

# Letter From New York City

by Herbert I. London

## Life as Pathology



The tumultuous events at the *New York Post* over the last few months serve as a perfect metaphor for New York. This oldest daily in the United States, established by Alexander Hamilton, is (as I write) fighting for its life amid courtroom recriminations over its ownership and purported losses of \$1.5 million a week. When the peculiar and volatile Abe Hirschfeld was granted ownership of the tabloid, he announced that Bill Tatum, owner of the *Amsterdam News* and well-known race-baiter, would be the paper's editor. This decision, along with rather bizarre public comments from Hirschfeld ("The *Post* will make me G-d") and the wholesale firing of many of the newspaper's stalwarts, led to an open rebellion by its staff. Despite their unemployment, many of the newspaper's employees continued to turn out the paper, excoriating Hirschfeld and Tatum in the process. It could easily be postulated that only in New York could such a zany set of conditions evolve.

New York was described as late as the early 1960's by Jan Morris, historian of cities in the throes of deterioration, as the center of international culture, a communications mecca, a place electric with opportunity. Since then, however, its slide has been perceptible. New York is not what it was and may never even be what it is. Recently Mayor Dinkins called a press conference to congratulate himself and his administration on a reduction in homicides from more than 2,000 annually to 1,900. This announcement was used to show that New York is on the "road to recovery."

Yet when Brian Watkins, a young tennis enthusiast, came to New York for the U.S. Open, he became one of the city's many casualties, brutally killed while defending his mother who was being attacked by muggers in the subway system. The day after this incident, Mayor Dinkins went to Washington to testify for tighter gun-control laws. But Brian Watkins was killed with a knife. When a known drug-dealer was killed in an altercation with cops, the mayor used tax-

payer money to have the drug-dealer's family travel from the Caribbean to New York for the funeral. When thugs boycotted a Korean-owned grocery in Flatbush, the mayor told police to ignore a court ordinance restricting the boycotters from the entrance to the store. He described the episode as "a community disturbance." When the Lubavitcher community in Crown Heights was attacked by ruffians after the accidental death of a 10-year-old child, police were restrained from converting a violent one-sided episode into a race riot. However, after Yankel Rosenbaum was killed in retaliation for the death of Gavin Cato (the 10-year-old killed in the accident) the mayor did not consider it appropriate to attend the Rosenbaum funeral service. So much for evenhandedness.

The consequence of such actions and inaction has been the conversion of this city into a racial tinderbox. Yet it isn't only race that divides the city. When Joseph Fernandez, former chancellor of its school system, insisted on imposing a "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum that in part promotes tolerance for homosexual activity, several local school districts balked. One of them, District 24 in Queens, led by 72-year-old grandmother Mary Cummins, fought tenaciously until Fernandez was ousted by a majority of the Board of Education and compliance with the curriculum proposal was made voluntary. The mayor supported Fernandez throughout this incident and lobbied vigorously for his retention as chancellor.

Similarly, the mayor fought relentlessly against the Ancient Order of Hibernians so that homosexuals could march in the St. Patrick's Day parade and carry signs declaring their sexual orientation. When the courts ruled against the mayor and the homosexual demonstration was declared off-limits, Dinkins, along with Governor Cuomo and President of the City Council Andy Stein, did not march in the parade—an event known as much for political participation as for demonstrations of respect for the sons and daughters of Erin.

Yes, events surrounding the *Post* are a mere microcosm of a city wracked by culture, race, and class warfare. The New York public schools, once the envy of the world, have been converted into a literal and figurative battlefield. One school on the west side of Manhattan, Park West High School, collected more than a

thousand weapons after a metal detector was installed at the beginning of the 1992 school year. And since Fernandez urged the distribution of condoms in the public school system as a preventive for AIDS, despite parental objection, classes have been organized to promote their "proper" use. It is hardly an exaggeration in this city to contend that students might spend more time putting condoms on cucumbers than on solving quadratic equations.

At the moment there are 540 municipal employees in the city work force for every 10,000 people in the city. That ratio doesn't mean very much until it is compared to the second highest such ratio among American cities. Detroit has 206 municipal workers for every 10,000 in the population. New York is by any measure the last and most entrenched bastion of socialism in the world. There are more school administrators (5,400) at 110 Livingston Street, the nerve center of the city's school system, than there are from Portugal to the Ural Mountains.

The size and scope of the city work force explain in large part why nothing works in the city. Recently I was asked to appear on a television program at WNYC, located on the 31st floor of the municipal building. When I arrived there I was told that the main elevator goes to the 28th floor and another elevator to the 31st. This was well and good, except that I couldn't find the second elevator. I proceeded to knock on a door where I was greeted by a twinkie-eating city worker. "Waddaya want?" he asked. "I'm looking for the elevator to the 31st floor," I responded. "Yeah, so is everyone else. Just get in line and I'll let you know where it is." Incredulous, I asked why I had to wait in line when all I wanted to know was where the elevator is located. Somewhat irritated, he said, "I'm just doin' my job. This is what my supervisor told me to do." Alas, here is socialism New York style. Mere civility is now forced into the cauldron of city politics.

There are 1.1 million people on welfare in New York City; 300,000 people work for the city government; and one out of every seven New Yorkers resides in a rent-controlled or rent-stabilized apartment. Moreover, private-sector jobs are declining, with the city losing 375,000 since 1989, or more than 25 percent of the nation's total. The net departure rate from New York is more than 120,000 since the decade began, and if the price of one-bedroom condos ever

rises to 1980's levels, young couples eager to leave New York will lead a mass exodus. Needless to say, those leaving the city do not include the poor, indigent, and homeless.

There are 80,000 "homeless" people on the streets, most of them in Manhattan and most deinstitutionalized in the 1980's. In 1980 there were 93,000 mental patients in New York City; today there are 11,000. These so-called homeless live in the alcoves of retail shops and in the subway system, turning a once unique transportation system into an open urinal. Yet the civil libertarians have made it virtually impossible to return the streets and the subway to sane, law-abiding citizens. Beggars, carrying empty coffee cups, are ubiquitous in New York. There is scarcely a street one can walk on without being accosted for money. And to the astonishment of almost every sensible citizen, Judge Sand ruled that begging can't be prohibited since it is a form of expression protected by the First Amendment. The decision was overturned, but it nevertheless suggests a great deal about the city's ideological pathology.

The streets of New York are now filled with foreigners, both legal and illegal, selling watches that are knock-offs of Rolexes and shirts that say Fendi on them and speaking Pidgin English. There isn't any obligation for these people to learn English since New York practices bilingualism (read multiculturalism) in the schools and every other institution. Moreover, the local office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service has virtually given up trying to control the situation. How else can one explain the public role that Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman had in New York's Muslim community, even though he was regarded as a terrorist in Egypt and forced to leave that country? In New York anything goes, even a terrorist preaching violence to fellow church members, some of whom blew up one tower of the World Trade Center.

The city's budget is \$30 billion, or the 14th largest in the world. Much of this money comes from commercial taxes. Yet many buildings in New York have a real value—based on occupancy rates—of zero. To make sure this financial house of cards doesn't collapse, city authorities perpetuate the myth that commercial properties have the same value today as in the 70's. Of course no one believes that, but city authorities won't

tell the truth, and building owners, fearful of losing property that they hope will one day appreciate, keep their mouths shut.

Into this maelstrom of madness add a variety of political candidates who claim they can solve the apparently insolvable. Mayor Dinkins will run again in large part because the demographics are moving in his direction. Blacks are a rapidly growing portion of the city's population, and they tend to vote as a bloc. No other candidate can count on 30 percent of the vote as he can. He also has to defend a record that includes a potential financial catastrophe, race hatred, and a school system that is falling apart.

His major rival is Rudy Giuliani, who lost to Dinkins by two percentage points in 1989. Giuliani is the Republican hopeful who is to present city politics what John Lindsay was to the 1960's. The word "conservative" he describes as ideological, and his political philosophy he calls pragmatic. He has variously described the Children of the Rainbow curriculum as acceptable if it incorporates certain changes ("the words 'artificial insemination' should be removed"), as unacceptable because it is age inappropriate, as a good idea because it promotes tolerance, and as a bad idea because it is silly to teach such issues to first-graders. As I see it, either Giuliani is confused or he is trying to be all things to all people. The one thing, perhaps the only thing, he is clear about is his desire to win.

Then there are Andy Stein, president of the City Council and a wealthy man; Herman Badillo, a member of the City University Board of Trustees, a former mayoral candidate, and not a very wealthy man; and Roy Innis, executive director of the Congress of Racial Equality. None of these men can defeat Dinkins in a Democratic primary, as recent polls suggest. But that will not deter any of them. In fact, Stein may end up on the ballot as the Liberal Party candidate, a scenario I regard as very plausible. Last is George Marlin, the editor of the G.K. Chesterton papers and a Wall Street banker who is likely to run as the Conservative Party candidate and who is the darling of the Mary Cummins set, meaning the white ethnics fed up with the Children of the Rainbow curriculum and other elitist ideas.

With this line-up what is a conservative to do? In the best of all worlds, my candidate is Marlin, even though he

probably will not garner ten percent of the vote. But New York is most certainly not the best of all possible worlds. In a four-way race involving Dinkins, Stein, Giuliani, and Marlin, every vote for Marlin is, in effect, a vote for Dinkins. The Marlin constituency will be composed of white ethnics who—if no real choice were available—would vote for Rudy Giuliani. Should Marlin get six or seven percent of the vote, it most certainly will represent the margin of victory for David Dinkins.

Since I want to see a Republican Party built on Reagan principles instead of liberal Republican pabulum, a Giuliani victory gives me pause. On the other hand, four more years of Dinkins playing the race card with a vengeance will mark the end of an era for New York and possibly an irreversible slide. Does a conservative, therefore, vote his principles or does he vote to oust Dinkins? Does he vote for the future of New York or does he vote for the millennia? This has been a far more gut-wrenching decision than readers might assume since the change, should Giuliani win, will be marginal in any case. Giuliani most likely will appease the homosexual lobby as Dinkins has, and he will not consider a voucher plan for the schools, a position Dinkins shares. Yet Giuliani would probably root out the corruption in Dinkins' Democratic administration, and he will mitigate the race war the mayor has promoted.

Yet I can't help but consider the long-term effect of a Republican mayor who espouses the liberal social line, especially when liberals assume these are the positions Republicans should advocate. Indeed, what happens to the Republican Party when its leaders are William Weld and Rudy Giuliani? Will genuinely conservative Republicans be forced out of Lincoln's party creating a marginalized third party or will they be forced into the background of a party that stands for low taxes and low morals? Surely these questions won't be answered by the mayoral election in New York City. But they are unavoidable in the New York context.

Aside from lamenting, I'm not sure what I will do in this election. I love New York for many nostalgic reasons, and I also love my principles. Should I compromise my principles to give New York a chance? Fortunately, I've got a few months before I decide. Unfortunately, I don't know whether the *New York Post*

or New York City can survive the next few months. These decisions rest with an authority much higher than the mayor of New York.

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## Letter From the Lower Right

John Shelton Reed

### The Mississippi Hippies and Other Denizens of the Deep (South)

January in Jackson—well, it wasn't April in Paris, but it had its pleasures, among them the chance to compare the Magnolia State to the more northerly South I know better. I was lecturing at Millsaps College, staying in a nearby motel with a view from my window of the quaint little observatory that figures in the delightful, made-in-Jackson movie *Miss Firecracker*. Millsaps is a small college with a good faculty, so its students may get worked a little harder than average, but campus life seems to be pretty much standard-issue Southern collegiate: "Inez-burgers" and beer at the student hangout, "meanbadboogie" by a group called the Mississippi Hippies, and so forth. The only thing that struck me as odd about Millsaps was its emphasis on security: the college is a heavily patrolled, fenced compound with only two entrances, both guarded after 6:00 P.M. Turns out there's a reason for that.

As the state capital, Jackson has picked up some of the accoutrements of yuppie-dom—fern bars, fitness centers, even a bookstore good enough to stock my books. But these amenities coexist with concentrated poverty of a sort that you've got to get pretty far off the Interstates to find in North Carolina these days. Jackson's the first place outside the Third World, for instance, where I've seen cigarettes routinely sold one at a time. Within sight of its downtown office buildings are blocks of squalid shot-

gun houses adjoining old Farrish Street. Now that the black middle class has moved to the outskirts of town and patronizes the same malls as everyone else, the once-vibrant commercial district of Negro Jackson has become a shuttered, graffiti-scarred wasteland. Take this residual poverty, add the crack scourge amply documented on local television news shows, stir in some pockets of relative affluence like Millsaps, and you've got the ingredients for a serious crime problem. Razor wire sales are obviously booming, and burglar alarm systems and private security patrols seem to be increasingly ordinary expenses of middle-class life. Of course, Jackson's not unique in this respect (we had a drive-by shooting a half-block from my house in Chapel Hill last April), it's just that the contrasts are starker than I'm used to.

Most of the city's problems, including this one, are tied in one way or another with race, so it should be said on the city's behalf that relations between black and white folk strike a visitor as relatively amicable. My racial animosity sensors are in pretty good working order and I've detected more—both ways—in some single days in New York City than in a whole month in Jackson, 1993. Black and white Jacksonians alike were uniformly civil and usually more than that to me and, as far as I could see, to each other. A very important contributing factor has to be that the spokesmen for the black community (at least the ones I encountered) are serious, sober, and constructive.

One Jackson image that will stick with me is that of a disconcerting "ghost mall" not far from the college, abandoned when the surrounding residential districts changed their demographic complexion. Next to it was a billboard offering the Virgin Mary's 800 number in Bayside, Queens. (For some reason, the poorer sections of Jackson were blanketed with these signs. The local Catholic bishop took to the pages of the *Clarion-Ledger* to deny any connection between his diocese and this enterprise.) Across the street, in a security-gated hole-in-the-wall, you can find Tony's Tamales, which I recommend. Tamales have long been traditional fare for black Mississippians, although no one has ever been able to tell me why.

Tamales aside, I figured culinary Jackson would be typically Southern: a meat and three vegetable plate-lunch town with an overlay of all-American fast food

and a few pretentious expense-account joints where waiters tote big pepper mills. I don't have to go to Mississippi for any of that, so I figured I'd eat Special K for a month, save some money, and lose the weight I gained over Christmas. But I underestimated both the hospitality of Jacksonians and the quality of the restaurants they'd take me to.

Jackson does have good country cooking (try the restaurant at the Farmers' Market). Midway between Memphis and New Orleans, it also has good ribs and passable mufuletas. But my favorite restaurant—and not just because I went there with Eudora Welty—has a sign out front that says "Bill's Burgers, God Bless America." In typical Mississippi fashion, its owner isn't named Bill and its specialty is seafood. Jackson's proximity to the Gulf means it has at least a half-dozen fine fish places, most of them run by Greeks like "Bill." The *Mayflower* is another, downtown near the capitol; a Jackson fixture for decades, it is run by a couple from Patmos.

One weekend I took a leisurely drive up through the Delta to Memphis. This rich bottomland between the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers is the subject of my friend Jim Cobb's fine new book, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, and by some criteria it may be that. Certainly it offers the largest concentration of rural black poverty in the United States, as it has for over a hundred years, and the recent introduction of large-scale commercial catfish farming hasn't done much to change that. I once made fun of V.S. Naipaul's book on the South for overusing the "one could have been in" gimmick, but with the semitropical landscape flat to the misty horizon, the ramshackle recycling of building materials, the gormless decoration with primary colors—well, one could have been in Nigeria.

The Delta has been fertile in so many ways. Even its place names are rich in associations, few of them happy, and it has exported its children by the scores of thousands. My route took me first to Yazoo City, home of Willie Morris and Jerry Clower and lately both Clinton's Secretary of Agriculture and the new chairman of the Republican National Committee. On to Indianola, home of B.B. King and the White Citizens Council. Past Parchman, the notorious state prison immortalized in a Mose Allison lyric ("Sittin' over here on Parchman Farm / I never did no man no harm /