



BOYCOTT THE *TIMES*

by Michael Ledeen

It is time to organize the great 1981 national boycott of the *New York Times*. Now that Richard Burt has left, one can expect to find an uninterrupted flow of the sort of ideological frenzy that we read on Christmas Eve. Signed by Jo Thomas, the story described a meeting in Havana involving Guatemalan guerrillas:

They had come to Havana to represent a coalition of four armed Guatemalan guerrilla groups at the second Cuban Communist Party congress, an event that drew hundreds of foreign delegates and turned into a sort of Woodstock for revolutionaries, a festival of affection that revolved not around music but around the person of Fidel Castro, who, revolution well in hand, dominated the meeting. . . .

If Cuba is now having to tax its peasants because they are threatening to become rich, if Cuba is now having to worry about producing more color televisions and fretting over how to get lazy employees to work, it is still a nation where the portraits of José Martí and Ché Guevara hang on every wall and the memory of its aging revolution generates respect.

The 1,700 Cuban delegates to the congress looked well fed, sometimes overfed. The foreign delegates, especially those from Western countries, were far better dressed, but they were often thin, sometimes frail, and they had about them the passionate fervor that in Cuba, 21 years after the revolution, sometimes seems a bit mechanical.

Quite a performance, even from the newspaper that gave us Herbert Matthews and lionized Fidel in the first place. One understands that the *New York Times* likes correspondents who hail the revolution, and even show enough independence to criticize the Cuban revolutionaries for overeating. But that bit about the Cuban peasants becoming rich is too much for me. Is that what drove the tens of thousands of refugees out earlier last year? And has Jo Thomas never heard of the rationing in Cuba? And if Jo Thomas hasn't, where are the editors?

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Lest you think that this sort of rhetoric is limited to such "progressive" publications as the *Times*, I was surprised to see Karen Elliott House, one of our best correspondents, spreading high-level disinformation in the *Wall Street Journal*. On December 11, House wrote: "Already, Italy's Communist Party has voted unanimously to break relations with the Soviet Union's Communist Party if Russian troops invade Poland. This move would make it easier for the Italian government to support military buildups in Europe in response to any Soviet invasion of Poland."

To begin with, the notion of the Italian Communist Party "voting" does some violence to the English language, but to imagine that over a million people would vote "unanimously" is absurd. Surely there is some lonely Stalinist in the mountains of northern Italy who is in favor of the invasion of Poland; after all, more than 60 percent of Italian Communists still approve the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. But Karen House is a good reporter, so I called several leading Italian Communists to find out what had happened. So far as they know, there has been no such "vote"; the closest thing to it is a letter from Secretary-General Berlinguer to the heads of other Communist parties, warning that a Russian invasion of Poland might have dire consequences. But there has been no vote, and certainly no unanimous vote (aside from the usual, empty sense of the verb in its Communist context: The leader spoke, and the comrades saluted).

One additional point: This story—that the Italian Communists would break with Moscow if there were an invasion of Poland—was circulating around Washington for about ten days before it was picked up. Stories like this seem to have an independent life, floating around the media universe until someone finally gives them precise form. But why, of all things, the *Wall Street Journal*? By such actions the Italian Communists acquire a certain legitimacy

without actually doing anything at all.

Oh, yes: Did you know that the *Wall Street Journal* will soon offer space to Mr. Alexander Cockburn (pronounced Co-burn) and Mr. Hodding Carter III? The former once a month, the latter twice a month. Perhaps the remaining weekly slot will be given to Andrew Young. Why is the *Journal* doing this? Presumably to show how broad-minded they are, and to give their editorial pages some "balance." It's one of the curiosities of American journalism that as daily journalism becomes more politicized, the op-ed pages strain for "balance." This, of course, is back-asswards. We want balanced, accurate reportage, and strong, politicized editorial comment. That the reverse occurs is one further sign of the confusion characteristic of our political culture.

The Caribbean: With all the attention directed at the Caribbean revolutionaries, you'd have thought there would have been more interest in the drubbing delivered by the Jamaican people to their own revolutionary regime under the leadership of Michael Manley. But whereas lots of outspoken congresspersons and editorialists have implored the administration to send money to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, not much thought has been given to support for the new government in Jamaica, even though the new prime minister, Edward Seaga, has called for a new "Marshall Plan" in the Caribbean in support of pro-Western governments. Apparently it's easier to generate passion for aid to one's enemies. I saw one quiet AP story on December 4 in the *Washington Star*, reporting Seaga's speech to a distinguished American audience. And the last paragraph is one of the most important to appear in the American press in a long time: "The Marshall Plan was an American financed project that led to the recovery of shattered Western European economies after World War II." You know what that means? It means

that the Associated Press editors—who know their business—realize that the American public no longer knows what the Marshall Plan was. And they failed to add that the Marshall Plan was offered in response to mounting Russian pressure on American friends. That clause should be there, because even those few citizens who know what the Marshall Plan was, forget that the Russian campaign against Western Europe, Greece, and Iran was the catalyst for the program.

Technology Transfer Department: There are few problems more complicated than that of selling—or giving—high technology to the Russians. Kissinger believed that this should be part of an overall policy of "linkage," by which he meant that we should be willing to sell certain items to the Kremlin if, and only if, the Russians' international behavior is tolerable. Carter had a different concept: We should trade unless there is a clear reason not to. As a result, the Russians were able to continue to trade with us even though their imperialistic actions became steadily more menacing. Reagan says he wants to go back to linkage, but whereas six or seven years ago there was a predominant strategic advantage in our favor, today the balance has shifted in favor of the Russians. How realistic is it to believe linkage can be achieved?

There are other problems as well: Should the American government attempt to constrain the development of Russian energy programs, or should we encourage them? The *Boston Globe* editorialists think we should help: If we interfere with Soviet energy development, the *Globe* said on December 10, it "can only . . . help drive up the world price of oil, which neither Europe nor the U.S. needs to have happen now." Moreover, according to the *Globe* strategists, "there is little point in trying to penalize the Soviet Union in ways that penalize ourselves even more heavily in the long run."

On the other hand, if we help the Soviets achieve a higher degree of

energy independence, might that not encourage them to meddle in the Persian Gulf, which can only cause us potentially fatal problems? The point of all this, is that we need a presidential decision about the basic question, rather than a patchwork of ad hoc decisions, case by case.

Now let's go back to the *Globe*. What is the overall context of the editorial? Is it the strategic balance? The question of Russian energy policies? Not at all; it's the NSC-State conflict. For the *Globe* editorial-

ists, a recent decision to withhold some high-technology items from the Russians testifies to the nincompoopery of Mr. Brzezinski. This sort of personalization of serious problems ill serves us. And I like to think that the demon in charge of typos punished the *Globe* with this memorable last line: "And that is something Roland Reagan might want to keep in mind. . . ."

New York Times *Department*: The *Times*, in its endless campaign to persuade its readers of benign Rus-

sian intentions, dropped a little box onto page 27 on the 7th of December. It's a peculiar "news story": "Does the Soviet Union's doctrine contemplate fighting, and winning, a limited nuclear war, as some Western specialists contend?" A Soviet military expert who consented to be interviewed on the subject said Moscow's doctrine did not. The Russian expert is a retired general named Milshtein, and in a long interview published in September he said that the latest Soviet doctrine, as reflected in the

thoughts of a certain Ogarkov, was not in keeping with the earlier statements of General Sokolov, who had called for a war-winning nuclear strategy. What the *Times* did not say was that Professor Richard Pipes of Harvard University had written in to advise the *Times* editorial board that Ogarkov himself, in the latest edition of the Russian Military Encyclopedia, had advocated a war-winning nuclear doctrine. All the news that's fit to print, or all the news we want to print? Boycott the *Times*. □



THE TALKIES

ROBERT REDFORD'S FEELINGS

by John Podhoretz

Lake Forest, Illinois: front lawns, stately manses, red leaves blowing prettily across beautifully paved driveways, dark Mercedes-Benzes in those driveways. The sound of Pachelbel's Canon in D, first on a piano, then sung by a chorus in fine voice. Close-up on a nervous boy's face in the chorus, singing: Hallelujah. With this, dear readers, we enter into the country of *Ordinary People*, a country of WASPs and their \$500,000 houses, their very attractive wives and very tall husbands. But there is hidden tragedy here, tragedy we can see clearly on that nervous boy's face. Conrad Jarrett (for such is the boy's name) can do little but sing; he has no appetite, is consumed with some mysterious guilt, has recently returned from an extended stay at some "hospital," and has odd scars on his wrists, which he covers all the time with heavy sweaters. Conrad is not a well fellow.

There is another problem in the Jarrett household: Conrad's mother, Beth, who is unable to talk to her son, and who seems to harbor some sort of hatred for him. She mildly tosses into a noisy garbage disposal a couple of pieces of French toast which Conrad says he does not feel like eating. She does not want him to see Dr. Berger, his kindly Jewish psychiatrist. She is short-tempered and unfriendly with her son. She nearly has a fit when she learns that Conrad has dropped off the high-school swim team.

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Her husband, Conrad's father Calvin, is a milquetoast—albeit a highly successful milquetoast. He seems to love his son, but cannot talk to him any more than his wife can, even though *he* tries. He does not know whose side to take in mother-son fights. He knows there is an evil pawing at his family, but cannot say what it is, or will not say. He repeatedly says he loves his wife, loves his son, but cannot satisfy either.

What is the tragedy that has occurred? It turns out that Bucky, Conrad's older brother, died in a boating accident about a year before the movie's action begins. Bucky, we learn, is the child Beth really loved, and she has blamed Conrad ever since for his brother's death (Conrad was with Bucky when the accident took place). Conrad, too, feels guilty—so guilty, in fact, that he attempted to commit suicide a little while after his brother's death, and was then himself committed to a psychiatric hospital. Upon his return home, he is fine on the outside, but on the inside what sinister self-immolating forces are at work we can only guess. Dr. Berger, Conrad's psychiatrist, tells him to feel, feel, feel ("I don't put much stock in dreams," he tells Conrad in the manner of a borscht-belt comic, as if spending precious time on dreams would distract the patient from the true issue, that of feeling), but Conrad is unable to express those feelings, even when his mother tells him she wishes he had died instead of Bucky. Clearly, all's not right with

these three ordinary people, and anxiously we await the murder of Beth, or the suicide of Conrad, or both.

Ordinary People is the first film to be directed by Robert Redford, America's reigning movie star and the WASP golden boy of every teenage girl's dreams. What Redford and his scenarist, Alvin Sargent (author of two of the most abhorrent films of the 1970s, *Bobby Deerfield*, and *Julia*, for which he won an Oscar) have fashioned out of Judith Guest's best-selling novel is as blatant a story of good (Conrad and, to a lesser extent, Calvin) and evil (Beth) as that silent film classic, *The Perils of Pauline*, in which the villain tied beautiful Pauline to the railroad tracks. They have Freudized it up (in a flashback, Beth touches Bucky in an odd, suggestive way), they have made it elegant by setting it in the homes of the wealthy, and have made it more "sophisticated" by adding pointed touches of social commentary (a cocktail party sequence, in which the talk is all of stock-market figures and portfolios, presents us with many, many Beths, all of them most assuredly doing to their children what Beth is doing to hers, and not a one of them is interested in a single vital issue such as Redford's favorite, solar energy). But still the movie comes out melodrama.

And a particularly virulent piece of melodrama it is. For the issue here is not love scorned, as it was in its predecessor, *The Perils of Pauline*,

but is a mother's hatred of her child—an ugly and almost unbelievable subject at best. Beth never went to see Conrad all those months when he was in the hospital, Beth wishes Conrad dead, Beth cannot even bear to pose for a family photograph with Conrad. She stiffens and gazes straight ahead in astonishment when, under Dr. Berger's guidance, Conrad hugs his mother, trying to love her for what she is. Beth is pure evil, but Conrad is a saint, in no way at all to blame for his brother's death, holding his difficulties in so as not to trouble anyone, even giving his mother all the benefit of the doubt that the monster does not deserve. What will save Conrad? Simple: Beth's death, or better yet, her spiritual death, her banishment from the house she loves and from the secure life she has so long struggled for. And this is precisely what happens: Calvin, after 21 years of marriage, finally discovers that his wife is "not a feeling person," tells her this, and so away she goes in a taxi while Calvin and Conrad hug each other on the back patio, saying "I love you."

The praise the movie has received (four stars from those critics who award stars, raves from everyone else with the honorable exception of Pauline Kael, in the *New Yorker*) is the easily anticipated praise that any actor receives if he makes a suitably artsy, and politically correct, debut as a director. Redford has done both. There is no music in the film, a sure