
EDITORIALS



STUPEFYING IMBECILES

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

Washington

One of the many unpardonable offenses that one can commit in this enlightened and progressive city is to quote the utterances of one's fellow journalists after a sufficient amount of time has elapsed to expose their flumm-diddle in all its stupefying imbecility. The colleagues do not like to be reminded. Yet with regard to the many portentous pronouncements they have handed down on Ronald Reagan's tenancy in the White House, surely the pundits will not mind being quoted. They have been reiterating their charges against him with unusual regularity for eight years.

In fact, two of the few constants of the Reagan years have been spreading peace and prosperity accompanied by the pundits' judgments that Ronald Reagan was imperiling peace and prosperity. Now, as the most popular President since FDR leaves office, the majority of pundits in print and across the airwaves drone on, sounding pretty much as they did in 1980 when they pronounced Reagan injurious to civilization.

Off to his retirement the oldest President in American history goes, and columnist Pete Hamill once again sounds the shocking litany: "Now we will have to pay for Reagan's party," he moans in the *New York Post*, "learning to live as the world's leading debtor nation. We will have to acknowledge the wan-

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

ing of our economic power, as the true engine [sic] of the world shifts to Tokyo and the rest of Asia. The mayhem of the drug gangs will get worse. The ghastly army of the homeless will recruit many more troops. And Reagan will live out his days, surrounded by the California rich, basking smugly in public affection. . . . This is some country." Earlier in this column Dr. Hamill relied on another line that has been a stock canard with his kind for eight years: "To the very end, Reagan was only an actor, a man schooled in the craft of counterfeiting eloquence, emotion and toughness." Well, if you can charge a man who so valiantly endured a bullet to the chest with "counterfeiting toughness," you can utter any absurdity. This the Reagan-haters have been doing through the tedious years as they grow ever more honored, more repetitive, and apparently more gaga.

In its 1980 endorsement of Jimmy Carter the *New York Times* wrote: "What concerns us about Ronald Reagan is the depth and texture of his political values. . . . He seems genuinely to believe that the vain pursuit of arms superiority will bring the Russians begging to the bargaining table." *Times* columnist Tom Wicker warned of a Reagan Administration "that threatens a heightened arms race and a retreat from hard-won liberal achievements." Anthony Lewis's contribution to the monotony was that Reagan "seems likely to accelerate the nuclear arms

race. He might strain the relationship with Peking to the point where the Chinese would reconsider their attitude toward the Soviets."

By the fall of 1981 the chorus had gained another somber theme or two. Columnist John B. Oakes explained, again in the *Times*, that Reagan was presiding over a "harshly reactionary revolution" that "substituted a mindless militarism for a foreign policy." Much of Reagan's arms budget "will be dissipated in the self-defeating spiral of an open-ended nuclear-arms race that poses a greater threat to our internal and external security than all the Communist propaganda . . . from Moscow." In 1982, at the threshold of one of America's longest, most comprehensive periods of prosperity, Wicker pronounced the Reagan tax reduction bill "a solid, ringing failure." As to its capacity to produce recovery, "it's self-evident that it hasn't and won't." Two months earlier Lewis was

groaning, "If the economic folly of the Reagan Administration goes on . . . the price will be terrible," and he approvingly repeated Kevin Phillips's prediction that "Reaganism will be followed by authoritarian right-wing populism." Carl Rowan concluded that the Reagan Administration was "destroying" hope "for millions of poor and middle-class Americans."

With the October 1987 stock collapse, the chorus ignored the essential soundness of the economy and sang, "The binge is over"—economist Robert Reich; "The age of Reagan is over now, no matter what happens"—Dr. Lewis; "This debacle marks the last chapter of Reaganomics"—John Kenneth Galbraith. In its summation of the Reagan presidency *Time* magazine now runs the headline "Going Home a Winner," but the subheadline is "Reagan's bread-and-circuses strategy will mar his place in history." And what of the pundits' place in history? □

NBC'S "YESTERDAY" SHOW

As an assiduous viewer of the Republic's three major morning talk shows I should like to tender a public-spirited suggestion to the producers and directors of NBC's "Today" show. The program's name no longer conveys the character of the show or the reason that viewers turn to it. Viewers do not watch it to be informed of events today but to be informed of the way things were yesterday. In the interest of accuracy I suggest that NBC rechristen this swell assemblage of all the sentiments, the prejudices, the bugaboos of the 1970s (occasionally the 1960s too) "Yesterday" with Bryant Gumbel and Jane Pauley.

I do not make this suggestion in pursuit of snickers or rude gestures at NBC's expense. The "Yesterday" show is, I know, a success. Every morning there are a million or so yuppies out there gobbling vitamins, sipping vegetable juices, prayerfully spooning their way through mounds of dis-

gusting bran, and vastly enjoying NBC's stroll down memory lane, where Presidents are always under imminent threat of impeachment and untrustworthy corporations are subverting noble Third World showcases of the socialist political science. A decade ago today's yuppies had only their idealism, their herbal soaps, their earth shoes, a loony prof as a guru, and their bumper stickers. Now they have the Reagan prosperity, their BMWs, and their bumper stickers. They have no new literature, no new wisdom, only their fat paychecks. They are the only malcontents in the history of the West to have learned nothing from their dalliances with totalitarianism and failed Utopia. Those malcontents who in the 1930s returned from abroad extolling the virtues of Stalin, Mussolini, and even Hitler occasionally confessed quite eloquently to their error. Consider Muggeridge, Orwell, or Koestler. Apart from Peter Collier and David



Horowitz, no American admirers of Castro, Ho Chi Minh, or Mao have in the 1980s admitted to being duped. Instead most of yesteryear's *enragés* have now gentled into the middle-class amenities that Reaganism provides in such abundance and kept their old prejudices intact and impenetrable. A bumper sticker finely tuned to their sentimental weirdness might be "A Brain is a Beautiful Vegetable."

Certainly the brains that govern the "Yesterday" show are beautiful vegetables. There one would never know that for the past six years American GNP has grown annually at 4 percent, that today's GNP is approximately 26 percent higher than it was

when Ronald Reagan arrived in office, that without a nuclear freeze or any of the other quack panaceas of the left Moscow is again cordial toward Washington, dismantling missiles and withdrawing from countries it overran in the days of the Carter grin. Watching the "Yesterday" show is like watching the "Today" show, say, in the spring of 1975—except for one thing: recent history has demonstrated that radicalism's infantile sneer at the American way of life is no improvement on reality.

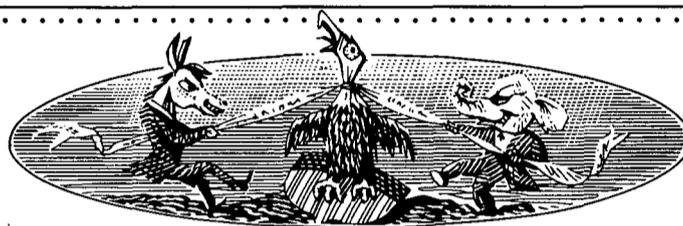
The other morning, when I tuned in, one of "Yesterday's" features was a piece on Texas whence, we were told, so many powers in the Bush Administration will be drawn. And who was our

guide to George Bush's Texas? Why, Jim Hightower, Texas's "populist" agriculture commissioner who gained fleeting fame for being one of the most florid abominators of George Bush at last summer's ill-starred Democratic Convention. Mr. Hightower boasts of his left-wing rigorism by saying things like "the only things in the middle of the road are yellow lines and dead armadillos." The Texas that Mr. Hightower showed us was more like the dustbowl of the 1930s than the Texas George Bush and his people come from. Once again NBC was not telling us about today but rather about yesterday. Mr. Hightower's explication of Texas was one unrelieved tour of misery and penury: farms fore-

closed on, huge office buildings vacant, a grizzled good old boy wheezing something about George Bush's being a wimp.

"Yesterday's" visit to Texas was a fantasy and it ended with Mr. Hightower's warning that George Bush had better "get in touch" with the people. His urgency was somewhat startling, considering that only two months ago 53 percent of the electorate were for Bush, and polls indicate that an even higher percentage of nonvoters supported him. When will "Yesterday" cover the 1980s? My guess is never. Apparently its producers are attempting to create a museum of the 1960s-1970s. It is a nostalgia broadcast. □

CAPITOL IDEAS



DEFENSELESS COWARDS

by Tom Bethell

On September 30, 1988, in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial entitled "Curious Chemistry," Air Force Chief of Staff Larry D. Welch was quoted as saying in an interview with the paper's editors: "As soon as the President announced his vision of a Strategic Defense Initiative, there was an immediate opposition to the idea. It wasn't an argument over whether SDI was technically feasible. It was an argument over whether defense is destabilizing, and I think that is an absolutely nonsensical argument. We have no defense system worthy of the name. This tremendous opposition to introducing a defensive element to the U.S. deterrent strategy has to be one of the most mysterious pieces of political chemistry we've seen."

The newspaper then editorially noted that the Reagan Administration had compromised with the "curious" sentiment that defensive missiles are immoral and offensive ones are not, thereby "perhaps compromising our national security as well." This may have been the strongest criticism directed at Reagan in his eight years in office, but no one seemed to notice it.

I write on Inauguration Day, amidst a general sense of euphoria in Washington. Bipartisan consensus has once again been restored to foreign policy,

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we are told. "The Establishment is back," a *Washington Post* editor wrote a few days ago, "not just the individuals and the pedigrees, but the state of mind." Which is what I am worried about, frankly. We are supposed to feel reassured that Andover, St. Marks, Yale, and Princeton are back in the saddle. And we are supposed to derive comfort because the left-wing senator from Maine and new Senate Majority Leader, George Mitchell, is "trying very hard to establish from our side an atmosphere of cooperation and bipartisanship."

David Ignatius, the editor of the *Washington Post's* Outlook section, noted that Secretary of State James A. Baker III was dutifully consulting with his predecessors, in a way that was reminiscent of "the best and the brightest" at the outset of John F. Kennedy's Administration. Lurking beneath the comparison with the ironically named "best and brightest," of course, was an implicit prediction of disaster ahead: Kennedy's highly qualified Ivy Leaguers soon strolled into the quagmire of Vietnam. Does a comparable fate await President Bush's team, so many of whom come from a comparable background?

What is disturbing about the present situation is not so much that the country is undefended as that it is undefended because we are afraid to defend ourselves. In an article in *Human Events*

last summer, Jon Utley, a friend of mine who lives in the Washington area, put the matter somewhat differently, but he too is disturbed. "The studied absence of any civil defense is a sin of pride of Biblical proportions. Are many Americans so arrogant as to consider a nuclear attack on us as meaning the end of civilization?"

By all accounts the Soviet economy is collapsing; Soviet troops are retreating from Afghanistan (they are all supposed to be out by February 15), having been beaten back by ragtag brigades of free-lance mujahedeens (armed, however, with the willingness to die for their cause). Still, the Soviet strategic arsenal is intact and there can be little doubt that the U.S. leadership is afraid to construct an air-defense against it. And we will not even think about civil defense for the American people.

Has anything comparable to this ever happened before—a great power so fearful of its collapsing adversary that it cannot muster the will to defend itself? "The sad fact is that few nations in history have adopted such a 'strategy' as that of the United States, purposely leaving its citizens as unprotected hostages to attack," Utley wrote. Petr Beckmann, the publisher of *Access to Energy* in Boulder, Colorado, believes that the present lack of will

among the American leadership class is more grave than it was in Neville Chamberlain's England of fifty years ago.

The predicament we are in is disguised by the existence of the misnamed Department of Defense, which spends \$300 billion annually, none of it on defense. The very large sums of money that the department disposes of every year amount largely to a form of domestic pork barrel, the money going to salaries, pensions, the maintenance of many obsolete, World War II-era bases, the subsidy of foreign governments and taxpayers, and (to be fair) the procurement of offensive weapons.

The Pentagon spends nothing on civil defense, that task having been delegated to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is housed on the campus of what was once a Catholic college in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Its budget is about \$150 million a year, part of which is dedicated to earthquake preparedness. One day recently I drove out to Emmitsburg to hear two talks on civil defense, one given by Arthur Robinson, who publishes a pro-civil defense newsletter entitled "Fighting Chance" (P.O. Box 1279, Cave Junction, Oregon, 97523). The other speaker was Justin Frank, the president of the Washington chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility. He said that when Jim-