

does corrupt, and while no President in recent history has had *absolute* power, what they have is close enough for government work. It will be business as usual for any President after the first year, and no business at all for the last two years. We won't even grumble; we *expect* it to be this way. The President's cronies will be rewarded no matter how venal — or embarrassing — they become; he will embrace a cause only if it is politically popular. (Which President has ever taken on the tobacco growers' or distillers' lobbies or the UAW or ACLU or AFL-CIO?) We let the media go on and on about the differences between the candidates and the importance of the election, but we know that they don't believe it any more than we do, and they *know* we know. Still, it's a living. We live from hand to mouth, spiritually speaking, these days, manufacturing one quick make-believe warm fuzzy after another.

The Gipper had us going for a moment. Briefly, when we were younger and the world was full of hope and logical consequences, he made us believe that with hard work, decency, brains, and the grace of God, we could have it all. We *wanted* to believe, wanted it desperately, after the humiliation of the Johnson and Nixon administrations and the bland impotence of the Ford and Carter years. The nation roared in approbation when our boys conquered the midget Grenada. America was back! The Golden Era, from 1981-84, gave us hope. The last four years have stolen it away, possibly forever. If Reagan couldn't sustain us with what we gave him in 1980 and even more in 1984, it's hard to believe that anyone can. Our new President, whoever he is, may sustain *something* — his ego, his drive, his bank account, his autobiography — but history predicts that he will do it by spending America.

It's not morning here any more; it's mid-afternoon, and twilight approaches. What we have left is ourselves. We have fashioned the candidates in our own image, and their campaigning is, as some wit said recently, a demonstration of the "evil of two lessers." Our candidates deserve us, and we them. But at least we could stop pretending that our fates will be much better with one than with another. That in itself

might be a step toward a slightly more honorable twilight.

Jane Greer edits Plains Poetry Journal.

## Letter From B.U.

by S. Steven Powell

### *The Academic Blues*

When I left the University of Chicago a few years ago, I felt the whole world lay ahead and that every opportunity was open to me. I decided to go on with graduate school but took some time off to work as a research associate for a think tank in Washington, DC. One problem that concerned me more than others was the breakdown of a bipartisan consensus on foreign policy. The search for plausible explanations for this seemed like a very worthwhile intellectual endeavor. It was, after all, George Washington who warned us in his Farewell Address of 1796 that "the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party . . . open the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passion."

During the Vietnam War the American public was subjected to the confusing spectacle of celebrities like Jane Fonda and Susan Sontag giving aid and comfort to the North Vietnamese while U.S. soldiers were dying in South Vietnam to prevent a Communist takeover. In the 1980's, it was no longer just cultural celebrities who found favor with America's Communist adversaries. Congressmen, senators, even presidential candidates now seem to have little compunction about political posturing from Havana or Managua.

I published an article about some of my findings but decided to direct my energy toward an in-depth study, a monograph or perhaps a book. I also decided to continue my formal education in a Ph.D. program because I wanted to teach on the university level at some future time.

Rather than return to Chicago, I decided to go to Boston University because it had an interdisciplinary doctoral program, the University Professors Program, originally created by President John Silber to provide an environment

for serious study on unconventional topics. Silber struck me as someone not afraid to take unpopular positions and speak out on controversial issues of the day. Under his tutelage, B.U. seemed to be one of the few major universities attempting to stem the tide of mediocrity brought on by the left's ascendance in America's educational institutions.

When I arrived, I was welcomed by Betty Zisk, acting chair of B.U.'s political science department. "I'm afraid we'll have a hard time getting you into Howard Zinn's class," she explained. "It's always so full." Small wonder — Howard Zinn is a tenured Marxist whose chief preoccupation is activism, not scholarship. He was very popular not so much because students genuinely cared about Marxism, as because he was a well-known "gut teacher." Zinn candidly admits such evaluation criteria as tests are but unnecessary bourgeois formalities.

As I attended various classes I became increasingly disturbed by the widespread incompetence in the humanities and social science faculties. Even if the B.U. administration agreed on what constituted a proper liberal arts education, apparently it was having difficulty in filling the ranks of its faculty with people who shared a commitment to the same educational goals.

My first encounter with incompetence was with a political philosophy professor who could neither lecture nor lead a discussion. His discourses on Plato, Machiavelli, Locke, and Rousseau amounted to little more than a series of cynical anecdotes. The literature was brimming with insight on the possibilities and eternal problems of politics, yet little of any significance was ever talked about in class.

B.U.'s one course in the history of Western civilization attracts 200 students eager to fill the large lecture hall at the beginning of any semester, but within a few months only about 30 bother to attend the lectures. The reason? The professors who teach the class read out of the textbook or ramble incomprehensibly. Last year's students circulated a petition to protest this deplorable state of affairs. To their dismay, they discovered that the professor against whom they were protesting was the chairman of the department with which they were going to file the petition.

The first major goal of most applicants pursuing an academic career at B.U. and other universities is to secure tenure. The most important criterion on the tenure track is publication. But being published in the academic world is not necessarily a good indicator of competence for university faculty appointment. Many scholarly journals are little more than outlets for academics whose work is so marginal as to be otherwise unpublishable. The articles published there are seldom read by more than a handful of people, two of whom include the author and the journal's editor.

Another important aspect of the tenure process is the collegiality of the candidate. Mediocrity and liberal bias at B.U. tend to be self-perpetuating. The newcomer who brings fresh ideas or a greater grasp of a subject is likely to be perceived by other faculty members as a threat. Also, notwithstanding the outspoken conservative image of B.U.'s president, the politics of tenure work against those with the courage to be out of step with the liberal nostrums that dominate many departments.

After a discussion section late in the semester, one political science teaching assistant let her hair down with some of her students: "Neither Andy (the professor) nor I can write what we really want to write," she said. "Some people call me Communist, and that's okay. Andy is about to get tenure, and all he needs is President Silber's signature. I cannot wait to see how he teaches after he receives tenure."

Silber has been an outspoken critic of the tenure system largely because it protects this biased elitism. But, unfortunately, his search for new faculty members has not clearly reflected a commitment to long-term excellence.

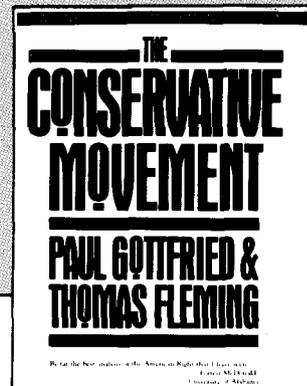
Located in the same town as Harvard and MIT, B.U. is plagued with an inferiority complex. In an attempt to raise its standing, it has been willing to pay dearly for fame and publicity. For instance, the librarian of special collections spends considerable time and resources to obtain Hollywood memorabilia, which end up in the basement storage of the library. Lavish parties are thrown for invited movie celebrities in hope that they will donate personal papers or effects to the university. Just what scholarly purpose all of this serves is hardly clear to anyone.

The most puzzling aspect of my experience at B.U. was that so many of those tenured professors who are decidedly nonliberal seemed apathetic about improving the academic programs of their own university. Establishing a liberal arts core curriculum has been stalled for years. Professors whose integ-

riety in written work I respected seemed reluctant to stand up and be counted on any issue that would cause disagreement with the majority of their colleagues.

Serious students ought not to harbor illusions about academic life. While there certainly are professors who care

# NEW FROM TWAYNE PUBLISHERS



## The Conservative Movement

Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming

Appearing in a crucial presidential election year, this is a timely analysis of one of the most powerful political and social forces in America. It is the first objective critical approach to the conservative movement, clarifying its ideologies, goals, impact, differences with liberalism, and growth from 1945 to 1987. Quoting politicians, lobbyists, journalists and intellectuals — including Burke, Buckley, Kirk and many others — scholars Gottfried and Fleming clearly outline the characteristics of conservatism: an anti-Soviet stance, advocacy of unlimited material opportunity, and exaltation of custom as the protector of social morality. A significant contribution of this study is its exposé of the

movement's fragmentation. In their thought-provoking chapter on conservatism's future after Reagan, the authors predict that this fragmentation may be the movement's demise.

### Table of Contents

1. Forming a Worldview:  
The Conservatism of the Fifties
  2. Before and After Goldwater:  
Conservatism in the Sixties
  3. Ivory Tower/Ivory Gate:  
The Conservative Mind on Campus
  4. Revolt of the Intellectuals:  
The Neoconservatives
  5. Populist Rebellion: The New Right
  6. Postscript: Reagan and Beyond
- Bibliographic Essay  
Index

Feb. 1988 5½ x 8½ 160 pp.  
0-8057-9723-8 Cloth \$18.95  
0-8057-9724-6 Paper \$ 7.95

Yes, please send me *The Conservative Movement* by Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming at \$18.95 Cloth (ISBN 797238) or \$7.95 Paper (ISBN 797246)

You must enclose payment with order. Total enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Payment Method:  Check enclosed (payable to G. K. Hall)  Visa  MC  AmEx

Card # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Send to: **Twayne Publishers** (A division of G. K. Hall)  
70 Lincoln St. • Boston, MA 02111 or call TOLL-FREE 1-800-343-2806

about their students, there are also many others who teach only for the money. More than once I found that faculty members took an interest in me only if they could use me or my work for their own interests or publishing efforts. It was understood when I came to B.U. that I was engaged in major study of special interest groups involved in thwarting U.S. intelligence activities and defense policies. Compared with most Ph.D. studies, my work had practical value, especially in the context of ongoing problems in Central America, the Middle East, and in East-West relations.

As it turned out, when I completed my academic courses, I could not find a sponsor for my dissertation, although I had adequate faculty support to put together a dissertation committee. My academic advisor, a leading neo-conservative sociologist, was unwilling to be a sponsor, although he privately acknowledged the importance of my work. I turned to another professor in my department who had written a book on a closely related subject. Although he too favored my work, he deferred any sponsorship. The reasons given were basically twofold: it was unconventional for a student to get academic credit for work that would also be published as a book, and it was unconventional for a student to proceed on a project without adequate faculty supervision or guidance.

There was some truth to the latter, but it was not for lack of wanting or seeking criticism and assistance from the faculty. Ironically, the faculty members who objected on this ground were the very ones who had always been too busy with their work, travels, and conferences to have time to read or evaluate my dissertation. The most disconcerting part of the whole experience was my uncertainty about whether anyone really wanted me to succeed. I wrote a personal letter to the university president and to the provost, asking why the university could not find merit in a student who fulfilled the dissertation requirements and succeeded in publishing a book at the same time. I argued that the main criteria for a dissertation should be the subject matter and the originality of the work. I was confident that my dissertation met both of these.

Months passed, and I was still receiving mixed signals from the powers that

be. Finally, I decided to abandon the attempt to secure academic credit for my 700-page study (a project that I had spent three years on). I realized that everyone would be much happier if I wrote a dissertation on some irrelevant academic subject about which no one was likely to object.

I decided to write a whole new dissertation about a more mundane subject: entrepreneurship. I was confident that this would be "safe," having relatively few political overtones. As far back as to Adam Smith, economists had mostly ignored the role and importance of entrepreneurial input. For Smith, the invisible hand was a self-regulating mechanism independent of the economic leadership of the entrepreneur. The two major sources of literature on the subject came from the Austrian and supply-side schools of economics.

My dissertation committee included my advisor, a sociologist, a political scientist, and a renowned developmental economist—one of those B.U. professors wooed away from Harvard with a fat salary offering. At first I couldn't understand why the economist kept coming up with a host of problems concerning my work. My arguments and empirical evidence supported the thesis that the entrepreneur provided the mainspring of economic progress. He objected to my favorable assessment of supply-side economics and recommended that I delete references to it when I revised my work. "There are many economists who believe that supply-side economics has been a dismal failure," he told me, obviously counting himself among them. (It was the fifth year of an economic expansion that had witnessed the creation of some 14 million new jobs in the United States.)

The other professors on my dissertation committee assured me that political bias was not at issue and that I had better pursue the course of least resistance, deliver what the economist wanted, and be done with it. Above all, I was counseled not to do anything that would cause more problems for him. It was becoming increasingly clear that the root of his objections to my work was my libertarian philosophy. He had, after all, built his entire career by championing state intervention, regulation, and planning. No graduate student was going to challenge the basic New Deal-

Keynesian faith without paying a price. "Maybe you could play more to your strengths—the noneconomic aspects—and attempt less in the economic realm," he wrote at one point in his evaluation of my dissertation. My advisor and committee chairman took a cautious but concurring position. "No reasonable person today believes in strict laissez faire," he noted, dismissing the value and legitimacy of libertarian economics.

I'll never forget those last all-nighters needed to finish the revisions on the dissertation. In the end it was only the economist that held out on signing the approval for my graduation. When I drove up to his house to drop off the final dissertation corrections on the eve of graduation, I wasn't surprised to find bumper stickers for left-wing Massachusetts political candidates on the two Volvos in his driveway.

Boston University has often been applauded for having reestablished high standards after liberal educational policies brought it to the brink of ruin in the early 1970's. But like most universities, B.U. is finding it difficult to achieve excellence because it runs contrary to the leveling goals of liberalism itself. Moreover, the task has only become more difficult in the 1980's because liberalism has been transformed by prejudices and militant ideologies of the left.

Courage and honesty are needed to admit that liberal arts education at B.U. and at most other universities is largely failing in its two most basic tasks—first, to foster an appreciation of the values and institutions that have expanded liberty and opportunity, and second, to clarify the responsibilities of citizenship.

There are no easy solutions or quick fixes to the sorry state of higher education. Concerned faculty with tenure can certainly afford to take a clear stand and challenge the ruling ethos and norms of the educational establishment itself. And if entrenched faculty majorities are reluctant to change, it might be good to encourage the younger generation of students to shake things up a bit. In that case, sponsoring a student involved in controversial research and writing might even be viewed as an opportunity, rather than a liability.

*S. Steven Powell is the author of Covert Cadre (Green Hill Publishers).*



## THE ACADEMY

### The New Obscurantism

by Nicholas Davidson

Santayana's commonplace observation that "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it" is not popular with professional historians, who suffer from chronic disagreement about what the past means, or whether it means anything at all. Such embarrassment is understandable: Since the First World War, the most salient lessons of the past have been systematically obscured in the academy, for reasons that are both structural and political.

The ever-increasing specialization of scholarly disciplines has led to a continuous refinement of knowledge in many fields, but it also works to discourage the large conceptions that are inherently necessary to treat large topics.

Who profits? In the short run, clearly the ever more segmented guilds of Americanists, Europeanists, medievalists, and classicists. Specialization confers authority in proportion to arcaneness. Lacking the empirical tests of hard science, the study of history dissolves into a kaleidoscope of specialties, whose only common feature is their mutual exclusivity. While knowledge proliferates, understanding decreases.

Historians, most of whom would do far better to spend their time assimilating a past fewer and fewer of them know well, and transmitting this distilled knowledge to their students, who desperately need such background, are under constant pressure to demonstrate "originality." They have responded through countless publications in a growing welter of ever more inconsequential journals. Interpretive revolution, which can only come from individual genius or the convulsive pressure of long-prepared events, is institutiona-

lized, trivialized, and finally vitiated. In the meantime, true originality, which consists in discerning useful relations between apparently disparate facts, is structurally discouraged. A few oddball generalists resist the tide, but in general, historians have less and less to say to the public because they have less and less to say to each other.

The universal refrain is fast becoming, "It is so complex we cannot know." Every obvious connection is severed: between the bourgeois ethos and the Industrial Revolution; between the French Enlightenment and the Reign of Terror; between German anti-Semitism and the rise of Nazism. The structure of academia systematically rewards scholars for destroying the connective tissue that makes knowledge intelligible and thereby useful.

Deconstructionism is the logical end result of all this. As the high priests of intellectual disintegration, deconstructionists have come to enjoy a certain aristocratic status in academia, like murderers in a prison. (It is an analogy they would relish.) Those who sacrifice continuity to change, simplicity to complexity, and certainty to doubt relinquish half the basis for sound judgment and become the camp followers of whatever revolution is currently in vogue. In the extreme case of the deconstructionists, like the anarchists before them, they succumb to a parricidal hatred of the very bases of civilization.

Academics tend to dislike answers, for there is no profit in them. They provide no rationale for further grants. Worse, by making human experience intelligible to ordinary people, they threaten the hegemony of specialists, "experts." Such is the sociostructural impulsion to moral relativism. Sociobiology, which threatens to discover a biological basis for morality, is demonized. Economics, ethics, and sexuality become formless grab bags of "choice." The professionals have still not forgiven Schliemann for discovering Troy: the City of Priam was far more

congenial as a myth.

The destruction of limits, whether they are valid or not, also serves a more specifically political function. Extreme environmental determinism persists in the social sciences years after it has been empirically discredited, because it usefully obscures the social imperatives that social reforms violate at the price of creating predictable misery. For instance, no person with an even moderately open mind can be conversant with recent work on fetal masculinization and tomboyism or on sex differentiation in brain structure, yet still take seriously the unisexist doctrine that constitutes our current national philosophy of gender. Ironically, in light of the continuing progress of knowledge in many areas, we live today in a time of intellectual impoverishment, fueled by the deliberate neglect of the obvious.

The new obscurantism performs the same politicized function in history as in the behavioral sciences. If the past is too complicated to grasp, if each period is so unique that there are no general principles to be deduced, the way is cleared for every fanciful social reformer and every hate-driven would-be revolutionary who comes down the pike. The vociferous 60's rejection of history as "irrelevant" rested on precisely this reasoning. To people dazzled by visions of utopia, nothing fixed and certain is of interest, even if it is central to the human condition. Like the Victorians before us, we live estranged from our own advancing civilization, in an intellectual universe whose attempts at wisdom and morality are cut off from the very empirical sources of its knowledge.

The modern left cannot study history and still remain a left. In history as in behavioral science, facts are fatal. No wonder "objectivity" is despised; no wonder Ranke's famous ideal, that historians should strive to understand the past *Wie es eigentlich war*, "As it really was," is dismissed as a naive conceit, to be left behind with the dross of the 19th century.

It has consequently become a