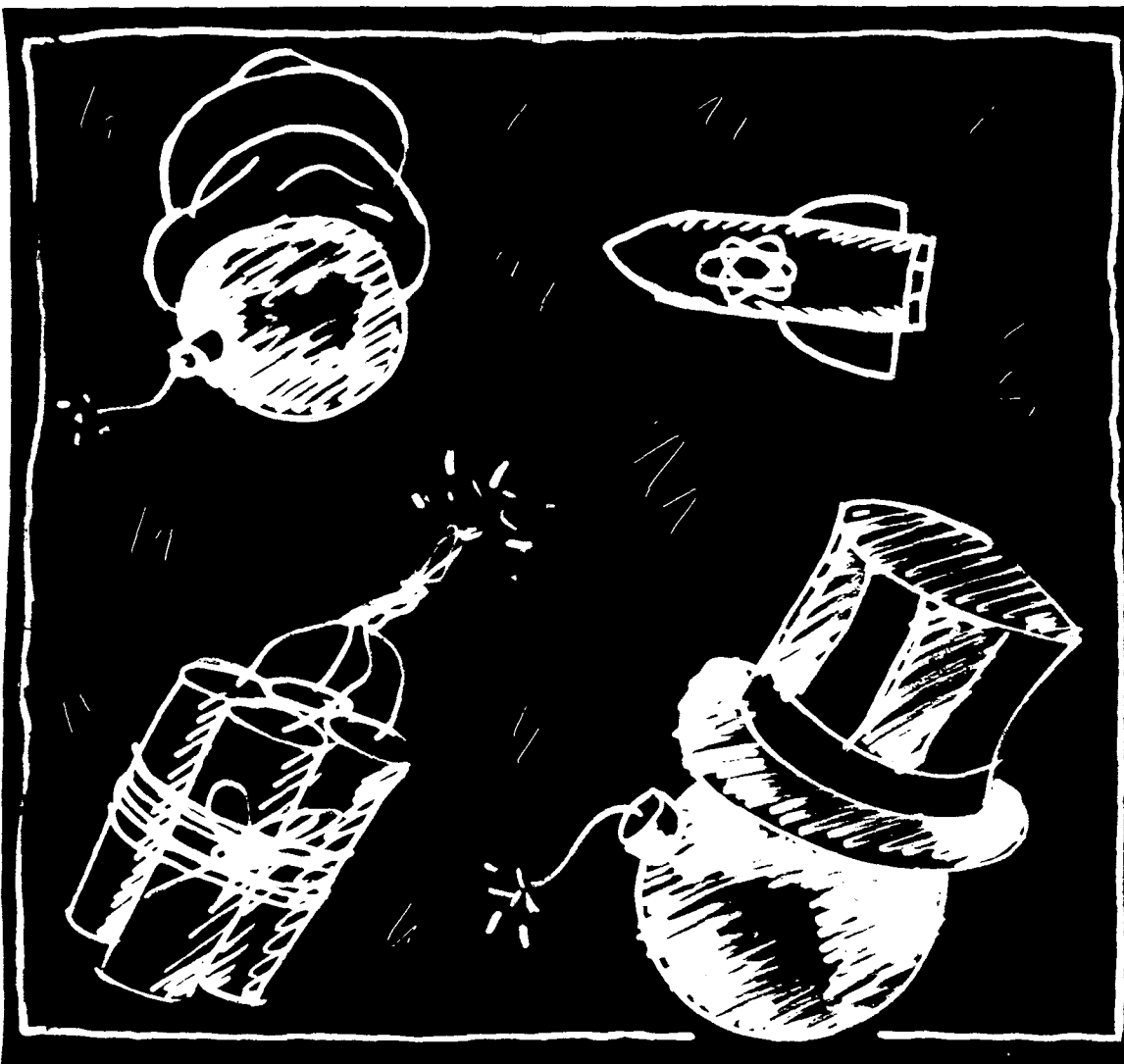
By Martin A. Lee

**I**N JANUARY, SHORTLY AFTER U.S. FIGHTER planes shot down Libyan jets over the Gulf of Sidra, the Pentagon released a slick, 130-page report—with photos and bar charts—called “Terrorist Group Profiles.” Praising it as “an effort to raise public awareness,” *CBS Evening News* correspondent Terrence Smith noted that the Pentagon spent \$71,000 to produce and distribute the report. “Cheap, by Pentagon standards,” Smith concluded, “and few are likely to question its value.”

A cursory glance at the report's table of contents is enough to discern the Pentagon's only slant. The section on African terrorism lists only one organization: the anti-apartheid African National Congress. El Fatah, the main PLO faction, is included among Mideast terror groups, despite Yassir Arafat's renunciation of terrorism. Latin American terrorists are all left-wing revolutionaries; right-wing death squads aren't mentioned. And the roll call from Western Europe features the defunct Direct Action from France, while omitting any reference to numerous neo-Nazi terror groups that are still active on the Continent.

That CBS should give its stamp of approval to such a blatantly biased U.S. government report underscores an essential point of Richard Falk's book, *Revolutionaries and Functionaries: The Dual Face of Terrorism*. “The American understanding of terrorism,” Falk writes, “has been dominated by recent governmental efforts to associate terrorists with Third World revolutionaries, especially those with Arab countries.... The media have generally carried on their inquiries within this framework of selective perception. As a result, our political imagination is imprisoned, with a variety of ugly and unfortunate consequences.”

**A narrow view:** By confining terrorism to anti-Western political activity and violence, the government fosters “the illusion that terrorism is alien to American patterns of conduct in the world, that it is done to us, and that what we do violently to others is legitimate counterterrorism,” says Falk, a professor of international law at Princeton. This narrow and self-serving conception has skewed mainstream political discourse to such a degree that the



## State of terrorism address

slaughtering of innocents through covert operations, so-called retaliatory attacks and other forms of low-intensity savagery by the U.S. government elude the terrorism label.

In Falk's view, terrorism and counterterrorism are often two ways of describing the same activity. “The terrorist,” he argues, “is as much the well-groomed bureaucrat reading the *Wall Street Journal* as the Arab in desert dress looking through the gun sights of a Kalashnikov rifle.” Indeed, the activities of both are symbiotically linked, with government functionaries invoking the specter of revolutionary terror as a pretext for using excessive force to preserve “national security.” Oftentime, the main effect of nihilistic “terror from below,” as Falk refers to revolutionary violence, “is to erode whatever degree of democracy exists, to impair civil liberties of the citizenry and to strengthen the hand of the state in relation to domestic dissent.”

Falk is careful to point out that the scope of revolutionary violence, which is largely symbolic, pales in comparison to the counterterrorism of state functionaries who are prone to drenching entire populations in blood. Since the U.S. government has the upper hand in the psychological war, revolutionary terror continues to exert a distracting hold on the American imagination. Although their numbers are much smaller, the targets of revolutionary violence receive far more mass media attention than the victims of U.S.-backed

functionary terror, who are reduced to a cold statistic, if reported at all.

During much of the Reagan era, U.S. officials—aided by a pliant press corps—pushed the spurious notion that the Soviet Union was Terror Central, the conspiratorial source that called the shots for terrorists worldwide. The issue of terrorism

## VIOLENCE

was especially useful for furthering a Cold War agenda. Its efficacy as a propaganda tool has not waned with the warming of superpower relations. Falk emphasizes how counterterrorist rhetoric has been geared largely toward converting public anxiety over political violence into support for militarist foreign policy and increased intervention in the Third World. Seen in this context, the bombing of Libya was as much salutary medicine for Vietnam syndrome jitters as it was a plot to murder Muammar Khadafy.

**Semantic chicanery:** What is most disconcerting about the phenomenon of terrorism is how banal it has become in our society. Hence the title of Noam Chomsky's book, *The Culture of Terrorism*, which focuses on Iran-contra and related scandals. A once-secret 1982 Pentagon intelligence report described the U.S.-backed contras as a “terrorist” organization, but this raised hardly an eyebrow in Congress, as politicians quibbled over strategies for containing the Nicaragua threat

in contra aid debates. “The Reagan administration came to office declaring that it would dedicate itself to eliminating the plague of international terrorism, as it prepared to launch programs of international terrorism on an unprecedented scale,” Chomsky stated. “Predictably this was all accepted uncritically by the educated classes.”

Chomsky never tires of lambasting the press for its role in limiting the damage of the Iran-contra affair through disinformation and semantic chicanery, while steering clear of taboo subjects like Lt. Col. Oliver North's (and George Bush's) plan to suspend the U.S. Constitution in the event of “a national crisis” such as “widespread internal dissent or national opposition to a U.S. military invasion abroad.” One recalls the deafening silence of the media after Rep. Jack Brooks (D-TX) tried vainly to raise this issue during the 1987 hearings. Debunking the notion that the scandal was merely an aberration of an otherwise healthy system, Chomsky provides details about Iran-contra and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA, the national crisis management unit), that should have been widely reported, but were not. FEMA director Louis Guifrida, for example, had once written a memo recommending the internment of all “American Negroes” in “assemble-centers for relocation camps” should there be a major civil disorder.

Chomsky, like Falk, draws an important distinction between whole-

sale state terror practiced by U.S. clients in Central America and atrocities of a lesser magnitude committed by Abu Nidal or Islamic fanatics in Lebanon. Although the point is well taken, merely shifting the discussion from pirates (Khadafy, Khomeini) to emperors (Uncle Sam) is not sufficient. One runs the risk of perpetuating the myth that Arabs and leftists have a monopoly on “retail” terrorism. This is hardly the case, as Ray Hill shows in *The Other Face of Terror*, a harrowing account of his experiences as a high-placed militant-turned-mole inside Western Europe's neo-Nazi underground.

**The right terrorism:** Hill's story begins in the mid-'60s when he was first exposed to the anti-immigrant polemics of a national socialist group in Britain. A poor working-class youth, he resented the foreigners coming to Leicester, his hometown, and he became an instant convert to the racist cause. After a few brushes with the law, Hill moved to South Africa, where his prowess as a fiery orator got him elected chairman of the South African National Front. Eventually, however, he realized the extent of the danger, the evil that was being perpetrated through attacks on innocent people. Upon returning to England in 1979, he made contact with *Searchlight*, the London-based anti-fascist magazine, and from then on he lived the double life of a spy posing as a dedicated Nazi.

Hill, who later testified before the European Parliamentary commission on racism and Eurofascism, describes in vivid detail the machinations of a neo-Nazi international, with its secret paramilitary camps, gunrunning operations, printing presses that churn out “No Holocaust” literature and other unsavory tracts, and a well-developed safehouse (“brown aid”) network for fugitive terrorists and assassins. These neo-Nazi fanatics have staged some of the worst outrages in post-war Europe, including the 1980 Bologna train station bombing in Italy, which killed 95 people and injured over 200.

As an undercover informant, Hill helped hide Italian fugitives implicated in the Bologna massacre. He was also drawn into a plot to bomb a West Indian carnival in the mostly black Notting Hill district of London, but the scheme was aborted when *Searchlight* tipped off the police. Nevertheless, the death toll from neo-Nazi violence in Europe exceeds that of the far left. And the violence is sure to continue, as anti-immigrant parties gain at the voting booth throughout Western Europe. Hill's highly readable account sheds significant light on this disturbing development.

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