

## Gossip Slingers

THE TOOLS a man uses to procure his daily mutton are an unerringly accurate intimation of the worthiness of his calling and state in life. For instance, if a man works with an array of devices including a small vial of poison, a revolver, several small utensils, blades of various lengths, a crowbar, explosives, a mask and a Book of Common Prayer, one may conclude that the livelihood of the man in question is one frowned upon by the archangels and other law-abiding citizens. Likewise if I am told that a man derives his sustenance almost exclusively from the usufruct of language my eyebrows rise instinctively. From the pit of my stomach flashes of premonition send forth tactical instructions to my cerebrum and I step back a bit, giving the scoundrel wide berth. Words are the tools of reform politicians, used car salesmen, white slavers and journalists. Such individuals always produce misery, mischief and conturbation for the citizenry and profit for themselves.

That the average American journalist is a scoundrel and a self-appointed moonceif is recognized by every decent individual in society save perhaps the journalist's mother and his lawyer. The problem with American journalism is not that it is American (as some journalists would have us believe), but that it is an "ism" possessed of no theory, doctrine or system that makes any sense. Though the typical self-effacing journalist sees himself answering a calling more sacred than that of the Peace Corps Volunteer or the conservationist, the fact is that journalists are generally a pretty raw and shady bunch, answering to no authority or set of standards that is not arrantly self-serving and hypocritical. I can think of no other profession or craft in which the practitioners or craftsmen stake their success and probity on the claim that the consumers of their product are howling in misery. Only in the journalistic underworlds is it taken as a sound axiom that the journalist is sedulous in his duty when he is stirring up the populous and making the dignitaries shriek.

Imagine the response if General Motors proclaimed that it built cars according to the same criterion. Imagine if the chairman of the board of General Motors announced solemnly that "an automobile maker is not doing his duty unless he is building cars that make people uncomfortable." How would that settle with Ralph Nader? What would the Federal Trade Commission say? Now actually, though General Motors declares otherwise, increasing numbers of discomfited Chevrolet drivers are convinced this is exactly the criterion GM follows, and every shareholders' meeting is taking on the bloodthirsty atmosphere of a women's wrestling match or a campus teach-in. Were GM

ever to take the journalist's creed for its own, no employee of that giant corporation would ever dare to dine near an open window.

The journalist further assures us that it is his job to tell tales that frighten little children and make grown men grieve for their country. According to this balmy syllogism, the heinous and the low are news, the sweet and the joyous are not news. To qualify as genuine news an event must be startling and unusual. But the laziest glance at the *Chicago Tribune* or the *New York Times* suggests that what is unusual and startling today is not rape, homicide, malfeasance, larceny and wife beating. On the contrary, it is startling to hear of a man who is faithful to his wife, of a cab driver who follows the golden rule or of a public official who dies in poverty. Nevertheless, the editor of your home town gazette would sooner kiss a pig than dilute the lurid pages of his paper with such good tidings.

Journalists are some of the most notorious swindlers to come along since Eve. We know who hounds and investigates the politicians, the union



leaders, the military-industrial complex, and such, but who scrutinizes the press? And how is anyone who does criticize the press ever going to be taken seriously? It seems whenever someone complains that the press is doing a shoddy, unfair or downright criminal job of distributing the gossip, the ingenious journalists leap at this criticism as irrefragable evidence that they are "on top of the news," vigilantly patrolling the commonweal.

Now comes our colleague, George Will, who has brought together Robert Bartley of the *Wall Street Journal*, Paul Weaver of Harvard's Department of Government, Douglas Cater, formerly a special assistant to President Johnson, Rowland Evans, a man of words, and Irving Kristol, an obscure New York intellectual, to publish a pamphlet which takes up many of the problems inherent in the press. Published by the American Enterprise Institute, *Press, Politics and Popular Government* can be ordered from AEI's Public Policy Research, 1150 17th Street NW, Washington, D.C. I commend it to your attention. It reinforces many of my own

prejudices concerning the gossip slingers and is therefore, by my standards, first rate.

As I see it the press' peculiar dilemma emerges from the following data.

A) It is enormously difficult to reconstruct any past event. The truth is elusive in the present and even more slippery in the past. If any journalist admits this, by the way, his days are numbered.

B) The intellectualization of the press has made it assume a tone that is artificial, "negative," and inherently biased. It has also led journalists into reporting issues and events which they are generally ill-equipped to discuss.

C) The increased politicalization of American life has stoked the fires of bias and spread them into areas once free of politics, making authentic journalism even rarer. For instance ten years ago there was not much partisanship inflaming the broader questions of foreign policy and sex. Today the woman's page of a newspaper is apt to read as though it were written by a disciple of Goebbels.

D) Beneath the dilating politicalization there is the withering of a national consensus on the "meaning of American Society." This naturally has manifest itself in what some are given to calling "polarization." However deeply one wants to plumb the matter, polarization makes the job of objective reporting that much more difficult.

E) Most journalists subscribe to an ideology that sees social problems as social injustices, concomitant with vast residues of guilt and blame. When the atmosphere crackles with blame and teems with showers of guilt a calm, objective journalistic account is unlikely.

F) The public's appetite for drama forces many journalists to dwell on the dramatic and neglect the commonplace. The result is a simplistic and moralistic journalism of vociferous infallibility that: a) neglects the ambiguities and complexities of life and b) sells.

Yet I am willing to bet my subscription to the *New York Times* that the blank-faced ignorance of an Arkansas yokel is more salubrious to polity than the negative knowledge emboldening the high-minded academics of our fated republic.

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

### To Our Readers

Good Tidings! Great Joy! Just as we promised our afflicted readers last month, this is to be our last issue until October, when all of the jolly boys will return from their summer internship at the Central Intelligence Agency. If your address will be different this fall please let us know by using the Change of Address form which is found on page 2.

Incidentally this issue is but a scanty precursor of the palmy things we have planned for next fall, so, lest you miss a single issue this fall, may we suggest you renew your subscription now, using the house advertisement on page 28.

## On the Public Interest

### Irving Kristol and the Public Interest Crowd

Robert Bartley

**A**S ESTABLISHMENT liberalism blurred into radicalism in the middle and late 1960s, the most telling opposition came not from those we usually call conservatives but from another distinct group of thinkers for which we need a new name, perhaps "neo-conservatives."

To measure what criticism tells, look at the reactions of the criticized. The Nixon adviser most maligned in liberal circles was not a conventional right-winger, but Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In the radical-liberal book reviews, the most hated book of recent times was not anything by a conventional conservative, but Edward C. Banfield's *The Unheavenly City*. Of the same people, the wife of an Ivy League department chairman remarks to a young dinner-guest job applicant, "You don't mention names like that if you want to be hired in this department."

Such is the perverse homage paid to critics who not merely sting but bite, to critics who are a real threat. In fact, "names like that," along with others like Irving Kristol, James Q. Wilson, Robert Nisbet and Nathan Glazer, represent a new intellectual school composed of a somewhat ironical alliance of empirical social scientists and classical philosophers attuned to an almost forgotten conservatism. The best place to follow its development has been in the pages of that incomparable quarterly, *The Public Interest*.

Irving Kristol is a key figure in the group, first of all as a central personality, but also in exemplifying the philosophical side of the alliance. In his new book he says the two contemporary figures who have most influenced him are Lionel Trilling, the famous literary critic who first wrote of "the adversary culture," and Leo Strauss, the great Aristotelian scholar at the University of Chicago. And through the essays run the ancient philosophical themes we so seldom see today: the nature of man and society, the question of virtue and the importance of underlying values.

The basic viewpoint of the group rests on its conception of society. A society, culture or civilization is held together not ultimately by its formal institutions but by informal things — traditions, values, feelings and ex-

pectations shared by its citizens and imposing on them certain disciplines.

Thus the problems of society may stem not from material conditions or its formal institutions but directly from the more important informal variables. In particular, the present distress of the United States and other western democracies arises from the erosion of values and traditions that have held them together. The most obvious manifestation of this erosion is the spread of the adversary culture, the growth of traditional intellectual hostility to capitalist society into a powerful and self-perpetuating force that undermines the authority and legitimacy any society needs to operate.

This view of society also suggests the immense difficulty of reform by rational prescription. Things are always so much more complex than they look. They have evolved that way through cut-and-fit adaptation, and those who follow rational prescriptions do not understand with what they tinker.

Kristol does not carry this as far as other members of the school might, though he says "the unanticipated consequences of social action are always more important, and usually less agreeable, than the intended consequences." He believes reforms are necessary, but not reforms intended to change the material conditions of life as to produce institutions that incorporate, stress and reinforce the values and traditions important to society. He calls for a "combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal."

How to designate this body of thought or thinkers is admittedly a difficulty. "The Public Interest crowd" is serviceable enough for some purposes, but the magazine carries many other writers as well, and others outside its immediate circle are coming to parallel conclusions. For its own purposes, the circle solves the problem well enough; a fellow member is "a sensible person," or more likely "one of the few sensible persons around." You don't describe yourself that way, though, and various individuals are forced to formulations like "radical centrist" or "neo-Whig."

Yet the words — self-discipline, authority, legitimacy, values, virtue — are profoundly conservative ones. And the themes come straight from the pages not only of Aristotle but from Burke. While some of the in-

dividuals involved may still object to the title conservative, this is a heritage that deserves to be emphasized and reclaimed.

Thus Herman Kahn, one of those outside *The Public Interest* crowd who sounds parallel themes, speaks of the emergence of "conservationists: trying to conserve old values, but not necessarily interested in the economic and political emphasis of 'Landon' or 'Goldwater.'" His term is overly contrived and a bit awkward. I do not know who first used "neo-conservative" in this context, but it seems the one that best fits.

The term neo-conservative is also useful in making another contrast. Despite the heritage of pertinent themes, they are not the ones we normally associate with contemporary American conservatism. They are occasionally found in the pages of *The National Review*, to be sure, but other and perhaps contradictory themes leave them muted and confused. The neo-conservative themes speak so plainly to our day, indeed, that it is something of a mark against American conservatism that sounding them is left to a group laced with apostate liberals and radicals.

One must give credit where it is due, of course, and anyone who values conservative ideas of any sort owes a deep debt to Mr. Buckley. His talent and enterprise have succeeded in making clear that another tradition does exist as an alternative to the dominant liberalism. Without his skill and verve even that much probably would not be clear outside of a few cloisters here and there. Writing in this journal, Henry Regnery tells how Russell Kirk won his battle to impose the word "conservative" during the founding of *The National Review*. One wonders, though, if Mr. Kirk lost the war.

So often those who claim the word conservative are not followers of Burke but of Adam Smith. So often you find not skepticism about rationalist reformers, but the prescription of *Laissez faire* not merely as a marvelously efficient economic device but as a cure for the ills of society. So often you find not the thought that other nations must work out their own systems even if we know ours are better, but an apocalyptic anticommunism. So often we find conservatives stressing not the protection and preservation of