

by Samuel Francis

Natural Born Kulchur

In the tumid political underbrush of the summer, there were a number of interesting and even important new sprouts, as Pat Buchanan slowly pushed aside Phil Gramm as the favored candidate of the Republican right and almost all of the rest of the blossoming aspirants to the throne of Reagan and Bush withered in the indifferent heat of the season. Neither Richard Lugar nor Lamar Alexander nor Arlen Specter attracted the slightest interest, and even one-speech wonders like Alan Keyes and certifiable crackpots like Bob Dornan produced only yawns. Mr. Buchanan's emergence as a serious candidate was due, of course, to the fact that he alone actually has something to say—about trade and the economic interests of the nation, about immigration and the nation's cultural identity, and about foreign policy and the nation's political interests in the world—that remains undreamt of in the platitudinous squints that serve as what most other Republican leaders are pleased to call their "visions."

Yet throughout the summer, Senator Robert Dole continued to hold the lead in public opinion polls, presumably not because of any vision he glimpses or has been able to share with his disciples but merely because he remains the most publicly visible of the announced candidates. It is to be expected that his commanding lead in the polls will begin to shrink as the campaign coagulates, but the Kansas senator was clearly determined to keep the lead, and the steps he took to do so provided what was perhaps the most instructive escapade of an otherwise tedious stage of the campaign.

His principal such step was his May 31 speech in Los Angeles about contemporary American popular culture, an oration that was barely five pages in length but offered intellectual munchies for the pundits for nearly a month afterward. Indeed, it was probably the most noticed speech Mr. Dole has ever given in his long career, and it may not only help him retain his lead in the opinion polls but also serve to nail his banner to the party's

mast next year.

The main topic of Mr. Dole's remarks, of course, was Hollywood and all the wicked films and lyrics its corporate aesthetes have inflicted on us in recent years. The speech recalled Vice President Quayle's wisecrack about a television sitcom a few years earlier and immediately gave the pundits their cue to moan about the looming repression of the arts for which the Republicans secretly pine—even though barely a month earlier the exact same sages had wagged their beards in grave approval when President Clinton launched his own assault on radio talk-show hosts for inspiring the Oklahoma City bombers. Mr. Dole, however, is not Dan Quayle and knew how to handle himself. It was obvious that he was inviting controversy in a way that Mr. Quayle neither sought nor understood how to greet, and perhaps for that reason the savants who make it their business to protect the Republic from censorious philistines for the most part did not rise to the bait Mr. Dole so slyly offered them.

The speech was in many respects a stroke of political genius, since it not only gained Mr. Dole the headlines he wanted but also gave him what his main rival at the time, Mr. Gramm, had been unable to get—a credential as a spokesman for the moral and religious issues that today animate the passions of no less than a third of the GOP. Mr. Gramm, an economist by education, refuses to talk or think about much of anything but economic matters and economic policy, and as a result, when he persistently refused to discuss or support these issues after the social conservatives of the party persistently insisted he do so, he began to flounder. Mr. Dole therefore presented himself as a spokesman for social issues at just the moment that Mr. Gramm's failure was being noticed and before Mr. Buchanan could run off with those issues all by himself.

Moreover, Mr. Dole donned the mantle of moralism in such a way that he committed himself to nothing whatsoever, and this is a large part of the genius of his Hollywood speech. Never known as a foe of abortion, a champion of prayer in school, an enemy of pornography, or a

drummer of the public virtue, Mr. Dole in his speech carefully contrived to avoid committing himself or the party or the government to doing anything at all about the evils he was denouncing. Never once did he insinuate censorship or even suggest that Americans who agreed with him should just refrain from going to the movies. His remarks thus gained him a solid reputation as a moral reformer without any commitment to any reform.

That reputation was immensely bolstered and maybe even invented in the days just after the speech, when the professional Christians of the Beltway sallied out of their cells to chuckle and coo over Mr. Dole's moral leadership. Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition, fresh from his own rhetorical abasement before the Anti-Defamation League, saluted Dole's speech as "eloquent" and acknowledged that the Majority Leader was definitely on the right track to receive the coalition's imprimatur. Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council also praised the speech and came even closer to endorsing Mr. Dole because of it, while William Bennett was trundled out of his ever-darkening obscurity to add his own approval.

And indeed much of the praise was merited. Mr. Dole blasted Hollywood for producing films that dwell on sex and violence and for distributing lyrics, especially those of black rap groups, that are little more than the contents of their singers' lower intestinal tracts. It is out of character for the Majority Leader, a politician far more comfortable with building coalitions and balancing vote tallies, to talk about public morality, but if he's learned how, there should be every reason to support him.

The problem is that both Mr. Dole's speech about Hollywood and popular culture and the eagerness with which the Christian right embraced it point to what is really and more deeply wrong with American culture and actually help explain why the kinds of endeavors Mr. Dole complained about are so dominant. The problem, in a teacup, is that neither Mr. Dole nor his fans in the Christian right nor most of his supporters among American conservatives have

the foggiest notion of what a popular culture should be. They have no such notion because the “visions” by which they have entranced themselves have no room for culture, and since no one else in the United States knows what a culture is or ought to be either, we are left with the morbid concoctions of Hollywood and the crippled musical droppings of Snoop Doggy Dog.

Mr. Dole’s cultural preferences are evident in the films of which he expressed approval. While he condemned Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* and Quentin Tarantino’s *True Romance* as “films that revel in mindless violence and loveless sex,” a characterization manifestly not true about the latter film, he praised such masterpieces as Disney’s *The Lion King*, intended as a children’s movie but capable of providing morally salubrious entertainment for senators, and *True Lies*, a virtually unwatchable chase movie that has the strapping Arnold Schwarzenegger massacring people far more mindlessly than Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis in Stone’s repulsive but carefully made film about two serial murderers. To be fair, Mr. Dole admitted later that he hadn’t seen any of the films he was talking about. It might have helped if he had. Then again, it might not have.

What is really frightening about American culture is that the films Mr. Dole praised are in no way preferable to those he damned. The only objection he or anyone else on the American right ever raises to any film is that it “glorifies sex and violence,” though even such blood-soaked epics as *Natural Born Killers* and *The Godfather*, which also drew a good deal of preachy wind from the right when it appeared in the 1970’s, clearly do not. What far less bloody films that no one on the right pays much attention to often say about the nature of man, society, and the universe is often far more degraded and dangerous than a few scenes of improbable shootouts and bedroom wrestling matches. Mr. Dole praised *Forrest Gump*, a pleasant and sentimental tale about a wise moron played by Tom Hanks, but it never occurred to him to mention Hanks’ performance in *Philadelphia*, a nonviolent and superficially decent film that is a protracted propaganda piece for the normalization of homosexuality. Mr. Dole expressed disgust for 2 Live Crew, but John Lennon’s cuddly lyrics in “Imagine” about a world without country, property, or religion are

far more subversive and far more influential. Lennon’s fantasies of a one-world utopian communism are in fact the essence of what both the left and the neoconservative right believe today.

If it’s really evil films you want, however, the “slasher flicks” popularized in the 1980’s and intended to appeal to pre-teens and adolescents—Wes Craven’s interminable *Nightmare on Elm Street* series is typical—are perhaps the most evil ever made. Their persistent theme, cemented throughout numberless sequels, is that evil is stronger than good, that the monster that appears to have been destroyed at the end of the last installment is really indestructible, and that there is nothing anyone can do about it. This theme is in fact the core idea of Satanism, but I recall no one among conservatives or the religious right remarking on this. For that matter, even downright wholesome movies like the *Star Wars* series never clearly distinguished the moral character of the heroes from that of the villains. The former are physically attractive, while the bad guys wear helmets and uniforms vaguely reminiscent of stormtroopers, but there is no clear explanation of why one side is good and the other bad.

In fact, the most violent films Hollywood has produced in recent decades sometimes offer the clearest moral distinctions. No director was more notorious for depicting graphic violence than the late Sam Peckinpah, but in *The Wild Bunch*, *The Getaway*, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and a host of other films, he drew sharp distinctions between good characters able and willing to assume responsibility for each other and bad characters who recognize no bonds or loyalties beyond their own greed and lust. For Peckinpah’s heroes, it is the social bond—of an outlaw band, friendship, husband and wife—that makes them human, while for his villains, it is the denial or betrayal of such bonds that makes them evil. The same is true in Tarantino’s *True Romance*, where the heroic characters are those willing to take risks and even lose their lives for wife, husband, or son, while everyone else, driven by greed, winds up literally killing each other. Of course, there’s no reason why children should be allowed to see such a film, but Republicans might learn something from watching it.

But they probably wouldn’t, and neither would the religious right, because in the United States the “official right” has

little interest in anything that doesn’t affect politics and the pocketbook. Immersed in an essentially hedonistic and economic worldview that recognizes nothing more important than material self-interest, the right is unable to form or even comment intelligently upon a culture, a normative way of life that transcends and shapes the pursuit of both power and money rather than being shaped by them. Hence, all that the right, religious or Republican, wants from culture is for it not to offend whatever habitual prejudices and tastes they happen to retain. The best kind of culture for them is what they think prevailed in the 1950’s, when Pat Boone and Fabian crooned nothing that disturbed their affluent slumbers and Lucy and The Beaver reconfirmed every week the eternal virtues of an already crumbling nuclear family where the father figure was an object of ridicule whose authority was to be evaded and undermined.

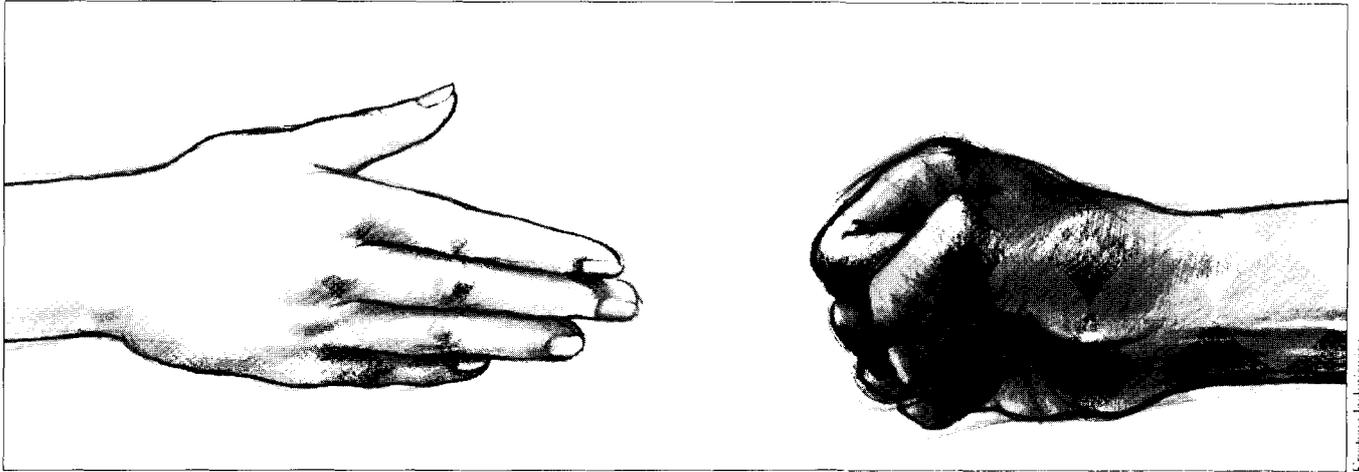
Mr. Dole concluded his speech by quoting approvingly the words of Mark Canton, president of Universal Pictures. “Any smart business person can see what we must do,” Mr. Canton remarked, “make more ‘PG’ rated films.” But a culture consisting of nothing but children’s movies is no more a real culture than Tupac Shakur is a real artist. What really smart “business persons” ought to be able to see is that when we ask nothing more of our culture than to be left alone to make money and run for President, what we will wind up with is exactly what we have now.

LIBERAL ARTS

LEARNING THE CLASSICS

Boxer Mike Tyson on how he spent his time in the hoosegow, from the April 10 issue of Sports Illustrated:

“I read a guy by the name of Homer,” Tyson said in a television interview last May. ‘And he wrote about a guy, Achilles, and another guy, Hector. And he wrote about that war.’ If it hadn’t been for the *Iliad*, the ex-champ suggested, prison life would have been hopelessly ‘mundane.’”



Caliban in the Classroom

by Thomas Fleming

What do black Americans think of whites? What do they want from them? The questions are almost as baffling as “What do women want?”—the question we raised a few months ago. After years of living with the men and women we used to call colored people, working with them and calling some of them friends, I got my first real clue in the late 1970’s, when I was teaching a Western Civ class at a black college. The syllabus required me to spend several weeks on *The Tempest*, and I was understandably nervous in discussing a play in which a young black male is condemned to slavery for trying to rape the daughter of his white benefactor. (I argued, without convincing anyone, that Caliban was supposed to be an Indian.)

As a Luddite I was inclined to make light of Prospero’s magical gifts, and trying to ingratiate myself with students whom I genuinely liked, I pointed out that scientific progress was not everything, that Western man might use technology to gain the whole world but only at the risk of losing his immortal soul. Ringing the changes on the leftist cliché that “They can put a man on the moon, but they can’t . . .,” I noticed some of the students getting agitated. When I asked what the trouble was, a nice young man erupted: “Man, you don’t believe that s--t about the moon landing, do you?” He went on to explain that the whole space program was done with trick photography, “to make us feel small ’cause we ain’t never put nobody on the moon.” Unable to grasp his point, I hastened to explain that I opposed the moon landing, thought of it as a desecration, when others in the class joined in and declared that most technology was a hoax or had really been invented by blacks and then stolen by whites. Incredulously, I asked the students, some of whom were bright and hardworking, how many of them believed that the moon landing was just a trick. All hands went up. For just a moment I felt like the young professor at the end of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: “I think I’m beginning to understand this now,” he says, realizing that everything he thought he had learned of George and Martha’s life story is almost entirely false.

It is only one little experience, admittedly, at an undistinguished black school, where the students were mostly part-time. Even kids who might not swallow the conspiracy theory were under a social pressure to side with their group against an alien. But in the years since, hearing “Dr.” Bill Cosby (a bogus doctorate from an infamous program that gives credit for life experience) and other successful blacks expressing similar sentiments, I have come to believe that Afrocentrism, so far from being an eccentricity, virtually defines the perspective of black Americans at every level in society. Not long after my first exposure to (literally) this lunacy, I was teaching a Latin class at a formerly all-white college (desegregated less than 20 years earlier). Several of my black middle-class students informed me that Hannibal was “a brother,” although the only evidence they could cite was a Budweiser poster in a series called “Black Princes of Africa.” Cleopatra and St. Augustine were also black, and nothing I said could change their minds. The really stunning part was the insistence that all Western culture came from Babylon, the first great black civilization. I got so sick of hearing about the black Babylon—and where they got this from I shall never know—that I told one student either to shut up or leave the class. He left.

None of this should have come as a surprise. Pan-Africanists and black nationalists had been talking about the black origins of civilization throughout the century. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Zora Neale Hurston recounts the standard “great speech” she had been hearing all her life:

Negroes were the bravest men on earth, facing every danger like lions, and fighting with demons. We must remember with pride that the first blood spilled for American Independence was that of the daring Crispus Attucks, a Negro who had bared his black breast to the bullets of the British tyrants at Boston. . . . It was a Negro named Simon who had been the only one with enough pity and compassion in his heart to help the Savior bear