

# Found Cause

Don't call me a conservative.

By Bill Kauffman

IN EDWARD ABBEY'S after-the-collapse novel *Good News*, Sam the Shaman tells the valiant anarchist cowboy Jack Burns, "There's one thing wrong with always fighting for freedom, and justice, and decency, and so forth."

"Only one thing?" replies Burns. "What's that?"

"You almost always lose."

In deference to Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology* poet and anti-imperialist states-rights Democrat, I shan't quote Clarence Darrow's line about lost causes being the only ones worth fighting for. Masters had been Darrow's law partner, and he disdained the Chicago loudmouth as a headline-hogging welsher.

Still, there is the matter of the loss of our cause. Peace, it seems, often passeth understanding.

Is *The American Conservative* a contrail in the sky of a dying America or the bright harbinger of revival—of a better, more humane Little America? I do not say this better America would be a more conservative America because for half a century, "conservative" has been a synonym of—a slave to—militarism, profligacy, the invasion of other nations, contempt for personal liberties, and an ignorance of and hostility toward provincial America that is Philip Rothian in its scope. The conservative movement, like the empire whose adjunct and cheerleader it is, is a daisy chain of epicene dissemblers and vampiric chickenhawks who feast on the carrion of our Republic. The c-word is quite simply beyond reclamation. The anarchist founder of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Frank Chodorov, had

the right idea, even if it did contradict his pacifism: "Anyone who calls me a conservative gets a punch in the nose." If we have to play Name that Tendency I'd opt for Little American, front-porch republican, localist, decentralist, libertarian, or, to borrow Robert Frost's term, plain old Insubordinate American—anything but C! (With a nod to Shel Silverstein.)

Be not deceived that a few opportunistic Republicans who said absolutely nothing in defense of our America during the Bush octennium are now sending up false flags of state sovereignty and the Tenth Amendment. Their Contract with America doppelgangers pulled the same stunt a decade ago before signing on, without any apparent qualms, to the brutally consolidationist Bush-Cheney regime. Recall that Bob Dole carried a copy of the Tenth Amendment during his flaccid 1996 presidential campaign, presumably in the same pocket that held the pills he needed to gulp in order to entertain the gracious Liddy. If these people were anything other than cynical party hacks I would be enthusiastic, but for God's sake, Charlie Brown, how often does Lucy have to yank the football away before you wise up?

The national "conversation," to misuse that word, is and has been limited to belligerent neoconservatives and liberal imperialists for many years now. Ed Abbey's Jack Burns is sooner to wind up on a Department of Homeland Security watch list than he is on CNN. But so what? We dishonor our forebears if we whine that the rulers and their lackeys are nasty, tyrannical, and placeless. Of course they are—they're rulers and lackeys.

The great John Randolph once

explained his contumacy: "I found I might co-operate, or be an honest man. I have therefore opposed them and will oppose them." This is even truer today, though mere opposition is a debilitating condition for all but the most friendless crank. Standing athwart things is a good way to get neutered. Luckily, we are *for* things—a restoration of the Republic, the rebirth of citizenship, social and political life on a human scale, a peaceful America that minds its own damn business. These goals will confound those who mimic the attitudes (never the Beatitudes!) blared from the rectangular soul-stealer in the living room, but among those who think up their own notions and sign their own names, to borrow Edmund Wilson's phrase, we have company. Anyone who engages in authentic civil or social life—ref in a pickup basketball game, drummer in a cowpunk band, secretary of a ladies' study club, rhubarb-cutter in a community garden—is acting upon the healthy, voluntaristic, small-is-not-always-beautiful-but-at-least-it's-human impulses that animate the first, last, and best alternative to the empire.

Whether we ever get together politically remains an open question. Protest politics is mostly boring street theater overseen by puppet-master choreographers in service of the two parties. True dissenters who undertake national campaigns—Ron Paul, Ralph Nader—are mocked, libeled, or ignored. Words are stripped of their meaning, even inverted, so that a vote for change produces Joe Biden, and a cheer for family values brings forth Newt Gingrich. I used to be

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# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Il Divo*]

### Italian Opera

By Steve Sailer

MOST MOVIE CRITICS are more concerned with film than with life, but my goal has been to help make movies, those pungent yet unreliable distillations of life, compelling for the reader who is more interested in the world than in cinema.

Consider “*Il Divo*,” a baroque stylized biopic about Giulio Andreotti, seven times prime minister of Italy in the 1972-92 era, then a perpetual defendant in murder and Mafia trials from 1993 to 2003. Paolo Sorrentino’s “*Il Divo*” is a film of aesthetic ambitions—the owlish politician inhabits a De Chirico Italy of sinisterly empty arcaded streets—and some historical significance.

Still, the labyrinthine “*Il Divo*” would be impenetrable to any American who hasn’t read up on Italy’s lurid recent past. Andreotti’s rival, former prime minister Aldo Moro, was kidnapped and murdered by the Red Brigades, various Vatican-connected bankers died in fashions that would have amused the Borgias, a Masonic lodge served as a seeming government-in-waiting for a post-coup Italy, and brave magistrates investigating the Mafia were blown up.

Italian politics, with its constantly collapsing governments, strikes Americans as a joke. Yet the fundamental questions of Italy’s Cold War years were deadly

serious: would the unruly joys of Italian daily life succumb to the grayness of a Communist state, the Cuban tragedy writ large? Just how many Machiavelian machinations in the name of saving Italy from the Reds could be borne?

We often heard in 2002 that the U.S. did such a wonderful job reforming Germany and Japan after World War II that we were bound to accomplish the same in Iraq. Unmentioned was the 1943 American invasion of western Sicily. Needing to keep civil order without tying up troops, we turned control over to local anti-Fascist men of respect, *Mafiosi* who had been lying low during Mussolini’s crackdown. It worked, but the blowback lasted 50 years. After the war, to keep Italy’s huge Communist Party out of power, the U.S. subsidized the Christian Democrats, who relied on Mafia get-out-the-vote capabilities in the south.

In the Anglo-American world, to label anything a “conspiracy theory” is to dismiss it out of hand. In Italy, by contrast, conspiracy theories are the default explanation for how the world works because conspiracies are the main mechanism by which politicians get done what little they do. In Italy, the political is personal. To understand historical events, you need to tease out the occluded connections among the players.

As “*Il Divo*” demonstrates, Italy needed to be led during those difficult decades by the least operatic politician imaginable and can only now afford to revert to more stereotypically Italian showboats such as Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Like a more cultivated, less bumptious version of the Daleys who have ruled Chicago for 41 of the last 54 years, *Il Divo* is not a diva. Andreotti doesn’t bluster from balconies nor even

bother to cut a stylish figure. He listens carefully, forgets nothing, and confines his own utterances to mordant witticisms. As portrayed by Toni Servillo of the recent Neapolitan mob movie “*Gomorrah*,” Andreotti is a thin, stoop-shouldered man who never talks with his hands. Telegraphing his introversion, he keeps his chin tucked to his sternum, his elbows tight to his ribs, and makes only the most primly clerical symmetrical gestures. Servillo’s characterization is reminiscent of Austin Powers’s nemesis, if only Dr. Evil were underplayed by Jack Benny.

Margaret Thatcher reminisced about Andreotti, “He seemed to have a positive aversion to principle, even a conviction that a man of principle was doomed to be a figure of fun.” “*Il Divo*’s” nightmarish depiction of Italian politics raises an unsettling point. In Andreotti’s defense, he at least was born into his system, while America is now led by a man who, with every opportunity in the world beckoning, carefully chose to make his career in our closest equivalent: Chicago politics.

Having been acquitted on a second appeal in the shooting of a journalist investigating Moro’s death and saved by the statute of limitations from conviction for his 1970s alliance with the Sicilian Mafia, Andreotti is still influential as a Life Senator at 90. The unflappable maestro commented on “*Il Divo*,” “I don’t agree with Sorrentino’s portrayal of me, but I understand he had to make certain dramatic choices to make it interesting; my real life is actually quite boring.” Unfortunately, an American would have to be as well-informed as Andreotti to make sense of “*Il Divo*.” ■

Unrated, but would be PG-13.