

The Alternative, Since Yesterday

IT HAS BEEN four years since one Elizabeth Taylor wrote me to the effect that the students of White Pines College were not interested in receiving a subscription to *The Alternative*. As Madame Taylor was then dean of that illustrious citadel of learning, I could easily understand the matronly vigilance for her flock's virtue, and, enjoined by my effortless compassion I replied, "Your name has been sent to the F.B.I."

I have been sending such genial notes to readers ever since, and though some like Madame Taylor already knew quite enough about our high-minded endeavor, others have sought to know more about the magazine and the idealistic young people who serve it up every month. It is with them in mind that I have confected this little essay about the nature and origins of a magazine which remains, so far as I can ascertain, the only magazine in the country still capable of giving scandal to college girls.

Our season of gestation was the late 1960s, a time when authorities were breaking down all across the Republic. Whether it was the authority of high culture, the university, the courts, or whatever, it did not seem to matter. There was a fever on the land, and swarms of pests rose up where once only nice bright liberals had dwelt. These pests proved many old verities, the most salient being man's enduring tendency to become the very ass he had heretofore warned us about. These descendants of rationalism, humane sensibility, and democratic process became dervishes of antiintellectualism and authoritarianism.

Not all of them goose-stepped to the same tune. Some became revolutionaries while others merely opted for hectoring the citizenry with all sorts of idiotic and inconvenient reforms. Pecksniffery, puritanism, and philistinism were revived on a gigantic and wonderful scale hitherto unimagined even by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. But now the liberal audience had fragmented, and many thoughtful liberals found themselves nursing their prejudices with many modern conservatives. *The Alternative's* writers emerged from this pothering milieu. It became our credo that the test of a civilized individual is how infrequently he inflicts himself upon his fellows.

Most of the young writers who bedazzle our pages today came out of the 1960s with an amused disrelish for radicals, manifestoes, and intellectual slovenliness. Further, most of us have had a bellyful of moral indignation. By 1970 it had become obvious that there were cells of enlightenment on campuses across the country, notably at Harvard and the University of Chicago; so I suggested recasting *The Alternative*, which had been an off-campus antiradical magazine at Indiana University, and presenting it to a national audience. For the most part the staff of the old *Alternative* assented, and after making organizational

changes to include our associates in Cambridge, Chicago, New York, and Washington, we blossomed for the first time as a national magazine in the fall of 1970. Since then it has been an extraordinary literary spree, constant, stupendous, and delightful. Obviously, Bloomington, Indiana, and its environs constitute a highly congenial atmosphere for publishing. Not only does the area abound with many philosophical bartenders, hordes of nubile cuties, and the cow that jumped over the moon, it also has every species of clown from America writ large. What is more, thanks to the recent penetrations into these parts of mass communications and the aeroplane, we now have access to all the amenities of New York and Washington plus the colossal advantage of being able to shut them off at will.

Now *The Alternative* has been assayed as beneath the salt, when compared to such magazines as the *New Republic* or the *Nation*. But the merit of this criticism withers with every issue we publish. Our growth has followed the anfractuuous pattern of evolution which is typical of a normal individual's growth to adulthood. *The Alternative* grew from an off-campus magazine into a national magazine of opinion *pari passu* with its editors' growth. It should surprise no one that our performances have been uneven, but I believe our development has been rapid and steady. The average age of our staff today is twenty-four, and our budget could not match the *New Republic's* budget for coffee. Though we are not one of those voluptuously packaged products that appear on the American scene accompanied by a blast of trumpets and public relations persiflage, I believe we are superior to most of them. Typical of these is a new magazine that recently inflated itself into national prominence through a million-dollar advertising barrage lurid with adjectives like "provocative" and "iconoclastic," and full of assurances that whatever sacred cows still reign in America, they will soon be filled with terror and contrition. Needless to say, *New Times* is a multimillion-dollar bore, mainly because it is a Taj Mahal to the only sacred cows left, to wit: those mountebank journalists who roll themselves in the antique dust of Lincoln Steffens and compliment themselves on their audacious contemporaneity. If *New Times* ever debunks the sham pretensions of modern journalism and if it ever does it intelligently or even eloquently, I shall take the oath of silence and off to a monastery with me. But until then I shall sit back with my cohorts and snicker while *New Times* whoops it up for itself and for a newly christened journalism that is as old as the art of gossip.

Our contributors constitute a varied lot, all of whom stand on the common ground of respect for democratic process (especially American democratic process) and appreciation for cultural excellence. Some are Democrats and some are Republicans. We publish liberals and conservatives. It is our boast that any intelligent reader of any era

would find us interesting. We pant after no trendy enthusiasms and peddle no nostrums. We behold America, we relish its fullness, we are enchanted by its bouquet. Too much of the stuff makes us dizzy, even sick, but the sickness is our own doing and no reason for discommoding our neighbors.

Naturally, in the era of Watergate and the Great Milk Conspiracy, some people are curious about shady operators whose feet protrude beneath the drapes. Rest assured. *The Alternative* is the property of no political party, cabal, or moon-struck Jeremiah. We are bankrolled by no labor union, no tycoon, no university, and no government cornucopia. There is no sinister force about the place, not even a small band of Black Handers, but merely a constantly expanding circle of writers interested in preserving an intelligent discourse about the educational value of business, politics, the arts, and in fact all the gorgeous elements of Americana. New writers often contact us, and we occasionally ferret a few out for ourselves. *The Alternative* accumulates a vast and one might even say lavish debt, much like the Penn Central. But as Congress has yet to be persuaded that we are critical to the public interest, we have had to raise money from friends in general fund-raising appeals. Our success has been slim, but it has been enough to keep us in paper, ink, pretzels, and beer. Further our circulation has steadily climbed, and the day is coming into view when we will about break even—though I doubt I shall ever share the tax problems of our great President. So *The Alternative* raises its funds from its readers, and is owned by no mysterious junto—though this is not to say that I would turn up my nose on a reasonable offer.

Then there is the matter of our staff. Readers have been making scholarly inquiries about them for years, and so I shall take this opportunity to lay down the facts for the historical record. The tallest is Jim Grant, a nearly seven-foot-tall retired French horn virtuoso, who anchors himself in size 15½ D shoe. The shortest is P.D. Tyrrell, twenty-four inches, who spends most of his time in bed, a trait which has become a family hallmark. As to who is the sweetest, there is a running battle between Joyce Goldberg and Neil Howe, and bearing in mind that the latter is given to cheating in such contests, I give the nod to Miss Goldberg. Joyce is also the most liberal, having voted for the famous tailor, Louis Fisher, in the last presidential sweepstakes. Ron Burr is the most conservative. In fact he has actually refused to brush his teeth until Brooks Brothers markets toothpaste. He is unmarried. I am undoubtedly the most idealistic, though Von Kannon has also supported many public-spirited endeavors, notably his recent crusade to get the Code of Hammurabi adopted as a replacement to the states' various criminal codes, or what remain of them. Our most intelligent colleague is Barry Burr, who recently dropped out of

(continued on page 35)



Irving Kristol

Utopianism, Ancient and Modern

MEN ARE DREAMING animals, and the incapacity to dream makes a man less than human. Indeed, we have no knowledge of any human community where men do fail to dream. Which is to say, we know of no human community whose members do not have a vision of perfection—a vision in which the frustrations inherent in our human condition are annulled and transcended. The existence of such dreaming visions is not, in itself, a problem. They are, on the contrary, a testament to the creativity of man which flows from the fact that he is a creature uniquely endowed with imaginative powers as an essential aspect of his self-consciousness. Only a madman would wish to abolish men's dreams, i.e., to return humanity to a purely animal condition, and we are fortunate in having had—until recently, at any rate—little historical experience of such madness. It is true that, of late, certain writers—notably Norman O. Brown—hold out the promise of such regression as a kind of ultimate redemption. But even their most admiring readers understand that this is largely literary license, rather than a serious political agenda.

On the other hand, and far more common, there are also madmen who find it impossible to disentangle dreams from reality—and of this kind of madness we have had, alas, far too much experience. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a good part of modern history takes place under the sign of this second kind of madness, which we familiarly call "utopianism."

I am using the term "madness" advisedly and not merely to be provocative. The intellectual history of the past four centuries consists of islands of sanity floating in an ocean of "dottiness," as the British call it. We don't see this history in this way, and certainly don't study it in this way, because—I would suggest—we have ourselves been infected by this pervasive "dottiness." Just look at the cautious and respectful way our textbooks treat the French utopian theorists of the nineteenth century: Saint-Simon, Comte, Fourier, and their many loyal disciples. It is no exaggeration to say that all of these men were quite

literally "touched in the head" and their writings can fairly be described as the feverish scribblings of disordered minds. Fourier, for instance, divided humanity into no less than 810 distinct character types and then devised a social order that brought each character type his own special brand of happiness. He also believed that, in the ideal world of the future, the salty oceans would benevolently turn themselves into seas of lemonade, and that men would grow tails with eyes at the tip. Saint-Simon and Comte were somewhat less extreme in their lunacies—but not all that much. To read them, which so few actually do today, is to enter a world of phantasmagoria. Oh yes, one can cull "insights," as we say, from their many thousands of pages. But the inmates of any asylum, given pen and paper, will also produce their share of such "insights"—only it doesn't ordinarily occur to us that this is a good way of going about the collecting of insights. It is only when people write about politics in a large way that we are so indulgent to their madness, so eager to discover inspired prophecy in their fulminations.

It is not too much to say that we are all utopians now, in ways we no longer realize, we are so habituated to them. Further than that: we are even utopian when we think we are being very practical and rational. My own favorite instance of such subterranean utopianism is in an area where one is least likely to look for it. I refer to the area of city planning.

William H. Whyte, Jr., in his excellent book, *The Last Landscape*, has pointed out that, if you examine the thousands of plans which now exist for our shiny, new, wonderful cities, there is always one thing that is certain to be missing. That one thing is—a cemetery. In a properly planned city, the fact that people die is taken to be such an unwarranted intrusion into an otherwise marvelous equilibrium that city planners simply cannot face up to it. After all, if people die and are replaced by new and different people, then the carefully prescribed "mix" of jobs, of housing, of leisure-time activities—all this is going to be upset. Modern city planning, whether in the form of New Towns or Cities Beautiful,

is inherently and radically utopian in that it aims to bring history to a stop at a particular moment of perfection. The two traditions of urban planning I have just mentioned disagree in their attitude toward modern technology and modern industrial society—the one wishing to minimize their influence, the other wanting to exploit their potentialities to the utmost. But both are, as a matter of historical fact, descended from various nineteenth-century utopian-socialist movements, and neither of them can bear to contemplate the fact that men are permanently subject to time and changing circumstances.

That is why city planners are so infuriated when someone like Jane Jacobs comes along and points out that the absence of old buildings in their model cities is a critical flaw—because old buildings, with their cheap rents, are needed by the small entrepreneur, the bohemian intellectual, the dilatory graduate student, the amateur scholar, and eccentrics of all kinds. These are the people who give urban life its color, its vitality, its excitement—and who, moreover, play an indispensable role in the dynamics of urban growth and decay. But growth and decay are precisely what most offend the utopian cast of mind, for which time is an enemy to be subdued. And this is why the dimension of time is so rigorously excluded from modern city planning—and from modern architecture too, which derives from the same utopian tradition. Ask a city planner or an architect whether his work will grow old gracefully, and he finds your question incomprehensible. His is the perfection of art, which is immune to time, which does not age or wither or renew itself. That human beings and human societies do age and wither and renew themselves is for him only an immense inconvenience, and he cannot wait until our social sciences shall have resolved that problem.

I want to call your attention to the interesting and important fact that this utopian cast of mind I have been describing is quite rational—only, it has ceased to be reasonable. And this divorce between rationality and reasonableness, which is characteristic