

A Cheap Way to Feel Good about Feeling Lousy about America

Daniel, directed by Sidney Lumet (Paramount Pictures).

Most American Communists, Whittaker Chambers observed in *Witness*, were not flamboyant people. They were not, like John Reed, romantics who made up for mediocre writing abilities by an adventurous outlook on life; on the contrary, they were rather humdrum sorts with a rather narrow view of what life had to, or even ought to, offer. They were the kind of people who worked the bureaucracies of state agencies, did not read surrealist poetry, bought reproductions of perfectly ordinary pictures, shopped at Macy's, not Saks, and were, in short, tacky.

Like most people, Chambers added, Communist party members required faith. This was Chambers's great insight and the cause of the mistrust he provoked among liberal anti-Communists in the fifties, as well as the admiration he evoked among traditionalists like William F. Buckley, Jr. What was really at issue—Chambers was convinced of this—was not so much a political system as man's soul, and communism must be opposed not by liberalism but by Christianity. For he saw that the Communists, at least the American Communists whom he knew, were above everything else believers.

You can carry on back and forth as to the accuracy of Whittaker Chambers's insight, its applicability to Communists outside the United States, and any number of other issues that it raises. But I think it is very likely that a large number of Communists were people such as Chambers claimed he knew in the party, ordinary people with a big emptiness in their souls, which they filled by believing in the Soviet Union, the working class, the revolution, or whatever the party might refer to at a given moment as the central tenet of its creed. And this spiritual atmosphere is absolutely crucial to understanding one of the most famous judicial cases in American history, the Rosenberg espionage conspiracy, and all subsequent comment upon it, including Sidney Lumet's new film, *Daniel*. The film opened in September and has been enjoying a feeble run at the box office—and causing a good deal of impassioned controversy among the critics.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were tried, convicted, and,

after appeals all the way up to the Supreme Court, executed for conspiracy to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. The trial took place in 1951, the execution two years later. The alleged goal of their conspiracy was the secret of the atomic bomb, and the principal witness against them was one of their alleged coconspirators, Ethel's younger brother David Greenglass (who drew a long sentence in his own trial). A third codefendant, Morton Sobell, was given 30 years.

Scapegoats or Spies?

This case has been the object of a great amount of controversy and has given rise to a substantial literature. Legal critics of the case, such as Louis Nizer, have agreed, in general, that the trial was fair. Historians of the case have also agreed that the trial was fair, as far as judicial procedure goes, but have been divided over the more fundamental question of whether it was possible to get a fair trial, in the deeper sense, in 1951, when the United States was at war in Korea and had recently lost its nuclear monopoly. A rapidly dwindling pro-Rosenberg faction is convinced that the FBI framed innocent people because the government needed scapegoats to get away with its imperialistic, anti-Soviet foreign policy (otherwise known as the Cold War). The anti-Rosenbergians are convinced that there really was a spy ring coordinated by Julius Rosenberg, indeed an effective one, which aided the Soviets. This side has just been given a boost by *The Rosenberg Files*, a new book by Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, who obtained previously unreleased government files, expecting to prove the Rosenbergs innocent but instead concluding that Julius was guilty and Ethel was aware of what he was doing.

The Rosenbergs' own insistence, to the very end, that they were innocent has been crucial to the mythology that surrounds them. That they were young parents, that the sentence was harsh, that the whole affair was depressing and gruesome—no doubt, all this contributed to making them popular martyrs for the Left, both Communist and non-Communist. But it was their "We are innocent" that was the most important thing, that led people to identify with them. Somewhere, despite the horrors of Stalinism and every other revolutionary Eldorado—or rather, precisely because of them—somewhere in his soul the revolutionary true believer must believe that he is right: "We are innocent." You can show the trial to have been fair, you can prove there was indeed a spy ring under Soviet control, still they meant to do the right thing: "We are innocent." If they had confessed, what good would they have been once the Soviet Union lost its charm—as, over the years, it did even to members of the

party? They would merely have been Soviet spies. But they died saying they were innocent, and so for every old ex-leftist, every jaded ex-fellow traveler, the Rosenbergs' innocence became an article of faith. Perhaps the last one.

One of the reasons for the 30-year insistence by the Rosenbergs that there was a government frame-up is that—this is one of the Left's many dirty little secrets—the Communist party did very little to help the Rosenbergs. In fact, there is good reason to believe they were far more valuable to the party dead than alive. Their party-connected lawyer, Emanuel Bloch, defended them poorly, and during the last stages of the appeals process he went so far as to try to prevent friendly lawyers from making new procedural arguments. The party and its press paid little attention to the Rosenbergs during their trial, as it felt it would be bad publicity to be connected to alleged Soviet spies. But as soon as they were on death row, the Rosenbergs became a valuable propaganda commodity to the party, in the United States and throughout Europe. Big campaigns were organized—the one in France was particularly successful—around the theme that the United States was in the grip of an anti-Semitic, Fascist hysteria and would crush any who opposed its bellicose foreign policy. From the party's point of view, with alarming purges of Jewish Communists taking place in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the bloc, the case provided a welcome diversion.

That, in bare outline, is the Rosenberg story. It is a dramatic story, obviously, in some sense even a tragic one. For what is clear is that the Rosenbergs, even if one sees them as traitors, were victims of forces much larger than themselves. They were simple, ordinary people from the Lower East Side who needed something to believe in. Julius had thought, in adolescence, of becoming a rabbi. Ethel wanted to be an actress. The Communist party gave them a faith and a stage on which to act out their beliefs. It caused them, through its Soviet master, to do incalculable damage to their country, and then it exploited them for all the propaganda value they were worth. This could indeed make a poignant story. They left two little boys and told them that they were right and that their country, the country the children would have to grow up in, was wrong.

Coverup

Out of this material, interesting tales could be told, and not just biographies and histories and legal critiques. What has happened, however, is that talented filmmaker Sidney Lumet (*The Verdict*, *Prince of the City*, *Network*, and many other films) has taken an atrociously bad novel, *The Book of Daniel* by E. L. Doctorow (best known for *Ragtime*), and transformed it into a film that seems to be more interested in covering up a story than in telling one.

Although the references to the Rosenberg case in *Daniel* are many, Lumet claims to have made a film without political content. It is supposed to be only about a son's search for his parents. There is a small problem, though, in that the parents in question (called Isaacson in the film) are up to their eyeballs in political idealism.

Even on its own terms, however, the story flops because the Daniel in *Daniel* fails to determine whether his parents were indeed framed. This question, and his sister's anger at him for pretending not to care about the family history, is what sets him on his quest. Nor does he understand the motivation of their political choices. With such basic questions left unanswered, Daniel's own personal and political transformations over the course of the story are thoroughly incomprehensible except, perhaps, by a leap of faith.

Daniel is quite possibly the most blurred, indeterminate, and inconclusive film ever made. The only thing we know for sure after seeing this movie is that it is awful to

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be 10 years old when your parents are sent to the electric chair. But has anyone ever devised a cheaper shot? How can anyone not be anguished at the sight of two small children running away from a waifs' home only to find their own home all boarded up? Not to speak of meeting their parents (one at a time) in the visitors' room at Sing Sing? Meanwhile, of the many important questions faintly suggested by *Daniel*, all of which have their source (and perhaps their answers) in the Rosenberg case, not a single one is dealt with seriously by Sidney Lumet. Why were lower-middle-class Jews of that generation attracted to the Communist party? Does Daniel think his parents were guilty or not? If innocent, were they tried and convicted for their beliefs (because "the country had lost its mind," as one Rosenbergsian critic suggested in a review), for their Jewishness, or what? Does Daniel join the antiwar movement out of filial loyalty or considered political judgment? It is simply impossible to say.

Messrs. Lumet and Doctorow are on record as stating that their story is not about the Rosenberg case at all. This claim is not credible, in view of the many references to the case in the film. Mr. Doctorow himself, in this connection, said something very revealing. "To get back to the Rosenbergs," he said, "they're dead. And no description of their guilt or innocence is going to bring them back. The meaning lies not in what they've done, but what we've done to them. That's what fascinates people who think about our national identity."

Forget about the meaning of the Rosenbergs' lives, you understand, because what counts is what "we" did to them. What we did was to snatch beautiful happy young parents away from their children and kill them. Neither Mr. Lumet nor Mr. Doctorow can deal seriously with

what the Rosenbergs did because what they did was to aid a power, the Soviet Union, that threatens our national identity in a most fundamental way.

In the years since the Rosenbergs were tried and executed, anticommunism has become a somewhat unpopular political attitude among America's political and cultural elites. For a variety of reasons, it has become fashionable to be, on the contrary, rather anti-American. You might almost say that anti-Americanism took the place of that fierce faith that Chambers discovered in American Communists. It is not an orthodox sort of faith, but it has its orthodoxies, and Mr. Doctorow expressed one of them, perhaps unwittingly, with his little remark about what we did to them. Daniel's parents are victims of an omnipotent machine; his sister falls victim after a pathetic degeneration into madness; he barely escapes. What saves him is that he finally understands. It is not at all clear what exactly he understands. But he does. He joins the movement against America, in support of people who are killing Americans in Vietnam, just as his parents supported people who were killing Americans in Korea. This is a leap of faith if ever there was one, and though most critics have panned this scene, it is the best one in the movie.

For what this final scene in *Sheep's Meadow* (in New York's Central Park) shows is that our own failings seem to preoccupy some people more than what our enemies might be capable of doing to us. This attitude has had its ebbs and flows. It is not exactly in the ascendant at the moment, but that is not to say it doesn't have its strong

currents. The Rosenberg story, though dated, is valuable to this current of thought because it poses the fundamental questions rather starkly. Did the United States have the right to defend itself, as anti-Communists would maintain, even if that meant carrying the battle to two seemingly defenseless young parents? The anti-anti-Communists, as the party of appeasement is sometimes called, would answer no ("what we did to them"), for this would only make us less worthy of our own ideals. This is the real significance of the story and of the way Mr. Lumet chose to shoot it. To him, attacking Communists is a waste of time that could be used to improve ourselves. Only, what with all that we know about the Soviet Union and about communism, what we knew in 1951 plus all that we've learned since then, it might not come across very well if one said that the Rosenbergs were right to spy for the enemy, helping it obtain weapons that could destroy us totally. On the other hand, it is not difficult to say that the Rosenbergs, or at least the Isaacsons, were nice people and it was a shame that they had to hang. This is, if one will, soft anti-Americanism, anti-Americanism only halfway out of the closet. For those who cannot say they prefer communism to American democracy (because in many cases they quite honestly don't), *Daniel* offers a cheap way to feel good about feeling lousy about America.

Roger Kaplan

ROGER KAPLAN is a *New Yorker* whose articles have appeared in the *American Spectator* and *Commentary*.

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A Vital Moral Force in America

Reflections of a Neoconservative (Looking Back, Looking Ahead), by Irving Kristol (New York: Basic Books).

Midway through this collection of his writings, Irving Kristol sets out eight points that he believes are the distinctive features of neoconservatism:

① “[The relation of neoconservatism] to the business community—the traditional source of American conservatism—is loose and uneasy, though not necessarily unfriendly.”

② “Neoconservatism is antiromantic in substance and temperament . . . it regards political romanticism—and its twin, political utopianism—of any kind as one of the plagues of our age.”

③ “Neoconservatives are admiring of Aristotle, respectful of Locke, distrustful of Rousseau.”

④ “Neoconservatives do not think that liberal-democratic capitalism is the best of all imaginable worlds—only the best, under the circumstances, of all possible worlds.”

⑤ “Neoconservatism is inclined to the belief that a predominantly market economy . . . is a necessary if not sufficient precondition for a liberal society . . . It also sees a market economy as favorable to economic growth.”

⑥ “Neoconservatives believe in the importance of economic growth . . . as indispensable for social and political stability.”

⑦ “Neoconservatives . . . are not libertarian . . . A conservative welfare state . . . is perfectly consistent with the neoconservative perspective. So is a state that takes a degree of responsibility for helping to shape the preferences that people exercise in a free market—to ‘elevate’ them . . . The current version of liberalism, which prescribes massive government intervention in the marketplace, but an absolute laissez-faire attitude toward manners and morals, strikes neoconservatives as representing a bizarre inversion of priorities.”

⑧ “Neoconservatives look upon family and religion as indispensable pillars of a decent society. Indeed, they have a special fondness for all of those intermediate institutions of a liberal society which reconcile the need for community with the desire for liberty.”

Many a New Righter will likely read this and exclaim, “That’s me.” Those eight points come closer to a general statement of what some in the New Right strain of conservatism believe than anything else in popular print.

Mr. Kristol begins this collection with a memoir of his life as a campus radical at the City College of New York. It is clear that Mr. Kristol, then a member of the Young People’s Socialist League, profited greatly from the non-stop exchanges and serious debates that took place, particularly in Alcove Number One, a corner of the rancid City College lunchroom. This was the era when the effective opposition to dedicated Communists came from the likes of the Trotskyist Left. “Joining a radical movement when one is young is very much like falling in love when one is young,” Mr. Kristol observes. “The girl may turn out to be rotten, but the experience of love is so valuable it can never be entirely undone by the ultimate disenchantment.”

Coming from near-slums gave Mr. Kristol a people’s perspective on life that he never lost through his journey from student intellectual activist to spokesman for a unique brand of conservatism.

In the final chapter, “Christianity, Judaism and Socialism,” a revised version of a lecture he once gave to professors and students of divinity, Mr. Kristol defends orthodoxy in religions.

He calls himself a neo-orthodox Jew, that is to say, nonpracticing but very sympathetic to orthodoxy, and he goes on to admonish the Catholic church, for which he says he has enormous respect, in a profound and insightful manner. “Young people do not want to hear that the Church is becoming modern,” Mr. Kristol told his audience, who must have been astounded. “Go tell the young people that the message of the Church is to wear sack cloth and ashes and to walk on nails to Rome, and they would do it. The Church turned the wrong way. It went to modernity at the very moment when modernity was being challenged, when the secular gnostic impulse was already in the process of dissolution.”

In the chapter entitled “Pornography, Obscenity and the Case for Censorship,” Mr. Kristol makes a simple but devastatingly effective point that if those libertarians who are against all forms of censorship really don’t believe that no one was ever corrupted by a book, then “you have to also believe that no one was ever improved by a book (or a play or a movie).”

In a 1983 essay entitled “The Emergence of Two Republican Parties,” Mr. Kristol displays an understanding that far surpasses the vision of the entire GOP leadership, the whole *National Review* and Old Right crowd, and most contemporary political commentators. It is a stinging indictment of the Reagan administration’s failure to take risks to change things in America. Its corollary is a 1982 essay in the section of the book on foreign policy, which concludes with this statement: “Most American