
In Focus

A Fashionable Steel-and-Glass Jacobin Club

Daniel Patrick Moynihan with Suzanne Weaver: *A Dangerous Place*; Atlantic-Little, Brown Books; Boston.

by Kenneth Kolson

We all know what Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan has to say. And we know to expect him to say it in his inimitable way. Like Lyndon Johnson's "Treatment A," which rarely failed him in one-on-one arm-twisting situations, the Moynihan Treatment, which is performed only in public, is irresistible. Arms oscillating, pencil poking, eyebrows quivering, voice undulating and ejaculating, juices spraying—the world's only 250 pound, splay-legged leprechaun is, when airborne, a spectacle the likes of which has not been seen since the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. And what was said of the Fair may as justly be said of the Moynihan Treatment: as an educational force and inspiration it will do its good "by the exaltation that it will inspire in every man, woman, and child who may have any emotions, and even he who has none, that may come to view it."

Never has the Moynihan Treatment had a more salutary effect than at the United Nations, where it took a furious wind indeed to blow out the pollution left by thirty years of hypocrisy, charlatanry, and brutal intimidation. For eight tempestuous months (can it have been only eight months!), Moynihan, a relentless, blustering bagpipe of moral indignation, employed his incomparable talents to challenge, most audaciously, the tyranny of opinion that had transformed the U.N. from a motley cacophony into a fashionable, and most dangerous, steel-and-glass Jacobin Club.

Ambassador Moynihan's finest hour

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—indeed the finest hour in the history of the international organization—occurred in the wake of its blackest, most shameful deed: the adoption of the resolution which equated Zionism with racism. The vote was 67 to 55, with 15 abstentions.

When this sordid business was finished, Moynihan took the floor. "It was our speech wholly," Moynihan writes in *A Dangerous Place*, which is part journal and part commentary on his tenure at the U.N. and on the proper place of human rights in our foreign policy, "Washington having had the sense to leave us be." Moynihan opened with words that had been written for him by Norman Podhoretz: "The United States rises to declare before the General Assembly of the United Nations, and before the world, that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act." As if devoted to single-handedly arresting the failure of nerve that has incapacitated the West even as it gazes into the eyes of its assassins, Moynihan roused his rhetorical powers and unleashed a display of oratory so extravagant, so furious, that the moment is, and will be, remembered as much for the exhibition put on by the Ambassador as for the infamy that provoked it. That was just the point.

The argument of the speech is as compelling as the ostentatious show was awesome. It focuses on the harm that will inevitably be done by the resolution to the cause of human rights. The danger is, first, that the resolution "will strip from racism the precise and abhorrent meaning that it still precariously holds today." This distortion of the language is sure to insidiously undermine the idea that racism is an evil to be vigilantly combated. As political scientist Charles H. Fairbanks put it in a memorandum written for Moynihan's

use: "To call Zionism a form of racism makes a mockery of the struggle against racism as the emperor Caligula made a mockery of the Roman Senate when he appointed to it his horse."

The second pernicious effect of the U.N. resolution will be its erosion of those claims on which the independence and the legitimacy of nations now rest. "Today we have drained the word 'racism' of its meaning. Tomorrow, terms like 'national self-determination' and 'national honor' will be perverted in the same way to serve the purposes of conquest and exploitation." When this happens, Moynihan warns, it will be the small nations of the world that will suffer. For "how will the small nations of the world defend themselves, on what grounds will others be moved to defend and protect them, when the language of human rights, the only language by which the small can be defended, is no longer believed and no longer has a power of its own?"

The most profound point in Moynihan's speech is contained in the third threat which this resolution poses to human rights, to wit: "the damage we now do to the idea of human rights could well be irreversible." Moynihan goes on to explain that the very idea of human rights is inextricably wedded to social contract theory; to the idea, hatched in the 17th century, that man is a being who can be conceived of as having lived in a prepolitical state, a state where his rights—if he has any at all—accrue from this national condition and not from his political circumstances. Thus the destruction of this idea—this philosophy in which Western civilization is rooted—means nothing less than the destruction of human rights, because it means the destruction of the *idea* of human rights, just as surely as the U.N. resolution contributes to the destruction of the language in

which this idea is expressed. Moynihan observes that:

“... most of the world does not hold with that philosophy now. Most of the world believes in newer modes of political thought, in philosophies that do not accept the individual as distinct from and prior to the State, in philosophies that therefore do not provide any justification for the idea of human rights and philosophies that have no words by which to explain their value. If we destroy the words that were given to us by past centuries, we will not have words to replace them, for philosophy today has no such words.”

This is a dangerous book because it is written by a dangerous man who says dangerous things. The danger is that all who read it, as all who have beheld the spectacle in the flesh, will begin to doubt the veracity of what issues from the U.N. today: that Presidents Nixon and Ford were racists, that Cuban troops constitute a stabilizing influence in Africa, that hundreds or even thousands of political prisoners are stashed away in the American Gulag, that Zionism is tantamount to racism. Let those who are faint of heart be forewarned: “the terrible lie . . . told here today will have terrible consequences.” □

Waste of Money

Halberstam's Wow! Gee!

David Halberstam: *The Powers That Be*; Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

This is Hype-Pop-New Journalism at its best, or worst, depending on what we expect from this contemporary mass-cultural phenomenon, or plague. Mr. Halberstam chronicles chronologically—one demurs at calling his methodology historical—the modern sagas of media empires such as *Time*, CBS, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. Even the

verb “to chronicle,” which denotes a certain writing effort conceived within the realm of creative intellect, seems oddly misplaced when used to describe Mr. Halberstam's endeavors and results. He displays—vividly, to be sure, albeit meretriciously—some people and personalities of America's sociocultural proscenium, but does not attempt to measure them against any idea, any concept, or any moral yardstick of our particular epoch. They seem to form the cast for a giant TV sitcom, starring the tycoons of American journalism. They are presented and judged in keeping with the standards of a Manhattan cognoscente who feeds on the “in” philosophies of fashion, hubris, and rather sleazy variations of liberalism. It does not even occur to Mr. Halberstam, after all his pains-

taking factual research, to ask what all those Bill Paleys, Kay Grahams and Harry Luces, given all the power he ascribes to them, have done to such fundamental ingredients of contemporary America's *esse* like civic duty, moral principle and freedom. Their impact on man, mankind, truth and human destiny is also ignored. Mr. Halberstam sees in journalism some greatness and momentousness as *Ding an sich*; but his sentiment hardly fits the feelings of contemporary America, which the more she reads her press and listens to her media, the more she tends to see their heroes as “black-hearted scoundrels”—to use Mark Twain's favorite *mot* for journalists. Which, eventually, places Mr. Halberstam's depth of vision and wisdom in the same category as Lou Grant's. □

Delbanco's Strange Dullness

Nicholas Delbanco: *Sherbrookes*; William Morrow & Co.; New York.

This is a strangely dull book. Although it sets out to deal with such themes as love, sex, family ties, loyalty, birth, death, roots, etc., the total effect is one of emptiness. In its 250 pages of carefully wrought prose—mostly detailing inner landscapes—the novel manages to evoke few emotions and even fewer ideas. The story has to do with the return of a young man called Ian to his family home in Vermont some months after the death of his father, Judah. Living in the house (referred to as the Big House and set on 1,000 acres) are Ian's old aunt, Hattie, and his widowed mother, Maggie, who, at 52, turns out to be pregnant. The father is not Judah. Nor is his identity of any real importance. What is supposed to be important is the meaning of the pregnancy to the three main characters. Unfortunately, the author provides no reason for anyone else to care. The lengthy musings of Ian, Maggie and the old aunt are about as stimulating as a protracted heat wave—and

considerably less genuine. Overcome by feelings of vacuousness, the reader lapses into a semitrance. *Sherbrookes* is Mr. Delbanco's ninth book and concerns the same family he wrote about in an earlier work called *Possession*. (MS)

The Abnormalcy Obsession

John Howland Spyker: *Little Lives*; Fred Jordan Books/Grosset & Dunlap; New York.

The jacket blurb describes “. . . [an] astonishing discovery . . . a joyful celebration of eccentric individuality . . .” Actually, the author seems to have gone out of his way to present the reader with an array of the most freakish characters, past or present, that he can find. He takes great care that we know who didn't always wear undergarments and who, it was rumored, “ate his own bogers.” Contrary to the jacket blurb's claim that Mr. Spyker is able to sum up lives in a few sentences, all he really