

On Taking Slobs Seriously

One of the most furious passions pulsing through the Republic these days is the passion to be taken seriously. It afflicts the hominids of both sexes, all age groups, every walk of life, and every state in the Union. This craving for individual recognition and solemn appreciation emboldens America's most unlikely gnomes. Even the ant-like creatures crawling through the ruins of New York City seem to think that they are personages to be accorded the utmost seriousness, though they dwell complacently in an environment that would discommode Cro-Magnon Man, and they display no interest whatsoever in improving their plight and accepting the rudiments of civilization.

This hunger for deferential nods from one's fellows has not always agitated the American herd. In days of yore a slob was a slob. He was willing to admit his sorry insignificance, quietly trudge through his simple daily tasks, and when his hour was at hand he would croak . . . and so to dust. Bootblacks ministered to the hooves of their clients and did not deliver themselves of bursts of sidewalk metaphysics. Sales girls chattered about their sore feet, not the vulgarized political philosophy you are apt to hear from their modern equivalents. And it was held unimaginable that a newspaper editor would ever query the slob on the street about anything at all, much less take him seriously. This sober acceptance of the ordinary man's limited capacities and ultimate insignificance was not undemocratic or even disrespectful. Rather it merely recognized the resilient truth that a slob is a slob, possessed of no prowess or significance beyond his United States citizenship, the rights and privileges of the Constitution, and the love of his mother.

Indeed this pandemic condition of restrained self-esteem reached even into the White House. There is no record of any president ever having made the kind of grandiloquent quips about himself that are now the regular repertoire of Assistant President Henry Kissinger and many of the other White House Bell-boys. President Coolidge imagined no timpani when he rolled out of bed in the morning — or in the early afternoon as was more often the case. And glamorous Franklin probably had less grandiose visions of himself while dining with Churchill and Stalin than our last three presidents have had while brushing their teeth. This was as it should have been.

But now Americans have loosed an egalitarian fever throughout the land, and they are all running around evangelizing the palpably untrue proposition that the carcass of the meanest man, woman, or child is very special stuff. Even more absurdly, they insist that everyone has his own exquisitely beautiful identity. "Rise up from the muck, and express your creativity," they exhort. Or, more desirable still, "Wallow around in it and utter any kind of gibberish that crosses your mind." For, according to the

current wisdom, the coarsest expressions from the lowest slob are beautiful, and who is to say that Aristotle ever did any better.

Pure, high-grade bosh! And only the most gullible college professor would ever have given it a hearing were it not for years of beguiling chatter from psychiatrists, sociologists, and other such charlatans who dance for nickles and dimes before weekly meetings of dozing Rotarians and Kiwanians and the like. It is these moonshiners who have brought on the present witless chorus from the streets, these frauds and the gallimaufry of quacks who zoom around college campuses hypothesizing the splendors of the lumpenproletariat while pawing for wallets. They all make their livings by telling Americans how awesomely complicated they are and how their creative talents would quite transcend those of the masters if only a few adjustments were made in their environments. Bosh again!

The result of all of this tomfoolery is that today many trashy oafs are writing poetry when they could more profitably be shoveling dung. A lot of bird-brained college boys are dreaming about their appearances at Carnegie Hall and hunkering away from the gloomy day when they will have to fulfill their palmy fates and become life insurance salesmen. And a lot of arrant scoundrels are bashing skulls, pillaging, shooting their fellows, skyjacking, and otherwise making nuisances of themselves, all because they heard some charlatan proclaim that there is a Beethoven, a Balzac, or an H. Ross Perot struggling in the bosom of every rascal and every fiend.

So this urge to be taken seriously has its tragic side. No doubt it has issued in a good deal of criminality and sorrow. Hardly a week goes by that we do not hear of some crazed scoundrel shooting down a batch of defenseless citizens, or making off with valuable property, or commandeering public facilities, or shooting a political candidate. And on these occurrences do we ever hear the culprit admit, "I did it because I am an evil, vicious miscreant, warped from birth and so marked as evil until death. Free me and I'll do it again."? Not at all. Instead we hear a few incomprehensible grunts from the "accused," while a mob of apologists rushes out to proclaim the rascal's superior virtue and suffering circumstance. Then comes the villain's revised testimony. The great man had suffered grave indignities. He had not been accorded the high place in society that he knew to be his natural state. He was misunderstood and ignored. Girls thought him a screwball. He lost five hundred dollars at a rigged pin-ball arcade. His boss fired him for breaking paper plates. No one took the sainted chap seriously. The more irrational and bloodthirsty his act, the more he is glorified. His testimony is clean of the least spot of guilt or self-doubt. As his

apologists see it, this contemporary Dillinger's world view is just as legitimate as that of any other citizen. Indeed it is often portrayed as no different than that of the businessman or any man of achievement.

Well, all these scoundrels should be gathered up with their apologists and put to the sword. Capital punishment should be reinstated. And it should be carried out during intermissions at professional athletic events. Let a gallow rise from every center field! Let the half time at the next Super Bowl feature the Manson Family, Sirhan Sirhan, James Earl Ray, and H. Rap Brown! Any charlatan who bellows about the elegant sensibilities of common criminals should be boiled in oil!

So this mania for taking people seriously has its tragic issue, but let us not forget that it also conduces to some gorgeous moments. All sorts of people, it seems, are just sitting around aching to be asked their views on this or that major subject. For instance, there are television shows in which famous faces sit around and jabber about anything that crowds into their tiny minds. Some of the things they say are merely embarrassing. Other pronouncements evoke guffaws. Taken together they reveal how astonishingly eager Americans are to deliver idiotic philippics or sonorous homilies on just about anything. Then too there are those ridiculous radio programs which encourage the country's fervent yahoos to call in and set things straight. But for me the most humorous of all these manifestations of the gab phenomenon are those idiotic newspaper columns wherein some semi-educated reporter queries a random assortment of shoppers about the most prudent course for the president to follow, say, at the next International Monetary

To Our Readers

As some of you noticed last summer, *The Alternative* does not publish during July, August, and September, for it is then that our staff withdraws to libraries and universities.

During this period we renew our contact with the great thoughts of our time, improve ourselves, and make ourselves better persons through telepathic communication with professors, students, and other suffering persons. This summer we intend to study at the University of California at Berkeley, where we have enrolled in G387: Goats and People, Expanding Civil Liberties; C999: The Choreography of Sunshine; S123: "Sexual Perversion" as a Force for Good; and L436: The Comic Book — Relevant to Shakespeare?

Obviously, when we send out our next issue in October, this famous intellectual journal should be better than ever or at least no worse. So be sure to get your change of address in now. Use the coupon on page 2.

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Conference. The ensuing explications always tickle me and fuel my belief that man's closest relatives are not the primates but the hyenas. I have the suspicion that these interviews always take place in the purlieu of an insane asylum or of a large university. I devour them.

Now the serious problem with a nation whose citizens take themselves so seriously is not the episodic tragedies brought on by self-righteous scoundrels nor the degradation of rhetoric and the elevation of the thoughts of flatulent yahoos. Rather, the serious problem reposes in the certainty that when a nation's citizens take themselves seri-

ously, the nation takes itself seriously. Government becomes grim business, unsympathetic with civil liberties or disagreement.

Americans have always been given to overdoing things. Today they are sodden in affluence. Many are besotted in anomie. Others are bored. Both boredom and spiritual anarchy can be powerful engines for catastrophe — especially amongst people who gorge their enthusiasms.

In the long view, though it entertains me vastly, I can see very little good coming from this passion for taking everyone so seriously. I can see little

good in it, because it rests on an untrue proposition — the average man's view of complex problems is generally benighted, and rarely useful to any analysis. I can see little good in it, because it elevates the vulgar and drives out the civilized. I can see little good in it, because a nation zealously pursuing vulgar notions drifts toward the brutal. And . . . well, to shorten a long and increasingly obvious analysis . . . the demand to be taken seriously wafts very much of hubris. And if the Greeks knew nothing else, they knew their sins.

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.



Toward a Political Science of Watergate

Everybody knows that old science fiction cliché, the Giant Amoeboid from Outer Space. A small meteor, or something, lands on Earth in a flash of flame and smoke. A scientist, or somebody (often a Teenager), goes to inspect the crater and brings back a small sample, which he deposits in his neighborhood laboratory. During the night the sample begins to grow; by morning it has become a huge, seething, repulsive Blob that sets out across the landscape, gobbling everything in sight and multiplying faster than a third-generation computer. It and its progeny get bigger and bigger; they invade the cities, wreaking destruction and death; tanks and rockets prove powerless to stop them; Civilization seems doomed. Then, in the nick of time, one of two things happens; a scientist comes up with an ingenious device or method for killing Blobs, and it works; or the Blobs suddenly die by themselves as a result of not being immune to the bacteria and suchlike of Earth. The movie ends, the lights go up, and everyone leaves the theater reassured that, as God is in Heaven, so is there a System on Earth, which, with the help of a few courageous individuals, will triumph over any dangers or evils visited upon it from an alien world.

Is this also the lesson of Watergate? Certainly there are some who have begun to insist that it is. The President said as much in his May 1 speech, which praised the press, the courts, "a courageous judge," and the Congress. For its efforts, the *Washington Post* has already received an apology from the White House and a Pulitzer Prize from Columbia University. Increasing numbers of politicians have joined the chorus in praise of the System and in appre-

ciation of its efficacy in responding to Watergate.

Now clearly there is much to be said for this view. There is a system, and it has by no means completely failed us in this case. Against considerable resistance, it identified and publicized a lot of intolerable behaviors; it has convicted several persons of crimes; it will almost certainly convict many more in the future; and there is reason to hope that the huge investigative, judicial, and legislative machinery that has been set in motion will eventually grind out the appropriate results with minimum damage to innocent persons and institutions. All this is unquestionably to the good. And to this extent, it is true that Watergate is already a success story. We should be aware of this fact, and let it cheer us up a bit over the coming months as the Ervin committee exhumes and reconstructs the whole sordid mess. It may not be much consolation, but it is something, and it should help us preserve an appropriate modicum of self-respect.

Yet there is an old proverb — or if there isn't, there ought to be — that warns: Beware the man who draws the moral of the story before the tale has come to an end; the "tale" he is concerned about may well be his own. For the Watergate story is nowhere near its end. If I may be pardoned the metaphor, the Blob at this point has only just burst out of the laboratory and begun to ravage the landscape. Each day brings news of yet another person or institution being consumed. Thus far, brilliant defense lawyers, invocations of executive privilege, presidential speeches, and all the other weapons of political warfare haven't fazed it. The Blob goes

forward, uncontrolled and perhaps uncontrollable. Nobody knows who will be next, or what it will all finally lead to. But it has already become clear that there is grave danger to all concerned. For the President, the Blob threatens impeachment. For Congress, it threatens the later political consequences of impeachment, which certainly include, as one possible scenario, intense popular backlash against the Democratic Congress, the election of a Republican in 1976, and God only knows what foreign or domestic chaos in the interim. Of course, it could turn out otherwise; nothing is certain. At this point, the only thing that can be said for sure is that the end is not yet in sight, that the stakes have become very high, and that the final outcome could cut either way, or both ways.

This is a situation which has made Democrats and Republicans, President and congressmen, join together in singing the praises of the System. They do so because this rhetoric, in addition to being partially true, is also extremely useful — useful to all of them collectively, and useful as well to each group separately.

It is useful to all of them collectively because it defines a strategy for regaining control over events by means of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The underlying idea here is that if you talk to the Blob as if it has already been done in by the System, you may thereby persuade it that this has in fact happened. If you succeed in this, the Blob may then start acting as if it *were* dead, or anyway moribund. In practical terms, this would mean that popular passions over Watergate would cool off, and that Congress and the courts wouldn't feel so constrained at each point to go yet one extra mile to punish yet one more person involved, directly or indirectly, actually or allegedly, in the entire repulsive mess. Of course, it isn't certain that this rhetorical strategy will work. The Blob may not listen, or may not believe what the System-praisers are saying. Or perhaps the Blob will prefer to listen to those in the press and elsewhere who are imploring it to roll on and on until every sinner in the land has been brought before the bar of justice and sent to his eternal reward. This latter is a particularly live possibility. Still, for those

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