

Jimmy: Midway in the Revels

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The saga began on January 20, 1977, the date on which Jimmy was inaugurated 39th President. His inaugural address, intoned in his famous *andante con ping pong* cadence, was an arrestingly straightforward and simple-witted oration that should have answered immediately and forever his campaign's famed rhetorical question: "Why Not The Best?" Why not indeed! The Wonderboy had entered the Presidency with exactly six years' experience in Georgia state government behind him. When he was inaugurated, the current edition of *Who's Who* still listed his profession as "farmer and warehouseman." Thirteen days after this soporific monologue he delivered his first "Fireside Chat," the substantive highlight of which was his request that citizens restrain themselves from sending him "gifts." About that time there appeared the first pictures of our President tripping Ford-like in front of the White House. It was an impressive beginning, but for the first few months not many caught on. Except for the hijinks of the Rev. Young and the scalping of one or two of Jimmy's more maladroit appointments, Washington remained in a protracted and blissful coma.

This was to be expected. Our sudden release from the Ford fascism was bound to gladden many a Washington heart, and a temporary relaxation in our indigenous freedom fighters' eternal vigilance was only natural. More importantly, however, it is in the early months of an administration that the President presents his policies and that the pundits and pols politely scrutinize them. It is a quiet time. In Mr. Carter's case, it was an especially quiet time, for he did not seem to have many policies or even many ideas about policies. What policies he did have amounted to sheer tedium—the Great Society as understood by Dinah Shore, and implemented by George McGovern with assistance from the Plains, Georgia, Rotary. Harding drunk was better equipped for the Presidency than Jimmy, though here it ought to be recorded that when the voice of the people was heard in 1976, the voice was faint: 27.5 percent of the people said Jimmy, 26 percent said Jerry, and a whopping 46.5 percent said yecch. So the pundits remained quiescent, but by autumn the average American began to shift in his seat. Soon even the pundits began to stir. Andy Young, Bert Lance, Rosalynn, Amy, Miss Lillian. Zounds!

It was in early November 1977, not yet a year into the Populist Era, that the President's coterie of yokels was roused from

reveries on the perfect *filet de catfish* by the shouts of the pollsters. Jimmy's popularity had mysteriously evaporated. Holy Shee-it! At the White House Ham and Jody, our President's dungareed aides, hurriedly removed their socks from the radiator, thrust their hooves into their clodhoppers, and with shirttails flapping galloped into the Oval Office. The Yankees had done woke up! Congress was in mutiny! The conservatives were mad and the liberals were madder. Even the Washington press corps no longer saw the charm of having a pack of Snopeses listening to Scheherazade in the White House's West Wing.

Publisher's Note: Attorneys, myopes, and insomniacs have already let out a yell, having read in our masthead's fine print that *The American Spectator* is now a fully monthly magazine. In the past we were, according to the fine print, "published monthly except July and September." This allowed the editorial staff time to sunbathe and otherwise carry on after the manner of the modern intellectual, but our business department grew anxious. The summer slowdown also caused our subscribers some alarm, and doubtless there were moments of depression, perhaps even instances of weight gain and hives. So now we're a fully monthly magazine. Our subscription price is \$12 for twelve issues, rather than \$10 for ten issues. Current subscriptions will not be affected by this change—if you had 3 or 11 or 32 issues remaining in your subscription before the change, you'll still get 3 or 11 or 32 issues.

The yokels' holiday in the big city was over. Something stupendous needed to be done or it was back to the all-night Standard station. Fortunately for the boys, Jimmy had hired a Yankee pollster, Patrick Caddell, who had already devised a political strategy memorandum to assure Jimmy's victory in 1980. We know this because the astonishing document was leaked to the *New York Times*. According to Caddell, "Too many good people have been beaten because they tried to substitute substance for style." Of course, Jimmy was in no danger of perishing from a superabundance of substance, and when Ham and Jody heard of Caddell's prescription for presidential greatness they came alive with enthusiasm. Very simply, Caddell prescribed a "continuing political campaign." That day there resounded

from the Oval Office many hot damns and taaarnations. It was a day for jubilation. The boys would not return home in 1980! The people could be hornswoogled once again! During the next month our President showed the old fire of campaign '76. First he went aridin' through the slums of South Bronx to condole with the victims of Wall Street. Then he laced up his own clodhoppers, charged onto the White House lawn, and put on the feed bag with "the Peanut Brigade," five hundred credulous Georgians who had staffed his 1976 campaign and with whom he would occasionally visit to illustrate some obscure point in the populist whim-wham. "These are my closest friends in all the world," he sighed, and the press quoted him. "We're part of the same family," he purred. "I'm a red-neck just like you." A certain breed of low-grade American seems to fall for this drivel, and Jimmy and the boys knew it. When in trouble he would mix such sentimental flummeries with outraged denunciations of lawyers, doctors, businessmen, automobile mechanics, almost anyone who produced anything, almost anyone footing the bill for our government's good works. At times his philippics would be so violent that they would astonish even the Gucci Bolsheviks of Georgetown.

But brazen flattery, unctuous maundering, and objurgations of the tax-paying public availed him naught. Moreover, the polls continued to sink him. In a fever he began travelling to foreign lands, whether invited or not. In late December of 1977 he went on a historic nine-day, seven-nation tour that was as comic as it was useless. In Poland his arrival speech will be remembered as the most hilarious ever delivered by an American President on foreign soil. Aided by a spectacularly inept translator, Jimmy gravely notified an assemblage of shocked Polish dignitaries that he had abandoned America forever. Apropos of human rights, he assured the Poles that he understood all the sexual yearnings of the Polish people. Chortles commenced, yet onward he lunged, piling up malapropism atop malapropism. Distractedly he would look up from his prepared text and discover his audience convulsed in laughter, yet on he would trudge, amusing them all the more and assuring his place as the most thundering hind ever to bloviate in the land of the kielbasa. Did he ever ask any of his aides what the guffawing was all about? Who knows, and who knows how many of his aides would know. On his right stood Jordan and to his left stood Powell, both loyally shouldering his perplexity, at least

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Stephen Miller

New York Jew: A Tale Distorted

In the third volume of his autobiography, Alfred Kazin grotesquely misrepresents the character of Lionel Trilling, rehearses the orthodoxy of anti-anti-Communism, and reduces Jewish history and culture to a narrow ethnic mystique.

“The reciprocal civility of authors,” Samuel Johnson said, “is one of the most risible scenes in the farce of life.” A writer who was at the center of literary life in London for about 40 years in the mid-eighteenth century, Johnson well knew how writers are wracked more than most people with the pains of envy, jealousy, and resentment. It comes as no surprise that Alfred Kazin’s *New York Jew*,* a memoir of life among writers and intellectuals in New York during the past 30 years, shows up some authors for the vain, petty, and mean-spirited souls they often are—personal qualities that say nothing, of course, about the quality of their work. It comes as some surprise, though, that a few weeks after the book was reviewed favorably in the *New York Times Book Review*, 19 distinguished intellectuals objected—in a letter to the editor of the book review—to what they described as Kazin’s “grotesque misrepresentation” of Lionel Trilling, the well-known literary and cultural critic who died several years ago.

Lionel Trilling is one of the central figures in Kazin’s book, which is the third volume of an autobiographical trilogy that includes *A Walker in the City* and *Starting Out in the Thirties*. Dense with precise observations of the urban landscape and rich in fascinating sketches of famous writers, *New York Jew* is a tightly-woven and elegantly-written work of autobiographical art. Yet it is also a disturbing, misleading, and irritating book. And these qualities are especially apparent in Kazin’s portrait of Trilling.

The portrait is an ambivalent one. When Trilling first appears on Kazin’s stage, he is praised as a “master of distinctions,” someone with an extraordinarily subtle and fine mind. But it was a mind so fine, Kazin soon implies, that no clearcut political or cultural position could violate it. According to Kazin, Trilling was a careerist, an opportunist who always worried about his reputation. “He seemed,” Kazin says, “intent on not diminishing his career by a single word.” The initial bow of respect is followed by a slap in the face. “No one,” Kazin says, “could have been more discerning, and less involved.”

Kazin confesses that he was once invited to dinner at the home of Lionel Trilling and his wife, Diana Trilling, and that he was never invited back. Should we dismiss Kazin’s portrait of Trilling as mere petulance on Kazin’s part for having been, in effect, snubbed by the Trillings? Or should we dismiss it as resentment on Kazin’s part for not having received quite as many literary honors as Trilling received? Such speculations, I think, should be indulged in only by those who knew Trilling and Kazin—only by those who are capable of entering into an argument about Trilling’s character. The disinterested outsider can only examine

the general ideas that go into the making of the portrait. And they are worthy of discussion, for they touch upon a question that has been at the center of American intellectual life since the end of World War II.

The question is a two-fold one: What were the appropriate responses to the evils of Communism and Nazism? Throughout *New York Jew*, Kazin implies that on both issues—if we can call Nazism an issue—Trilling’s response failed to pass the test of adequacy whereas his own passed with flying colors.

The question of an appropriate response to Communism requires some historical elaboration. After the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, most American intellectuals broke completely with the Communists, the exception being Lillian Hellman and a band of Hollywood screenwriters who devoutly worshipped the Soviet Union until the late forties and early fifties. The question for most intellectuals was not whether one should be for Communism but how one should be against it, and the debaters sorted themselves out into two distinct groups: the anti-Communists and the anti-anti-Communists. Although such crude terms don’t do justice to the nuanced political positions of many, they have a certain appropriateness since they were employed by those participating in the debate.

The anti-anti-Communists considered it reprehensible to dwell on the evils of Communism because they thought that by doing so one played into the hands of reactionary forces. To some extent they were right. Some anti-Communists were out-and-out reactionaries who were quick to label any liberal idea as Communist-inspired; and some, like Senator Joseph McCarthy, were unscrupulous exploiters of populist paranoia about foreign ideologies. Finally, some were sincere ex-radicals who became tediously obsessive in their preoccupation with the spread of Communism; that was all they could think or write about. But there were other intellectuals who deplored the excesses of the radical right and yet at the same time recognized that it was perfectly legitimate to worry about Soviet expansion under the banner of Communism, which they saw as a threat to America’s allies and ultimately to the United States itself. The Cold War, they realized, was not an American invention—not an American fit of self-induced madness. Although American diplomacy may have needlessly exacerbated tensions at times, the Soviet Union was a power to be feared and indeed to be preoccupied with. Among this latter group, whom we might call the sober anti-Communists, was Lionel Trilling, though it should be said that he was less vocal about these matters than other more political writers such as Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Sidney Hook, and Diana Trilling. Kazin, as one might suspect, was on the other side; he considered himself an anti-anti-Communist.

* Alfred A. Knopf; \$10.95.

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