
EDITORIALS



HOODWINKED

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

Across the Great Republic our noble politicians have now auspicated their off-year elections, and on one matter both sides agree: this election lacks a national theme. In 1982 the Democrats made the economy the national theme, and the Republicans lost twenty-six seats. Now there is no theme, and according to Mr. Joseph Gaylord, executive director of the National Republican Congressional Committee, "that helps." He and many of his colleagues are relieved that only a dozen or so Republican members of the House of Representatives are expected to perish in the voting booths. In comparable off-year elections as many as forty-eight representatives from the President's party have bitten the dust. Thus this themeless election pleases many Republicans. They are apparently unaware that the comparable off-year elections of 1966 and 1974 were dominated by war and Watergate. By contrast, Ronald Reagan's six years in office have been a success. His opponents are bankrupt;

Adapted from RET's weekly Washington Post column syndicated by King Features.

they offer no plausible alternatives.

Once again Republicans have been hoodwinked by their crafty opposition. There are two themes available this election. The first is the success of Reagan conservatism. The second is the Democrats' disunity and lack of alternatives. If, owing to their timidity, the Republicans do not capitalize on their success and lose the Senate, their President will be forced to battle both houses on the budget, foreign policy, and judicial appointments. Suddenly the Democrats' amazing truculence—displayed most recently over the Rehnquist appointment—will confuse and envenom every presidential initiative. Dozens of false issues will destroy the relative tranquillity of the present. The new political era that Ronald Reagan's conservatism and the liberals' futile radicalism have ushered in will be endangered.

In the art of politics, misstatement is an essential skill. Over the years the masters of misstatement have with admirable regularity been Democrats. Six years into the most successful presidency of modern times the Demo-

crats preemptively declare that no national theme exists, and the credulous Republicans acquiesce. The Democrats attribute the success of Ronald Reagan, whom they scorned as a has-been and a clod as recently as 1979, to a sudden burst of charm acquired at age 70, and the Republicans agree. They even agree with the dubious Democratic claim that though Ronald Reagan is admired his policies are loathed. How often has a politician been elected by ever larger margins though his policies be loathed? Do the Republicans agree with the Democrats that what the American people really want are higher taxes, more inflation, more government regulation, a feeble defense—in fine, all the miseries bequeathed them by that Carter Administration of unwelcome memory?

By and large, Democrats are simply better campaigners than the Republicans, not only because of their mastery of misstatement but also because, unlike the Republicans, the Democrats relish a campaign. Their campaigns never end. They are always in search of some new babies to kiss, some new constituency to embrace. In recent years they have actually dreamed up a few constituencies, for instance the handicapped and homosexuals.

Even at their national conventions, with all the diverse and embittered special pleaders assembled, the Democrats transform what could be a gruesome session into a grand old time. Even behind such fated candidates as 1972's McGovern and 1984's Mondale they depart the convention full of fire and vows to slay the dastardly Republicans. Given their futile policies and the number of cranks among them, the Democrats do surprisingly well. By contrast, Republican campaigns are tedious, their conventions soporific. At the Republicans' last national convention the only speaker who evoked memorable whoops was Jeane Kirkpatrick, a lapsed Democrat.

And so once again the Republicans are unhappily out there on the campaign trail, the Democrats having hoodwinked them into believing that they have nothing to say. If they lose the Senate, however, it will not be because the Democrats had more attractive alternatives but because the Republicans did not stir up the electorate. Republicans will not be defeated by superior policies but by Democratic cleverness and by voter indifference. Then what could have been an era of Republican dominance will end with Ronald Reagan. □



THE FALL SEASON

Henceforth the American Broadcasting Corporation, or ABC, as it is called, shall be known as the Network of Conscience. This fall it joins with the Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS, in a vast campaign to smite illiteracy, particularly adult illiteracy, in America, a nation whose benightedness has increased with each additional educational dollar that the government spends. The campaign has been named Project Literacy U.S., or PLUS, and its pollens blow even now through ABC's "World News Tonight," "This Week With David Brinkley," "20/20," "Nightline," "Good Morning America," and more.

It does seem curious for a network

suddenly to manifest such solicitude for the printed word. Most viewers need hardly any language skills to roost gleefully in ABC's audience. In fact, the more literate one is the less likely he is to be in ABC's audience, save to throw an occasional spitball or to have a rude laugh. Television's defenders boast of how, with its high tech wizardry, television is an enormous advance over those gray pages that bring information so slowly and arduously to readers. Scholars, of course, have harvested fields of data proving television's unwelcome influence on the national mind. It misinforms, lowers artistic standards, and diverts viewers from reading things they really ought

to read. Recently, a study from the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrated that television often has an adverse influence on children's reading ability, an embarrassing finding that the promoters of PLUS deal with very gingerly in their promotional literature.

The precise nature of how television misinforms can be seen in the gravamen of ABC's literacy campaign. Here the illiterate is presented as a victim of American society, a consequence of insufficient government spending. Illiteracy is, says one of the project's barkers, "the hidden disease that threatens the well-being of the country." Once again, TV sends reality down to the makeup room, and when it emerges it has been transformed into gaudy fantasy, all for an improved Nielsen rating.

Actually, illiteracy in America is a complicated matter. Both the Department of Education and the Census Bureau place illiteracy at 13-14 percent of the adult population, but this tells us little. Nearly a third of these people are not American-born, and many do not speak English at all. Doubtless many are competent in their native tongues, and advocates of bilingual education are disinclined to rush these people into English. In many immigrant neighborhoods they get along adequately. Many have no desire to speak English. These are not victims of government retrenchment. The U.S. Department of Education spends more than \$100 million on seventy-nine adult illiteracy programs and related research.

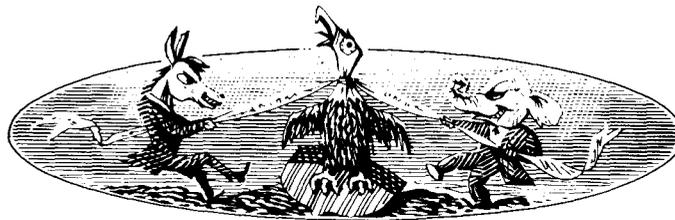
To be sure there are high school graduates entering adult life with inadequate

language skills, but 70 percent of our English-speaking illiterates never complete high school. The problem is not lack of remedial English courses for adults but that some students are not learning, and as Secretary of Education William Bennett observed in August in his report on elementary schools, this country does a rather good job of teaching students to read. Residual illiteracy in this country frequently is a consequence of inadequate motivation, and aside from coercion it is hard to think of any government program that can instill that motivation.

ABC's portrayal of illiterate adults as victims of failed programs is inaccurate. What is more, ABC's campaign is disingenuous. Broadcast media

have steadily diminished the importance of reading and writing. Fewer and fewer writers are welcomed into media to talk intelligently on serious matters. The venerable educator Jacques Barzun deplores the discontinuation, years ago, of media programs that stressed literacy and learning. Secretary Bennett challenges ABC to broadcast reading lessons before sports programs. I would be content if sports commentators would speak standard English and employ English subtitles to compensate for the defective elocution. The fact is, television is hostile to print. Its personalities recoil from mentioning books or a guest's books. How would ABC feel if one-fifth of its audience gave up an hour of daily television for an evening newspaper, a book, or a magazine? Television communicates with pictures, as did the caveman. □

C A P I T O L I D E A S



ASIA WATCH

by Tom Bethell

From the air Tokyo's outskirts looked as trim and orderly as a sunlit landscape in a child's picture book. It was a long bus ride into the city, past compact, economical pastures. To our left a Disneyland castle, then onto an elevated motorway, and so into the center of the awesome metropolis, spread out around us for miles like a gigantic Swiss watch. Office buildings teemed with toilers after 6 p.m. At the Tokyo Hilton we were greeted by deeply bowing kimono'd figures. Marion Magid said that Tokyo made New York seem like Calcutta.

Growing up I used to think that London was the big city of the world (having been born there). So I continued to believe until I arrived in New York in 1962. Now, as a group of us drove by taxi through the center of Tokyo, it dawned on me that this was the new New York, the world's leading city. I retained this impression over the next three days.

It's hard to say what provokes such emotional judgments. In Tokyo's case it had something to do with a sense of order, almost a tranquillity, pervading this immense industriousness. Such a

Tom Bethell is The American Spectator's Washington correspondent.

sense of order probably can only be felt when a country is at its peak, as one guesses must be the case with Japan today. Everyone seemed to be well dressed. The children in their straw bonnets seemed to echo an earlier and better time in the West. The Japanese will no doubt look back on this as their golden age.

As in Korea, the sense of a huge, middle class moving forward in unison was overwhelming. How long they can keep it up is open to question. If they take a wrong turn the whole country will tend to take it in lockstep. One senses the possibility that the Japanese could lose heart for some unpredictable reason. For one thing they have almost slavishly imitated so many things American. It's as though their national ambition is to outproduce us, and now that they have (I guess) succeeded in doing so, they may pause to wonder, fatally, what the point was. Then again, it occurred to me they just might go ahead and build SDI without waiting for us. That would give them something to do.

At the U.S. Embassy we were addressed by Ambassador Mike Mansfield, who spoke to us from behind a desk, like an old Presbyterian Sunday school teacher. He recited statistics

from memory, but his wisdom was of the conventional kind. Our \$50 billion-a-year trade deficit with Japan was "intolerable," he said. Why this should be I don't know. They send us cars and television sets and we send them pieces of paper manufactured at the Bureau of Engraving & Printing (called dollars). Why is this a bad deal for us?

Prices in Tokyo were a shock—buying anything at all made one feel like a rube in the big city for the first time. A newsstand offered a three-day-old *New York Times* for \$8. Next I saved \$5 by not buying a cup of coffee. I went to a very good record store, called Wave, in Roppongi, where they had American jazz records not available at any U.S. record store. Evidently they had also bought up stocks of records available in American stores in the fifties and sixties and were now selling them for \$50 each.

We must move on hurriedly to Peking. At the Sheraton Great Wall the *China Daily* was slipped under our hotel doors. It had stock market news ("Gold, Platinum Prices Soar on World Marts"), cricket scores, and no anti-American stories whatsoever as far as I could see; a big contrast to the

Japanese English-language papers.

There was a big Kodak ad in Tiananmen Square, where the masses used to mobilize at Mao's bidding, and many smaller ads on Democracy Wall. There's not much to Peking—no "there" there. Off the main roads were miserable miles of hovels hidden in the bushes. But there were lots of construction cranes in place, some of them working. The Chinese we met seemed to be pro-American, and Peking itself seemed far less repressive than Moscow. It is almost certainly the Chinese city where the Communist Party has retained greatest control, yet even here the sense of movement was to me palpable. It was also moving to see these poor people whose talents have been suppressed for so long but whose time of release may now be at hand.

We had fierce disputes about the future of China. "China is a big nothing!" said Arnold Beichman, the leader of the once-Leninist, always-Leninist faction—resolutely opposed to sentimental optimism about China.

But Alvin Rabushka of the Hoover Institution expressed a cautious optimism. →