

by Samuel Francis

The New Populism

In the 12 months since Bill Clinton stumbled into the White House, the most notable political events in the country have consisted neither of his own successes and failures nor of the triumphs and achievements of what purports to be the administration's loyal opposition in the Republican Party. Mr. Clinton's performance in his first year was remarkable chiefly for its inconclusiveness, and if he eventually extracted a kind of victory from the congressional fight over his preposterous budget proposals, he has used no small amount of his time backtracking from, qualifying, explaining the true meaning of, evading, and outright violating a number of his more exotic campaign promises.

As for the Republican opposition, its main claim to our attention is that it provides a seemingly endless supply of potential extras for a future remake of *Night of the Living Dead*. With the exception of the reasonably united Republican resistance to the Clinton budget, not one of the challenges to or reverses of the administration has derived from the Grand Old Party. Nevertheless, reverses and challenges there have been. Mr. Clinton spent a good part of his first year in office trying—none too successfully—to locate a law-abiding Attorney General; to explain to the lavender portions of his rainbow coalition why he did not at once live up to his promise to remove the ban on homosexuals in the military; to keep Haitian boat people out of Florida (again, contrary to his campaign pledges); to figure out how to coax, intimidate, or bribe Congress into passing NAFTA; to control, pitch overboard, or just keep quiet the assorted political nuts and crackpots in the shape of feminists, Afrocentrists, lobbyists for foreign governments, aggressive bull dikes, and nearly decrepit 1960's leftovers who cling to his coattails; and finally to avoid or contain the innumerable wars, invasions, police actions, and humanitarian missions in which the globalist exuberance of his foreign policy cadre would like the nation to embroil itself. These efforts, of course, have occupied only the first year of the political

quadrennium, and the thought that there are three more to go is nearly too much for most normal Americans to contemplate.

Yet almost none of the Clinton administration's difficulties sprang from the thick brows of those whose constitutional function it is to create difficulties for the majority party. The Democrats themselves were the first to voice opposition to Mr. Clinton's plans for a presidential *diktat* on homosexuals in the Armed Forces, as they were to express skepticism about the Somali insanity that the President inherited from his predecessor and that he quickly contrived to inflame, and probably no Democrat was so shameless as to exude the coos and cuddles with which the Republicans themselves greeted most of the Clinton Cabinet nominees last January. But despite the healthy skepticism of some in Mr. Clinton's own party toward his plans and proposals and the unhealthy supineness of the Republicans, what is most striking about the difficulties of Year One of the Clinton Era is that it has largely been the American people themselves who have forced the President to retreat from his ill-conceived schemes.

This became apparent in the controversy over Zoë Baird, whose appointment as Attorney General was originally embraced by Republicans and Democrats alike. Not until Miss Baird's own legal infractions came to light did anyone raise a question, and even then such brainless stalwarts of the Stupid Party as Orrin Hatch and Alan Simpson seemed to find it inexplicable why anyone would object to an Attorney General whose compliance with federal law was suspect. In the Baird case, it was the massive and largely spontaneous protest against her confirmation that developed on a popular level, especially through the medium of call-in radio shows, that quickly dispatched her back to her six-figure salary with the insurance industry, and the threat to the Republic that these shows represented was soon recognized in subsequent legislative efforts to muzzle them.

Similar popular outbursts were the proximate causes of the President's (and several other officeholders') reversals on immigration policy. In California, where

uncontrolled immigration nearly bankrupted the state last year, liberal Republican Governor Pete Wilson revived his flagging political fortunes by a hasty retreat from his earlier enthusiasm for open borders, and both of the state's new and well-to-the-left senators, Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein, retreated even faster. California, it so happens, is the one region of the country where immigration is a clear political issue, and it has become so precisely because the state sports probably hundreds of small but increasingly vocal citizens' groups committed to blocking the human tide from the south.

The opposition to NAFTA, too, was largely due to grassroots activism, and though much of it was cranked up by Ross Perot, there were noticeable independent populist anti-NAFTA activities in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, if not other places. Not since the controversy over the Panama Canal Treaties in the late 1970's has the nation witnessed as much popular fury directed at its governing class as it has over NAFTA, even though none of the trade agreement's architects, supporters, or well-remunerated lobbyists had anticipated any such problem. Much the same kind of independent populist resistance lay behind the growing efforts in several states to enact resolutions condemning "homosexual lifestyles" or espousing variations on that theme, with Mary Cummins' smashing rebuff to the New York educational elite, Will Perkins' kick in the teeth to the queer agenda in Colorado, and similar campaigns in Georgia and other states.

But such movements were only the most prominent. There now sprouts across the country a dense undergrowth of citizens' groups whose energies are concentrated on such issues as immigration, homosexuality, gun control, and the rights of crime victims, to name a few; the religious right has embarked on an ambitious crusade to muster political influence at local levels, and both talk radio and personal computer networks enormously facilitate all such efforts.

Like Dr. Johnson's dog standing on its hind legs, this new populist activism is remarkable not so much for being done well as for being done at all. What us-

ually occurs after a presidential election is the speedy return of the citizens to political dormancy. Most citizens have more important things to worry about than political issues, and they typically allow the country's brotherhood of professional officeholders to monopolize their fate for a few years. But the current wave of populism is occurring in the wake of the last election, and there is every reason to think it will become even more intense as the wheels of the electoral cycle begin to churn again.

But the continuing political activity of Americans is not the only peculiar feature of the new populism. Almost all the activism of the last year comes from the right; if it does not explicitly identify itself with the right, it is readily identified with the right by virtue of its alignment around the themes of traditional morality, national interest, and national identity. Yet at the same time almost none of these efforts owes anything to the "conservative movement" or the Beltway conservative establishment. Indeed, some of the populist initiatives like opposition to immigration and NAFTA are strongly opposed and even held in contempt by the Beltway right, and hardly any of the local efforts are due to help from the labyrinth of light-fingered eggheads in Washington who are always pleased to send you letters demanding money but who never seem to be at work when you call to find out what they've done with your contribution.

Secondly, not only does the new populism come from the right, and in a way that it has not come for a good many years, but it also centers around issues that are themselves relatively new. The controversies about homosexuality may in some respects merely be extensions of older orthodox and mainstream conservative concerns about traditional morality and the family, but in the debates over immigration and NAFTA appear values and concepts that enjoy respectable ancestry on the political and cultural right but have not generally been articulated in the right-left conflicts of the recent past. Whatever may be said about Mr. Perot's real political identity, his opposition to the Gulf war, the Somali and Balkan adventures, and NAFTA shares a common, though not yet explicitly articulated, principle with any serious movement of the right: the determination to put the interests of one's own nation first. The new populism, then, appears to have several

unique features: it is largely authentic and spontaneous, in contrast to the contrived and largely fake populism of the computer console and mailing list that has buzzed about the country for the last decade and more, and as an authentic populism it demands and succeeds in enlisting the energies and efforts of real people—not just professional activists who make a lucrative career out of crusading or pretending to crusade. It is right wing, conservative, and nationalist in its content, centered on what "we"—i.e., Americans, Christians, workers, citizens, the law-abiding, the nation, or whatever other reference group is involved—want and need, not on what is good for Mexico, immigrants, sexual perverts, criminals, the Global Economy, Mankind, or World Peace. And, finally, it is militant—not in the sense of being extreme but rather meaning that it is serious, more insistent on attaining its goals than in acquiring political office for its adherents, and uninterested in settling for compromise solutions that fail to achieve its goals but placate incumbent elites. What is perhaps most striking about its militancy is the very absence of extremism; most right-wing populism in the United States has quickly attracted to itself the most banal fringe elements, whose preoccupation with combating the Elders of Zion and Satanic conspiracies of one kind or another has always succeeded in repelling normal Americans and guaranteed the marginalization and trivialization of the cause. For the most part, the nuts don't seem to be involved in the new populism (maybe because they all have jobs in the Clinton administration); its driving force appears to be the serious concerns of citizens who are mentally and socially well-wrapped and who have no secret agendas for repealing the Federal Reserve Act or restoring the Habsburgs.

Indeed, the thrust of the new populism is pragmatic, and it may well be too pragmatic for its own good. Either it will succeed in achieving its specified and limited goals or it won't. If it achieves them, it will disappear, because it will cease to have any further purpose in existing. If it doesn't achieve its goals, it may disappear anyway, because those involved in it will find themselves frustrated, will not make money or gain from their activism, and will eventually find it unrewarding if not harmful to their personal interests. Moreover, in the kind of deracinated democracy that America has

become, there is little institutional reinforcement for enduring populist movements. Americans now move in and out of their neighborhoods and local communities like vagrants in a flophouse, their economic interests are dependent on vast industries and anonymous bureaucracies over which they have little control, and the managed cultural milieu in which they are enveloped is dedicated to inculcating passivity and complacency rather than the healthy and active habits of militancy that a free people requires to keep its freedom. And, even if the new populism does endure, it may itself soon go the way of most other movements in a mass-managerial society, becoming dependent on a professional bureaucracy and all the technology of manufactured and manipulated consent and illusory participation.

Nevertheless, the new populism suggests that the American people—or at least some of them—retain enough social, economic, and psychic independence and integrity to recognize threats to their material interests and cultural identity and to mount serious political movements to counter those threats. In a sense, of course, "populism" is always a bit of a fraud, since most of the *populus* is inherently too passive, uninformed, stupid, lazy, or distracted to bother with its own future. A truly successful populist movement is almost always the breeding ground for the birth of a new elite, centered around emerging social and political interests and myths that express and define such interests and prepared to challenge an incumbent elite whose apparatus of power has become an impediment and a threat. The new populism may well be just such a movement, and what it needs now is an institutional structure that can perpetuate and magnify its efforts without emasculating them, a national leadership that will respect and reinforce its dynamism rather than exploit and ruin it, and a political myth that formulates a coherent national vision around which less active and less committed Americans can gather. None of these is available in either of the two major parties and certainly not in the ridiculous Clinton administration, and the new populists will have to look outside the present political establishment, right and left, to find or invent for themselves what they need for definitive national victory.

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The Ruined Tenement

by Thomas Fleming

“Every child should be taught to respect the sanctity of his neighbor’s house, garden, fields, and all that is his.” When James Fenimore Cooper insisted upon the inviolability of property, his conviction was as much the fruit of personal experience as it was the expression of his old-fashioned reverence for law and order. Upon returning to his home in New York state, Cooper found that his property had been subjected to depredations from picnicking Yankees who had interpreted democracy as their right to help themselves to another man’s goods. The ensuing legal battle inspired his *Satanstoe* novels, which constitute a history of early America from the point of view of an estate, but his reverence for the inviolable household crops up in other parts of his work, particularly in the first of his novels devoted to the fortunes of Natty Bumppo.

When Cooper introduces Bumppo to his readers, the Deer-slayer is already an old man living in semiretirement and grumbling about the encroachment of settlers whose “wasty ways” are destroying the population of edible wildlife. Accused of taking a deer out of season, Bumppo refuses to allow a meddling peace-officer to enter his cabin, and when all else fails, threatens him with his gun. Before the agents of the law can return in force to search his place, Bumppo burns down his own house, and when they come to arrest him in the midst of the smoking cinders, the old hunter gives them a sermon:

You’ve driven God’s creators from the wilderness, where his providence had put them for his own pleasure, and you’ve brought in the troubles and divilties of the law, where no man was ever ever known to disturb another. You have driven me, that have lived forty long years of my appointed time in this very spot, from my home and the shelter of my head, lest you should put your wicked fire and wasty ways in my cabin.

At his trial, Natty pleads “not guilty with a clean conscience . . . for there’s no guilt in doing what’s right; and I’d rather died on the spot, than had him put foot in the hut at that moment.”

The inviolability of the household is of ancient lineage. When Aristotle put forward his theory of political evolution

from household to village to polis, he was outlining the facts of the case as they were known not just to the Greeks but to all ancient peoples that remembered their own history. House and land were passed down within the family from generation to generation without benefit of testament, and “it would also be taken for granted,” as Douglas MacDowell says, “that ownership implied the right to do what one liked with one’s own, so that on one’s own land one could build or demolish a house, cut down trees, and so on, without asking anyone’s permission.”

There were some limits, of course, even in ancient Athens, on the liberty of the freehold. To cut down a sacred olive tree was sacrilege, and a man guilty of serious crimes would presumably be arrested in his own home, but in most societies a man might feel secure from harassment once he entered the walls of his fortress. In most ancient cities of which we have knowledge, an intruder—a thief or an adulterer—was beaten or killed as if he were an enemy attacking a stronghold.

“A man’s home is his castle” is a proverb that meant something in the age when castles enabled a freeman to bid defiance to the world. By the end of the Middle Ages, the concept of the castle was extended to every house. Coke puts it plainly: “The house of every one is to him, his castle and fortress, as well for his defence against injury and violence as for his repose.” Felons were, of course, denied this sanctuary. As Blackstone observes: “No outward doors of a man’s house can in general be broken open to execute any civil process; though in criminal cases the public safety supersedes the private.” But the officers of the crown could not force their way in on some trivial pretext. A man might accumulate huge debts, but so long as he did not leave his house, his person was safe. How many 19th-century English novels include a bailiff-wracked debtor who cannot leave his own home?

The governors of this world have never been slow to find pretexts for the invasion of liberty. Despite the Common Law restrictions on the power of the king’s agents to enter a home without the owner’s permission, in England the habit of general warrants gradually developed, and by the early 18th century, the abuse was deeply ingrained in the English constitution. The numerous and various excise statutes, for example on