

## Editorial I

# Bad Ideas in Blossom

Richard Weaver's proposition that ideas have consequences is the kind of insidious commonplace that is treated suspiciously by the bovine of every community. Yet, if repeated to them often and booming enough, it will eventually thud into the goo of their cerebra and leave them entranced — stammering and shuffling about with tiny sparkles of light popping before their eyes. This is called Enlightenment, and it never quite measures up to expectations. Ninety-five per cent of the people it afflicts are rendered yammering idiots in search of a cause, and when the cause pops up the idiots stampede.

Now I have always held as a certitude that any cause — whether it be just or malign — is a nuisance to free men, especially during its time of stampede. Eventually it is even an embarrassment to the lofty fellow who, in the security of his bath, dreamt it up. What is more, any cause fired by Mr. Weaver's sunny apothegm is apt to sputter and backfire, for his assertion that ideas have consequences is only half the truth. There is a less rosy corollary to it, that is *bad* ideas have *bad* consequences, and as *bad* consequences always come more numerous, more furiously and more swiftly than good consequences it is usually better for the author of ideas to open a hot dog stand or chase lewd women than to dredge from his noodle bright ideas.

I know there are some who will dismiss this statement as shameful or un-serious. Such persons generally are honeyfogging their incomes from one form or another of the education swindle, and they reach for a lynching rope every time someone questions the value of "good books," the benefit of "higher education for all," the need for "continuing education," "humanized institutions," "broad horizons," "new eras" or any of the other poppycock platitudes that these rascals marshal to defend their swindles. They cannot be expected to have grasped the sad lessons of the 1960s which is unfortunate. That they are ages from understanding the profound political turbulence roiling the early years of the 1970s is more serious.

Though the lessons of the 1960s are unpalatable, they are not impenetrable. By 1971 the Federal government had grown over 200 per cent larger than it had been in 1960. More than half of that growth issued from government's attempted to "promote the general welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty..." as interpreted by American liberals. Billions were spent to implement abstractions at home (more billions were spent to defend abstractions abroad). Yet by 1970: a) the popularity of government and government officials had plummeted, b) the incidence of crimes against authority had skyrocketed to heights exceeded only during the Civil War and c) agreement on the very defi-

nition of welfare or liberty had shattered. More ominously, America's consensus on what constitutes the good life (what is society's goal) was, at the end of the 1960s, more fragmented than at any time since the 1780s.

From the 1960s thoughtful persons learnt that generally speaking — all improvement is for the worse, and any man who is out to do good is certain to do bad. Assuredly, ideas have consequences. But upon implementation, ideas, more often than not, reveal themselves as bad ideas — hence the parents of unpleasant consequences. A cursory review of a few of those great ideas of the late 1960s still attracting oohs and ahhs today will document my point.

Consider the salient anti-pollution ideas. Pollution is a wildly complicated, basically economic problem (involving what economists call externalities or the neighborhood effect). Unfortunately those persons leading this campaign rarely discuss economics. Generally they are upper-class persons whose solutions involve an invidious campaign against producers, the acquittal of inconsiderate consumers, the demand for limiting production, a high-nosed disregard for the basic theories of economic distribution and a reprehensible inattention to the situation of the poor. To limit production is to deny to the poor jobs and inexpensive products. These are but the most obvious consequences flowing from popular anti-pollution ideas.

Consider the idea of the quota system. To enhance opportunities for the underprivileged, quotas based on one defining characteristic or another are established for employment or admission to universities. At the universities the typical result of this bad idea is, that a number of unqualified Negroes are accepted because of their race and a number of Jews are rejected because — according to society's proctors — a disproportionate number of Jews attend universities, and this is not healthy. Individual achievement is denied. Progress is hobbled. Individual freedom and personal dignity lose their priority. Community breaks into competing factions based on race, religion, geography or whatever the defining characteristics of a quota happen to be at the time. In point of fact some of the consequences of the quota system have been the recrudescence of implicit anti-semitism, tainted degrees for every Negro regardless of his achievement and an increase in factionalism. Ultimately the bad idea of the quota system is opposed to individual achievement, dignity, personal freedom and progress.

Consider the ideas emerging from that glob of embellished discontent marketed by Mr. Ralph Nader as consumerism. As with so many of these social problems, it is always stated without any regard for economics but with dramatic solicitude for the rights of all of mankind. Un-

fortunately when the solutions are advanced it becomes obvious that the freedom of all mankind was part of the problem. The consequence of consumerism's basic ideas are that the enlightened few will decide for the benighted many, eventuating in a loss of freedom, a loss of efficiency, higher prices and the periodical loss of order — the worst of both worlds.

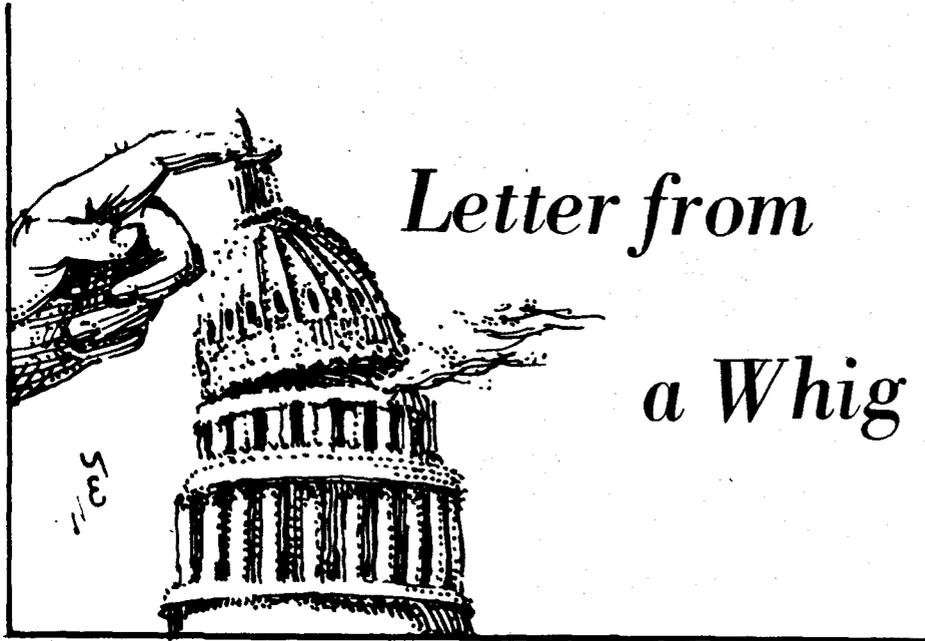
Finally there is the idea that the United States should deny its interest in foreign affairs and attend to problems at home. George Will dealt exhaustively with this particular bad idea in our November symposium, clearly elucidating the idea's baleful consequences. I would only add that when the carriers of this bad idea urge Washington to solve its problems at home what they have in mind are certain conditions which *they* perceive as problems and for which only their solutions are considered feasible.

Obviously these are all bad ideas; when implemented their consequences will be adominable. However the abominable consequences of these bad ideas are merely unpleasant legacies of the 1960s. A more serious condition troubles the early years of the 1970s, for it is the consumption of decades of bad ideas, and its consequences will be devastating. The American consensus on America's ultimate goal has dissolved of common purpose or an ultimate goal. In a constitutional democracy when citizens disagree about the means for realizing the society's ultimate goal, it is a sign of political vitality. But when citizens cannot even agree on what that society's ultimate goal is, the life of the constitutional democracy is imperiled, and this is a sign of sickness. Whether they realize it or not many politicians and figures prominent in public life today disagree on the "promise of America."

Originally the ultimate goal of the American democracy was what the founders called "Republican Virtue." It was fraught with contradictions, finally evolving into the national goal that served us for some 170 years. Outlined as the "right to a useful and remunerative job...the right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing...the right of every businessman, large and small, to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination by monopolies at home or abroad," President Franklin Roosevelt gave a synoptic rendering of our national goal in his famous "Economic Bill of Rights," and whether one was a Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, the great consensus of Americans held that the American Dream was one of expanding prosperity and individual liberty.

Obviously when voices demand that, in pursuit of pure air, we diminish industrial output or that, for the sake of some egalitarian paradigm, Harvard deny admission to a young man because he is Jewish and from the East or that, for the approved benefit of the majority, a minority will select what Americans are to consume or that in the name of "new priorities" at home, we trust our future to the good will of foreign powers rather than our own military strength, they are not merely lugging about bad

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## Letter from a Whig

### The President and the Inaudible Voices

George F. Will

President Nixon is the first professional Republican to be President since Hoover; he is the first really combative Republican President since Theodore Roosevelt. But neither Hoover nor Teddy Roosevelt ran when the GOP was a minority party.

The facts alone would be enough to lend drama to his re-election bid. The drama is augmented by the circumstances of Nixon's 1968 election.

It has been said of Nixon that no President in modern times came to office with fewer commitments.

He was not beholden to clearly defined constituencies because it was not clear which, if any, such constituencies voted heavily for him. He was not clearly obligated to discernible blocs such as blacks or unions or farmers.

But a lack of commitments is not liberating; it is, by another name, the absence of a base.

Thus it was with more desperation than delight that the President and his men latched on to the idea of the "Silent Majority." They had nothing more solid by way of a base, so they committed the politically unpardonable sin of allowing their wishes to be father to their thoughts. They conjured this gossamer "majority" into existence and paid dearly for their delusion in 1970 when a lot of real old-fashioned blocs — like blacks and unions and farmers — went to the polls disgruntled.

Lacking a base of manageable, bite-sized blocs, Nixon cannot hope to win with the techniques used by those who work with the still healthy and substantial remnant of the "New Deal coalition." Nixon cannot win by casting a series of small nets around blocs who basically want to be courted and caught.

Rather, Nixon must cast a single gigantic net; he must use a grand theme to captivate a winning plurality. That is what he will be doing when he seeks re-election as the "peace President."

Nixon will run as the man who got Americans out of combat, and who kept

us all alive, and who made Armageddon a little more remote. Being a Republican, he will have to emphasize that he did all this without messing up the economy. Being Nixon, he will run with an accusing version of Ike's "peace and prosperity" slogan; he will run on "prosperity without war."

Given what appears to be a tidy unfolding of events, it seems that Nixon has been planning this for some time. Consider the probable contrast between the 1972 and the 1970 Republican campaigns.

After witnessing ill-starred Republican campaigns in 1970, Pat Moynihan made an astute observation. He said, "the trouble with the Nixon administration and Republicans generally was that they talked not about the things that made people happy but the things that made them unhappy — war, crime, welfare-cheating, discord."

It is more than likely that Nixon understands this. In 1972, when he is running the campaign will be about things that make people happy.

Now happiness is not all that easy to manage in today's politics. We all remember the ridicule that attended one candidate's venture into "the politics of joy." But Nixon's achievements may make at least cheerful politics more manageable.

It is now clear that Nixon came to office with five grand goals. The achievement of these goals in the first four years was supposed to win him a second four years.

His goals were these, in order of importance to him:

He wanted to end the war through the Paris peace talks.

He wanted an arms limitation agreement with the Soviet Union.

He wanted to develop new relations with the Peoples Republic of China.

He wanted to put the economy on an even keel.

And he wanted to abjure rhetoric and flamboyance in the hope that a bit of studied political drabness might help

reestablish domestic tranquility.

With regard to the first goal, he is achieving it, but by other means.

With regard to the second goal, he thinks the only means at hand — the SALT talks — may yield the desired results. (Of course, he may just be willing to shape his notion of "desirable" in order to get results. That is, he may go for — say — an agreement confined to defensive missiles. By semantic fiat, anything can be baptized the "desired result.")

With regard to the third goal, things are right on schedule: his China trip will consummate the "new era" of U.S.-China relations, and the consummation will come smack dab in the middle of the spring primaries.

With regard to the fourth goal, it is now clear that no prior position is too precious, no principle too sacred to survive the President's determined assault on inflation. Furthermore, contrary to conventional wisdom, fighting inflation can be good political fun. Before the 1968 election Dwight Eisenhower told a Nixon aid, "I think Dick's going to be elected President, but I think he's going to be a one-term President. I think he's really going to fight inflation, and that will kill him politically." But if the public reaction since 15 August is anything to go by, it just might be that the President has found a way of simultaneously fighting inflation, befuddling his opposition, and winning some affection from the electorate.

Nixon's fifth goal — to de-escalate the rhetoric — may be his most important goal. I strongly suspect that democracies have more to fear from hot air than from hot wars; democracies produce abundantly only when they promise modestly.

But this raises an interesting question with regard to Nixon the politician. Does his de-escalation of the rhetoric constitute a kind of unilateral political disarmament that could spell political suicide? In short, can a man get re-elected while trying to break our national addiction to rhetorical extravagance?

The answer is "yes" because, not surprisingly, Nixon has an alternative weapon up his sleeve.

What Nixon lacks by way of rhetorical ability he more than makes up for — politically — in his capacity for planned surprise. Rhetoric has its risks; but so does surprise. If one must choose one or the other as a political tactic, it is understandable why, after Sorensonian pufferies about New Frontiers and after Goodwinian flights about Great Societies, a President — and especially this President — now would choose surprise. The Nation which elected Nixon in 1968 was tired of rhetoric. But it still suffered from a lingering dose of Camelotitis — a hankering for a politics of "style" by attractive people who trade in conspicuous gracefulness. For Nixon, the least graceful of Presidents, surprise is "style" carried on by other means.

Actually, there is no longer anything surprising about Nixon's penchant for surprise. Film in a pumpkin, the "Checkers speech," a riot in Caracas, a debate in a kitchen, the selection of Agnew, the China trip, a sudden Sunday evening abandonment of a recently affirmed economic "game plan" — there is

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