



# The Conservative Crack-Up

*Excerpts.*

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

## ■ *Origins*

I date the Conservative Crack-Up as beginning on the afternoon of July 1, 1987, when President Ronald Reagan stepped to the microphones and with ill-considered joviality announced Robert H. Bork of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia as his nominee to replace Associate Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr. That did it. The loyal opposition was not in a very good humor to begin with. Now they went into a capital fury. Neither the President nor his fellow conservatives seemed to notice.

Possibly a future Thucydides or Gibbon will take issue with me on this date. There is a body of opinion, most recently represented by the *Washington Post's* E. J. Dionne, that holds that there were portentous fissures in conservatism from its very founding in the 1940s, when its fractious alliance of traditionalists, libertarians, and anti-Communists could put one in mind of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in its last irritable days. Other students of conservatism will date the Conservative Crack-Up from November 4, 1986, when the Republicans lost control of the Senate, or from November 12, 1986, when the Iran-Contra hullabaloo was auspicated. And perhaps others will hold that the real crack-up came during the Clarence Thomas fiasco, when the White House advised this conservative judge to conceal his ideas and principles and present himself as cleverly inane.

Nonetheless, I am sticking with July 1, 1987. The Bork hearings represented a watershed. Conservatism's time of greatest strength preceded that date, and it has been a rocky road ever since. What is more, all the conservatives'

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imperfections, as I diagnose them, could be detected in their futile maneuvers during the Bork hearings. Their response was no concerted effort comparable to the political campaign being mounted against him and later against Judge Thomas. Some conservatives were complacent. Others thought a political campaign for a Supreme Court nominee unseemly. The conservatives' political libido is only slowly roused. They form few coalitions. They reach out to others only reluctantly. Their first urge is to exclude, rarely to include, which is the first impulse of the political virtuosi. Finally, in the Bork hearings the conservatives again demonstrated a failure of the imagination that has dogged them since their early days, when they marched forth with their free market economists, their philosophers, many businessmen, some politicians, but almost no literary talent. When the opposition portrayed Judge Bork as an imperious fog, the conservatives were utterly incapable of dramatizing his well-known wit and heartiness, or of even recognizing the high drama of one man standing alone against the Senate's kangaroo court, presided over by real kangaroos.

### ■ *Conservatives and Freedom*

Enormous suffering has been occasioned in this century by political ideas and the lust for power. More so than any other century in history, the twentieth century has been dominated by politics, and political misjudgments have meant concentration camps for millions, torture and death for millions more. Anyone who cares for freedom is obligated to defend it, and so during the last third of this century I have fallen in with some of the major participants in the era's political debates. My associates were for the most part conservatives, for I have found them to be freedom's most reliable defenders.

### ■ *Poseurs*

I can remember spending many happy times observing the arrivals and departures of college boys with monocles, walking sticks, capes. They always livened up receptions and dinners, to say nothing of seminars and street demonstrations. I remember one fellow whom I found particularly amusing. He was an inveterate user of snuff, which he delicately picked from ornate little boxes and jammed into his soiled nostrils, whereupon he would sneeze uncontrollably into a filthy handkerchief. I dreaded his presence at dinner parties and prayed that he would be seated next to some hypochondriac other than me. There were libertarians with huge bronze dollar-sign medallions hanging from their necks and dozens, possibly hundreds, of pretentious Anglophiles imitating Winston Churchill. Occasionally one encountered an epigonous Lord Byron. I cannot actually report having spotted a young squire wearing a powdered wig, but doubtless there will come a day. Every few years a new conservative prodigy would pop up and be the honored guest at a conservative assemblage, then he would disappear, never to be seen again. It happened all the time. I

could never understand their rise, so I could never understand their fall.

### ■ *The Irrefutable Stopwatch*

A background in sports is a splendid corrective for the delusions of politics and *la vie intellectuelle*, two areas of human endeavor that can revolve wholly upon fraud. An athlete cannot dupe a stopwatch. In politics and in the life of the mind one can go far on a honeyed tongue and plastic principles. Sufficiently blessed with guile, a politico or an intellectual can avoid the truth for a very long time; some of the greats have been able to drive out the truth altogether. But in sport one's efforts are submitted to a final arbiter—the stopwatch, the finish line, the left hook to the jaw—the judgments of which are pretty much indisputable.

In the early 1960s, when the conservative movement was taking shape, I was swimming six or more miles a day on a legendary athletic team, an Indiana University swimming team that held three-quarters to four-fifths of all world records in men's swimming. No Olympic team in the world was superior to our college team; and there were years in the 1960s and early 1970s when all the world's Olympic teams combined could not beat us in a dual meet. I entered the conservative movement from an athletic background in which I had never been on a team (not even a high school team) that had lost a championship or even a dual meet. On those teams all of us were accustomed to training and to winning; and we all knew precisely where we stood in national and world standings—again, thanks to the irrefutable message of the stopwatch.

The members of the conservative movement whom I came to know were frequently hard-working, and many were keen competitors, but they were usually appalling fatalists. They did not expect to win. Possibly this was because they had lost so often to the century's waves of reformers or because totalitarianism was on the march and appeared so formidable or because many of their founding evangelists, such as Albert Jay Nock and Richard Weaver, actually scorned politics. Whatever the reason, many were afflicted with an obstinate fatalism. They had a soft spot for the defeatist themes of Whittaker Chambers, the drift of which Russell Kirk imparts when he laments: "I am a conservative. Quite possibly I am on the losing side; often I think so. Yet out of a curious perversity I had rather lose with Socrates, let us say, than win with Lenin."

Well, the hell with that!

### ■ *Sidney Hook and God*

In the 1960s, the New Left had provoked hostility on the left itself, and from that quarter we got some of our most effective allies. These were the antiradical socialists led by a man who became a major influence on my antiradical compatriots, Professor Sidney Hook, the most competent polemicist of his generation. Sidney taught philosophy at

New York University, where he had propounded the ideas of John Dewey, carrying on battles against those whom he perceived as enemies of enlightenment, progress, and democracy. I took a summer class from him in 1969 and left convinced that, though the snobbery of H. L. Mencken & George Jean Nathan was great fun, liberty, democracy, intelligent debate, and academic excellence as advocated by Hook were to be the fundamental values of *The American Spectator*. On religion Sidney's views were less rooted in Western tradition. He was a confirmed atheist, convinced his destination was a compost heap. Reason told him so.

Despite his ardor for combat and the high seriousness of his thought, he was a man of endless generosity and kindness. He also had a proper capacity for comedy and contributed to some of the most ribald departments of *The American Spectator*. Late in his long life and after a pleasant supper with the Irving Kristols, we were exiting through the lobby of the New York Athletic Club. Gesticulating in his usual vigorous manner, Sidney was fondly recalling those battles that had been fought with *The American Spectator* as his ally. Many *American Spectator* writers had been his students and many more his disciples. A rapture of gratitude for the life he had led overcame him and, swelling with warm memories, the old atheist looked heavenward, palms upturned, and exclaimed: "Sometimes I'd like to look up and thank G-G-G . . . but"—and he shook his old head in amusement—"I can't.

The evidence, there's just not the evidence." And off we lurched. Supplied with the evidence from Yahweh, what a great rabbi Sidney would have been; but what a great man he already was.

### ■ Murray Kempton and the Kultursmog

Etched sharply into my memory is a debate in which three participants and a hostile upper-crust Manhattan audience had at me for an hour or so, after which one of the debaters, that master of garbagespiel Murray Kempton, charged me with dishonoring Mencken's legacy by being—get this—a "conformist." Think of it, with the entire audience against me, all other debaters onstage in superlative dudgeon over my every expressed thought, Kempton still calls *me* the "conformist"! I reminded Murray that at university debates, at egghead talk shows, wherever intellectuals gathered, I

was always outnumbered, but to no avail. In the New Age neither words nor simple mathematical computations conveyed meaning.

The conservative movement was not only the Republic's underdog movement, it was also the least celebrated of movements. In the 1960s and early 1970s it received nothing comparable to the publicity attending the antiwar movement, the youth movement, or the gruesome feminist movement. And yet only the conservative movement was to attract enough support from the citizenry to capture the White House. Perhaps I should be a big enough person to let this last point pass unremarked. Perhaps it is mean and uncharacteristically divisive of me to remind the reader that, while the mandarins of the *Kultursmog* celebrated every left-wing movement coming out of the 1960s, only the con-

servative movement was gaining a national following sufficient to capture the White House in the 1980s. But if this is a petty point, let me make a larger one. The daily news that is warmed up and seasoned by the chefs of American journalism is frequently not the significant news of the day. In the decades since the 1960s, the journalists have often passed over the truly significant while hyping the trivial, and transmuting piffles into towering calamities.

### ■ Conservative Party

When in June of 1978 Governor Reagan's aide, Peter Hannaford, asked me to host a dinner party at which the candidate might be introduced to leading neoconservatives, I flew to

New York and put together a soiree at the Union League Club. . . . The Podhoretzes and the Glazers joined the Reagans in the walnut-panelled fastness of a private dining room. Nat Glazer, shifting characteristically from foot to foot like a bespectacled jazz man, fell into a highly cerebral discussion of subway graffiti with the former governor. Nat, formerly on the faculty at Berkeley, now on the faculty at Harvard, had recently pondered graffiti's sociological significance in an essay in the *Public Interest*. Reagan followed his elucidations pensively as all good pols should when intent on seduction, and, if I recall correctly, threw in his own observations on fugitive art. Then he laid siege to the Podhoretzes, admiring an essay or two that had been brought to his attention. The drinks flowed, the blarney proliferated, and the Podhoretzes' residue of Liberal haughtiness for Reagan was greatly reduced by the time we exited into the Manhattan night.



Through the evening I had stayed glued to Nancy. What immensities passed between us I cannot now retrieve from memory's dark hole. I do recall that when the room's air conditioning went berserk the gallant within me arose and covered her shivering shoulders with my blazer. In fashion this look of full shoulders and ample sleeves came to be known as the "puffed sleeves look." It became the rage of 1981 once that singularly exquisite designer, Carolina Herrera, drew attention to its beauty. The look was perfect for Nancy, giving her a stately bearing to offset the slight skittishness that occasionally glinted from her large and beautiful eyes. (We have heard *ad nauseam* about the skittishness, why not more about those eyes?) Is it possible that she too noticed the full shoulders and flowing sleeves, and passed a recommendation on to Carolina? If so, someday history will credit me with having extended the influence of neoconservatism beyond the circles of policy analysts and into a power center that no neoconservative had ever perceived or analyzed, to wit, the province of high couture, wherein at that very moment dwelt some of the geniuses destined to be the giants of American public life in the 1980s.

### ■ A Café Intellectual

On September 22, 1982, I awoke in the Hay Adams Hotel and prepared to lead representatives from *Commentary*, *National Review*, *Policy Review*, and the *Public Interest* into a luncheon with the President. Later we hoped to broaden the group to include *Human Events* and other responsible conservative journals. Irving Kristol was our veteran luncher. A decade before, his luncheon companions had included the likes of President Richard Nixon, and so effectively did he lunch in those days that his influence in the Nixon White House spread despite his presidential endorsement of Hubert Humphrey. In fact, when Pat Moynihan left the Nixon White House to become ambassador to India, Irving was in the running to replace Pat as the President's chief adviser on domestic policy. Now Irving would become a White House presence to the benefit of the conservative revolution, or so I believed.

Unfortunately this was not intellectual New York in 1969. This was political Washington in the 1980s, and the Country Club Republicans were on the alert. None believed that we were there merely for lunch or to establish some-

thing so vague as an informal relationship with our friend, the President. It was a drive for power, a *coup de main* against them, and the President seemed to be leaning our way! The most insecure of the assistant presidents, which is to say the most inveterate schemers, had been politely telephoning me for a week to reassure me that each was a genuine conservative and a faithful reader of *The American Spectator*. One, Richard Darman, had caught me just as I was leaving the hotel to pledge that he was not only an admirer but also an "intellectual"—yes, an intellectual!—and he assured me that the *Public Interest's* executive editor, Mark Lilla, would vouch for him. "Stop by the office after lunch for coffee," he insisted. Espresso? Cappuccino? What do such intellectuals drink in the early afternoon?



### ■ No Conservative Heroes

Mention to a Liberal one of his embalmed and sanctified heroes, or, better still, one of his many imagined villains, and he will gabble on inveterately, according to the party line of the moment. Do the same with a conservative and there is comparative stillness. Conservatives are not even very long-winded in execrating their enemies, contrary to all the Liberals' myths about conservatives' hate campaigns. It is not that conservatives are restrained by high principle or that their dispositions are mild; many are excellent haters. But, unlike Liberals, most conservatives keep their hates to themselves; they simply are not very commu-

nicaive. Some are almost nonverbal, for instance, many conservative businessmen.

### ■ Ins and Outs

At some point in the spring of 1981 I got a call from Peter Rusthoven, associate counsel to the president. If ever there was a fellow who could say "I got my job through *The American Spectator*" it was Peter. While at Harvard Law School he had written our public policy column at the recommendation of Professor Pat Moynihan, then an unofficial *Spectator* adviser. A Hoosier by birth, Peter took his law degree back to Indianapolis, where he practiced the forensic arts and continued writing a very competent series of pieces on public policy for us. Reagan's adviser on the 1980 campaign, Peter Hannaford, read them and commissioned a memo from Rusthoven that became a prominent ingredient

in the Republican presidential nominee's acceptance speech. Eventually Rusthoven joined the office of White House Counsel Fred Fielding, and now my former *Spectator* colleague was on the telephone.

He asked that I cease and desist from claiming the President as a reader of the magazine. In the magazine's house advertisement, which listed famous subscribers, we regularly reproduced a photograph of Ronald Reagan's old address label from his Pacific Palisades residence. There were, Rusthoven said, complaints from the public. The ad was neither illegal nor in dubious taste, but some in the White House wanted to avoid controversy over the President's conservative ties. I acceded, but here I was allowing low prejudice to marginalize Ronald Reagan's conservative friends. The *Washington Post* had just described *The American Spectator* as Washington's new "in" magazine, but some in the White House wanted us out. I was innocent enough to go along, but once the fainthearted in the White House had distanced the Administration from us, what other magazine would authoritatively defend the Reagan Administration when it deserved defending?

### ■ Walter Annenberg's *Half Measures*

Returning from his stint as ambassador to the Court of St. James's, Walter Annenberg decided to pitch a few pennies from his vast fortune into an attack on the *Kultursmog*. He began to set up a periodical like *The American Spectator* under a different name and format, a biweekly titled *American Views*—an intellectual review similar to those he found in London. He brought in a fine editor and rerouted some of the best conservative writers into his pages. The higher rates he could pay to his writers made me and other conservative editors fear that we would be abandoned as both our writers and readers swarmed to *American Views*. I think it took two years, but eventually Annenberg lost interest. After blowing several million he folded his right-minded endeavor and returned to that perverse bourgeois custom of bequeathing great wealth to those who oppose its creation—that is to say, to institutions awash in the *Kultursmog*. Never again did he show any interest in the creation of a two-party media or in William Simon's salutary vision of a conservative counter-culture.

### ■ *Paleos*

Most of the fuddy-duddies who came to be referred to as paleoconservatives were notable flops in the Reagan Administration. Government was not for them—at least not the government of the United States, at least not in this century.

Most of the paleos were thoroughly dominated by the conservative temperament, so much so that they were prisoners of their private musings. A government fit for their participation would be one suspended somewhere in the vapors of yesteryear, far away in old Europe in a time when government ministers wore powdered wigs, tucked dainty handkerchiefs up silken sleeves, and walked with elegant walking sticks. Yet many of the paleos were hopeless incompetents, and frankly I cannot see them as effective politicians even in the baroque world of their dreams. Were they to don powdered wigs, my guess is that the powder would make them sneeze. The walking sticks would keep getting caught between their legs. They would insist on wearing their monocles in an offended King's presence or on smoking their water pipes in the court's non-smoking section. In the early days of the Reagan Administration, when a paleo of some academic distinction failed to get a prized presidential appointment, he called a distinguished conservative at the Heritage Foundation who had opposed him and challenged the amazed man to a duel. I shall mention no names, but had the duel come off, the paleoconservative in question might well have blasted a hole in his silk slipper.

When I took up with the conservative movement in the 1960s I noticed these quaint figures tottering around, boasting of their arcane insights and of the esoteric tracts they read. Some of the tracts were illuminating, but others were perfectly balmy. For years I wondered about those who read them and prescribed them so ardently. Were they geniuses? They claimed an enormous appetite for intellect, but many of the things that they got most intensely intellectual about were not for me: the history of the briar pipe, the source of Winston Churchill's bow ties, books by someone by the name of Tolkien, science fiction. The political challenges of the 1980s answered my questions about them. Many were simply not very bright and those who were had no political judgment. The dim ones among them were like dim ones everywhere



in modern America. They had been educated beyond their means; and, adrift in their hollow pedantry, they could recognize neither superior intelligence nor their own limitations. These poor fish composed the reactionary wing of the conservative movement that was so frequently pointed to by supposedly alarmed Liberals. They amounted to a very small percentage of the early conservatives and that percentage steadily diminished as the movement grew. There never was any reason for the Liberals' alarm. The reactionaries never could drag us back into another century, not even when aided by one of Professor Schlesinger's mad cyclical swings,

### ■ Write Reason

A facility with words is as essential to a political culture as it is to any social undertaking. Stories must be told, slogans devised, legends promulgated. Yet in researching the early years of the conservative movement I came across an amazing and intriguing datum. Seated round the campfires, planning the great revolt against Liberalism, there were economists, philosophers, businessmen, politicians, and even a few social scientists. Possibly there was a gastroenterologist and a showgirl, but there was only one distinguished writer. That was John Dos Passos. No poet, playwright, or novelist of distinction was sufficiently ideological or political to commit to *National Review* or *Modern Age* or any of the political organizations of the nascent conservative movement. Not that there were not plenty of distinguished writers in the Republic addressing conservative themes. William Faulkner was at work, as were the poets Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, but of the serious litterateurs only Dos Passos became active in the conservative movement.

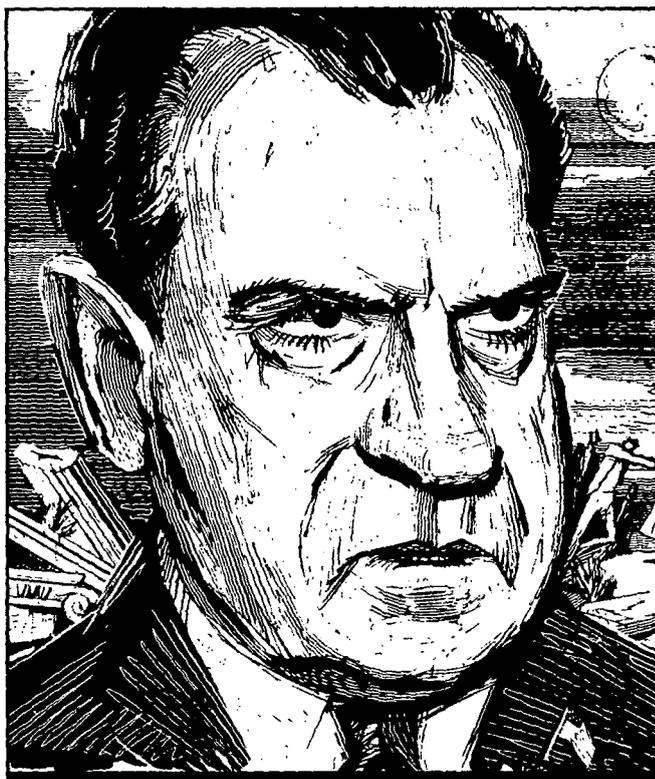
The absence of a literary sensibility among the conservatives abetted their proclivity for narrowness, for it shut them off from imagination and the capacity to dramatize ideas and personalities. To be sure, an economist of Milton Friedman's intellect is likely to have an active imagination, but even an imaginative man like Milton would have to spend years channeling his imagination away from chill economic statistics and towards prose and oratory were he to become as politically effective as, say, Senator Eugene McCarthy. Equipped with very few assets beyond an urge to power and a gift for words, McCarthy launched a successful challenge

to an incumbent president. In his 1968 presidential campaign he demonstrated what Adlai Stevenson and other political songsters had demonstrated before, to wit, that a literary sensibility can vastly assist the pol in his need to communicate.

### ■ Richard Nixon and the October Surprise

The only glimmer I ever caught of the RN that prowled through Liberal nightmares came while we were riding along the East River Drive in the back of his ancient armored limousine. He was silently peering out on a bleak expanse of the river. We were on the last laps of the 1980 election. Republicans were in a sweat over reports of an impending hostage swap between Jimmy Carter and the Ayatollah.

At any rate, on the eve of the 1980 election Carter was obviously pursuing a deal. It was in the headlines, and I naturally asked RN what he would do were he President. "Cut a deal," he replied impassively. I objected, and sought further explanation. An impatient RN turned to me and repeated: "You cut a deal," and looking back towards the river he added, "... and then you screw 'em." When I asked how, the former President's impatience enlarged into exasperation: "There are a million ways to screw 'em," he said. "Tell them the deal is tied up on Capitol Hill. Tell them the material is lost in the pipeline."



### ■ A Political Zoo

The political zoologist speaks of the Liberal impulse and with good reason. We see its manifestations everywhere: reforms heaved up; reforms abominated, thence reforms reformed; protests and boycotts in bucolic Bull Snort, Georgia; wars fought against poverty, against war, against smoking in public places, against fur coats. Is there a comparable conservative impulse? No. In fact at times there is no pulse at all. Conservatism is not the opposite of Liberalism. It is not of the same genus or species. If this comes to you as a revelation, remember that the march of science abounds with unanticipated discoveries. Scientists have found that the tomato is not a vegetable but a fruit, the dolphin is not a fish but a mammal, the koala bear is not a bear but a marsupial, and the brain of a teenager is not a brain but a gland. Conservatism is not an ideology. □

Peter Collier

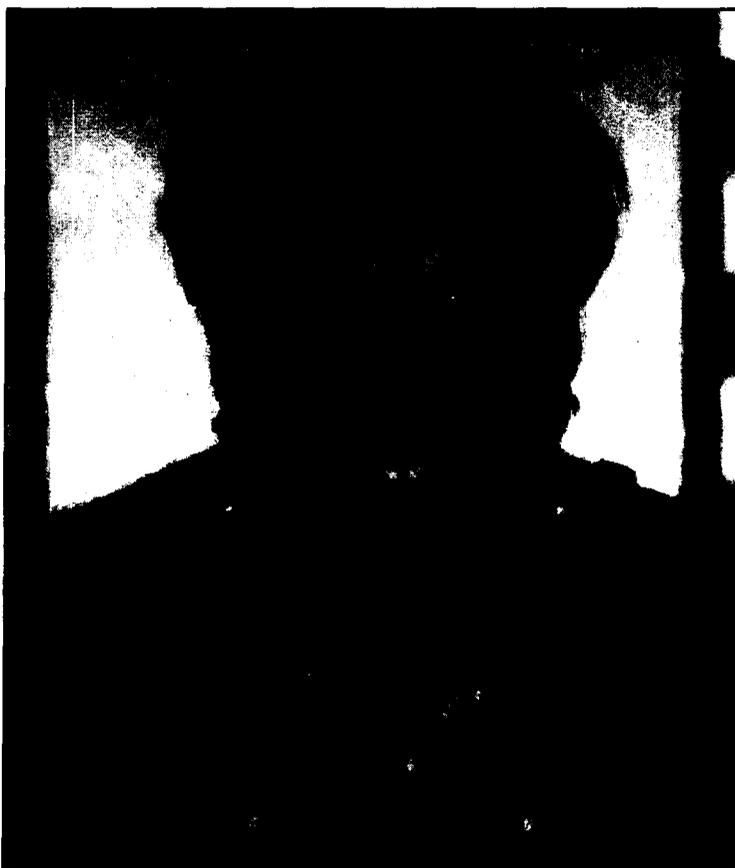
# Ollie über Alles

*Oliver Stone's triumph of the will.*

**T**he summary moment in *JFK* comes when Kevin Costner, as Jim Garrison, addresses the jury in a closing argument that the former New Orleans district attorney never actually gave. In a last effort to knit together the wild and woolly threads of his conspiracy theory, Costner finally concludes his feverish speech, drops his voice for effect, and then says of the system that has produced this assassination: "You call it for what it is—fascism!"

One wonders if those who have decorated *JFK* with Golden Globes, Directors' Guild awards, and six Oscar nominations realize that beneath the varied surfaces of Oliver Stone's films there has always been a single obsessive theme, repeated with jackhammer insistence: America is evil, sick beyond recovery and decadent beyond redemption. In *Scarface*, America is the mound of cocaine into which the vicious Cuban gangster buries his face. In *Salvador*, America is the death squad that stalks the Third World. The homi-

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cidal sergeant in *Platoon* is one of Stone's versions of Uncle Sam; another is the rapacious capitalist in *Wall Street*. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, America paralyzes youth and promise; in *The Doors*, it kills the alternative lifestyles that promise a way out of the dead end.

Fascism has always been the charge implicit in Stone's work, although until now it has been the word that dare not speak its name. In *JFK* he finally musters the courage. The movie is only superficially about the death of a President. Its real subject is the fascist state we have been

living in for the last twenty-eight years. (One suspects that Stone exempts the period between 1945 and 1963 only out of dramatic necessity.) Stone's America is a clockwork nightmare state operating flawlessly on behalf of an invisible junta. It is a conspiracy so vast (as Joseph McCarthy, a kindred spirit of Stone's, might have said) that the numbed populace perceives the unspeakable as normalcy and continues to graze on affluence and pleasure while pastured in repressive tolerance. The power of the nameless conspirators who control our government is so profound that they make the people think they are voting when they are really only validating the narrow range of choice offered by plotters of the "coup d'état" staged the day John Kennedy was murdered.