

THE DEATH OF PRIVACY

by Jerry M. Rosenberg

Random House, 236 pp. \$6.95

THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK ALONE should be enough to indicate that *The Death of Privacy* is intended as a horror story—rendered all the grislier because it deals in fact. The impression is heightened by such chapter heads as “The All-Seeing Eye” and “Along the Road to Psychological Submission.” And if that were not enough, there is in the appendix a Bob & Ray satire called “The Day the Computers Got Waldon Ashenfelter.”

It comes complete with a monster more sinister than any in the annals of science fiction demonology: a proposed federal project going under the innocent-sounding name of the National Data Bank. Not the kind of mechanical monster that would merely take over the planet and rule with literally an iron hand, this one would rob us of the most vital aspect of our individuality—our privacy. It would convert the nation and eventually the world into a gigantic fishbowl for the benefit and amusement of a few privileged viewers.

The reality of the threat is extremely well documented, as Jerry M. Rosenberg draws upon an impressive array of expert testimony from even the most ardent fans of computer technology. From the field of government he quotes the expressed fears of such divergent sources as Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas and Senator Strom Thurmond.

It is not computers as such that threaten to “get” us all. They are the indispensable tools of modern science, industry, government, banking and education, all of which would likely have been buried under a mountain of paperwork by now without them. Computers are merely extensions of man’s brain as the media are extensions of his voice and the automobile and jet plane extensions of his legs. The danger lies in what would, in effect, be the joining together of all the computers now in the employ of both the public and private sectors of our society into an all-knowing, all-telling data bank in Washington.

Already an unbelievable amount of personal information on us is stored on punch cards and tape reels in some twenty government agencies, including Social Security, the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service and the military. There are statistics on file elsewhere for nearly every move we make, from birth to the probate of our wills. We leave data tracks behind each time we sign for a trip or a night’s stay at a

motel on a credit card. Some 2,500 credit bureaus in America exchange information (and sometimes misinformation) on every purchase we make from a home to a trinket, and on every application for a loan or other credit, whether granted or turned down. Each check we write is grist for the computers at the banks. Our grades in school and college, brushes with the law, marriages and divorces, job records, income and savings figures—all these and many more details about us are on record.

What has, until now, preserved a measure of privacy for us has been the fact that such data are preserved in so many different places, making it difficult and expensive for anyone to pull it all together into a single dossier. It would be easy and relatively inexpensive, however, with the establishment of a federal data bank. Such a system, says the author, “will have an almost limitless capability to store, intermingle and, at the push of a button, retrieve information on persons, organizations and a variety of their activities, all without the knowledge of those involved.”

The framers of the Constitution were men of great vision. But they could not have been expected to put into that document protections against modern invasion of privacy through government’s proper function of record-keeping. The author suggests specific safeguards to individual privacy to be added to the Bill of Rights in terms understandable to computer-users.

“The point of concern,” he warns, “is that without sufficient safeguards, to have the opportunity to refute stored personal information, to allow the individual to determine what is collected, to maintain a permanent check on how data are used, we may someday stop asking whether our privacy is being invaded—when that time arrives we will find that we have no privacy left to invade.”

Dr. Rosenberg is obviously more optimistic than some of the experts he quotes, such as W. H. Ferry, vice president of the Fund for the Republic, who

regards privacy as “today a goner, killed by technology.”

If the people were nearly as aware as they ought to be about the threatened arrival of Big Brother ahead of schedule, they would doubtless button-hole their Congressmen while there is yet time. A good way to begin would be for everyone to read *The Death of Privacy*.

Fred Darwin

Fred Darwin, a radio news commentator, is author of the forthcoming book “How People Stay Young.”

THE SOUND OF MOUNTAIN WATER: The Changing American West

by Wallace Stegner

Doubleday, 286 pp., \$5.95

MUCH OF THIS BOOK has appeared earlier in print, some of it in the *Saturday Review*. What it says bears the repeating.

There are sixteen essays, written over the course of twenty years, and the perspective helps in the continuing process of attempting to define an area which constitutes, in Mr. Stegner’s delineation, some two-fifths of the nation, and which has the shortest history, the least rainfall, the fewest people, the highest mountains, the hottest deserts and perhaps the least understanding of itself of any of the ecological regions into which our country can be divided.

Outside its boundaries, the American West is understood, if at all, only in terms of its quick-gun mythology, its natural grandeur, and its big, wide sky. Even the latter is diminishing. The modern traveler flies over the West in a couple of hours, and Mr. Stegner has further refined the old comic map that showed Indian country beginning just beyond the Oranges and continuing westward until Sioux feathers collided with Hollywood sunglasses. Today, he observes, some maps of the United States are shaped like a dumbbell—“New York at one end, California at the other, and the United Airlines in between.”

The West has yet to come to comfortable terms with itself. For one thing, it has difficulty distinguishing between its predators and its builders. Until quite recently, its heroes were the exploiters, the clear-cutters of timber, minerals, land and grass who moved on leaving deep scars in the big country. As Stegner notes, scarred land heals slowly in an arid climate. With so much to conserve, the West has paid scant honor over the years to its conservators, and in its innocence and tough optimism, with so

much of everything except water, the West is unequipped philosophically to adapt to its limitations. The purple hills, the tawny prairies and the ochre badlands stretch on and on, but they are not, alas, as infinite as they seem.

As the young and groping West moves uncertainly toward self-recognition and maturity, hopefully toward a graceful acceptance of both its limits and its vigor, it owes much to sensitive, articulate men like Stegner. They are defining a land and its people, and it is important to do so to the extent that one wishes to believe that America is not homogenized geography, which it obviously isn't, and also not a melting-pot in which the rich metals of peoples are reduced to a uniform dross. Among the handful of writers who to date have seriously troubled themselves about what the West means, Stegner stands out. His voice is sound, wise, and temperate as he writes with affection about the landscape, the life and the letters which are close to his being.

Readers, east and west, who would hope to know the West might well start, or continue, with *The Sound of Mountain Water*. There are available thicker, deeper, more fact-laden books, some of them written by Mr. Stegner, but this one makes an excellent survey, and it has the advantage of the interesting time-span. Glen Canyon before and after the Dam, for example. It is a combination of geography, history, personal observation and experience, and literary comment in which, as an appreciator, Stegner delightfully flouts the aging microanatomists of

the New Criticism. In short, it is "... a book of confrontations (not in the contemporary sense!) with the West, a series of responses and trial syntheses."

Stegner describes a postwar excursion into the Nevada desert, several subsequent experiences of the canyon and river country in southern Utah, and, wryly annoyed, a brief auto trip through the roadside reptile zoos of northern New Mexico. Roughly half the book concerns a boyhood in Salt Lake City, the hangups—they are many—of the serious writer in the West, the writing of history, the rationale of libraries and books, and three major Western authors—Bret Harte, Willa Cather and Bernard De Voto.

Although Stegner is at pains to emphasize that this collection is not systematized, it is less potpourri than it might sound; in fact, the continuity of life and letters as they arise out of time and place is the dominant theme and provides a strong unity. Stegner says it thus:

One of the deprivations of people in western America is that Time in their country is still not molded by human living into the forms of sanctuary, continuity, and confidence that it is the ambition of all human cultures to create.

These things can be heard, if one listens, in the burbling and trickling, the deep-throated roars and the plashings of mountain water.

Robert L. Perkin

A student of the American West, Robert L. Perkin is the author of "The First Hundred Years."

THE AGONY OF THE AMERICAN LEFT

by Christopher Lasch

Knopf, 212 pp., \$4.95

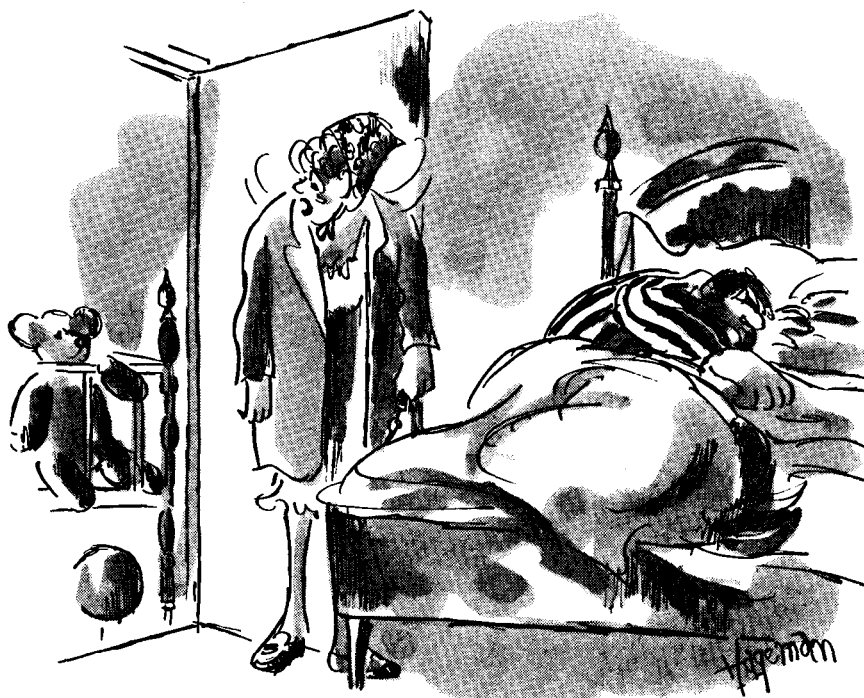
ON THE TRAIN FROM DUBLIN TO CORK I chanced to sit opposite an Irish college professor who, upon learning that I was part Irish myself, printed his name and address in Gaelic and asked me to send him a postcard from abroad. I inquired why I must use Gaelic rather than English, and he explained that this was a personal campaign to freshen the bilingualism of postal employees, for whom a reading knowledge of Gaelic is a condition of employment. With a like degree of zeal on the part of thousands, the government might be persuaded to replace English with Gaelic in the schools, thereby preventing its imminent extinction. When I asked why the Irish people should learn a moribund language, and one they could use only to communicate with each other, I was told that this was just the point.

The moment was revelatory. I have since heard similar arguments from black intellectuals on the need of Harlem children to learn Swahili, and from Catholic intellectuals on the need to retain Latin in the Mass. In *The Agony of the American Left* the delusions are analogous though grander.

Professor Christopher Lasch seeks to assist another culturally deprived minority: the radicals. The problem confronting them, it seems, is lack of sophistication. They have fried-chicken appetites when they should desire pheasant. They demonstrate only for bread when Professor Lasch would have them insist on cake. In ringing phrases he concludes that radicalism will be barren "unless the struggle is carried into the realm of ideology and becomes a demand not merely for equality and justice but for a new culture, absorbing but transcending the old." Specifically, rather than "merely" equality and justice, Lasch would have the New Left work for democratic socialism.

The book contains essays originally published in the *New York Review of Books*, with two additional ones that appeared in other publications. As a result, one feels at times that he is reading a very long book review, and senses an occasional lack of unity in the five chapters.

The work is not without substance. An essay on "The Decline of Populism" continues the kind of historical dissection of the American intellectual tradition that characterized Lasch's excellent *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963*. The other four chapters deal with the failure of socialism, the



"Good heavens! Who did I put on the 7:47?"