

U.S. Editing Out of This World

One of the more remarkable excisions of history achieved on a weekly basis by the U.S. mainstream press are opinions of the rest of the world about the U.S., as expressed at the General Assembly of the United Nations. In the days when the U.S. could regularly command majorities in the General Assembly, votes favorable to U.S. concerns were proudly recorded in the press here. But now, a quarter of a century on, when support for the U.S. is not automatically forthcoming, a different situation prevails.

A few weeks ago a General Assembly vote condemning the Soviet Union for its activities in Afghanistan received wide coverage in the press. A vote two days later essentially urging the U.S. and other countries to abide by decisions of the World Court concerning Nicaragua passed almost unanimously and was mostly ignored. On November 30 the U.N. General Assembly stated its grave concern at the militarization of outer space and called on both the U.S. and Soviet Union to conduct bilateral negotiations to prevent this. The resolution passed by 154 to 1, with no abstentions. The U.S. cast the sole dissenting vote. I saw no report of this in any U.S. publication available to me, even though the Gorbachov visit was imminent and therefore the views of the world on SDI presumably of some interest.

Similarly unreported was the fact that the U.S. cast the sole dissenting vote against a resolution condemning the development of any new weapons of mass destruction (18 abstentions), and was joined only by France in voting against a call for a comprehensive test ban (eight abstentions). The Assembly cast more than 25 votes on arms issues. In 14 cases, the U.S. opposed the resolutions while the U.N. endorsed them.

Red Noonday

The symbolic transfer of power from Ronald Reagan to Mikhail Gorbachov has been very evident to me in journeys around the country over the last month.

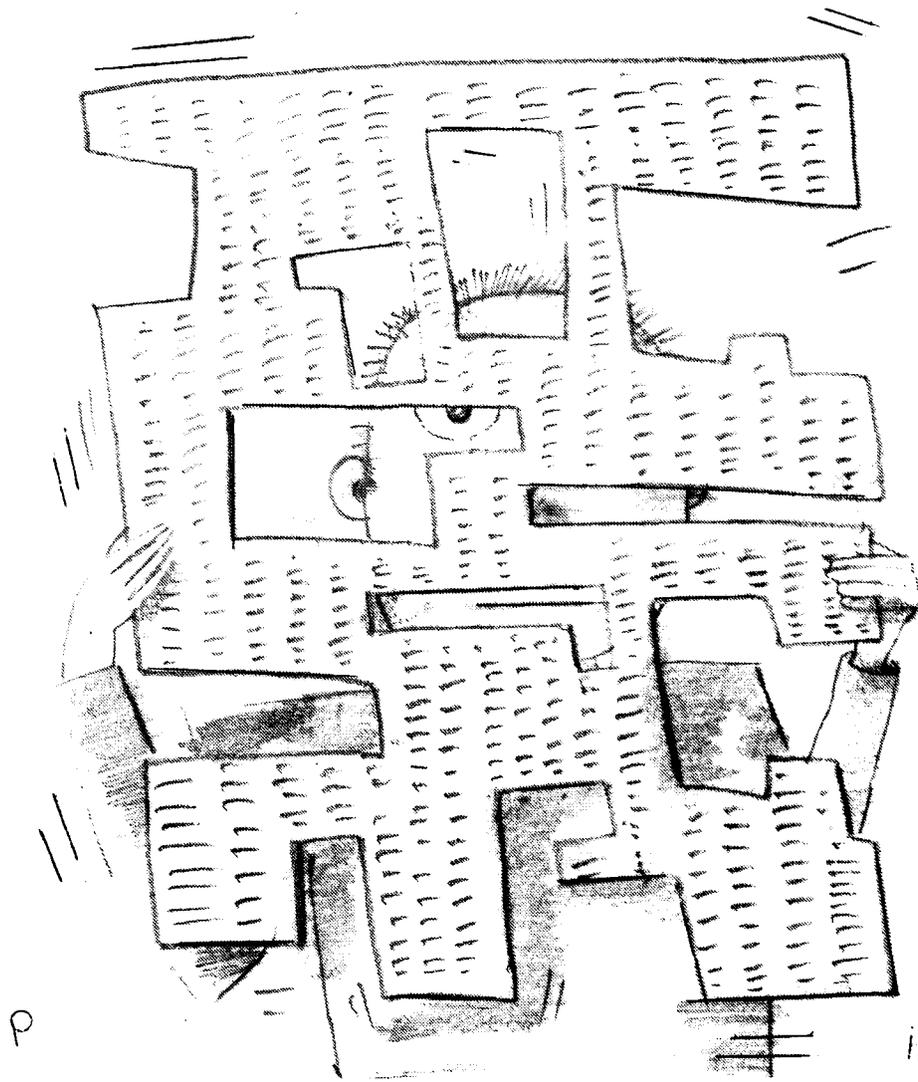
I'm not speaking here merely of the famous "Peoples' Committees" that have sprung up spontaneously in such traditional centers of dissent as Madison, Wis., Boulder, the Bay Area, the Northwest, Burlington, Vt., and so on. But less predictable areas have also seen demonstrations in favor of Gorbachov-style openness and economic renewal.

The committees are already organizing state-by-state campaigns to put Gorbachov or some appropriate proxy on the ballot during the upcoming primary season and demanding that their position gets equal time in innumerable TV debates scheduled over the coming months. Some strategists are arguing that such mechanistic adherence to "electoralism" is unnecessary and that stage known in Leninist theory as dual power is already a realistic prospect. In this analysis Reagan has a year remaining of ceremonial office during which time the effective control of the state would be shifted to the Kremlin, where the major decisions would be taken.

This perspective has been denounced—rightly, in my judgment—as *etatism*, a crude reading of Lenin's April theses and his pre-emptory injunctions to the Petrograd Military Committee of October 1917. The cautions of Zioniev and Kamenev, erroneous in that instance, are here appropriate. It is already evident that the enemies of openness and eco-

ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn



conomic renewal, appalled by the success of Gorbachov's visit, are seeking to regroup. Outgoing Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger openly affirmed his view of the Soviet Union as an evil empire at exactly the moment that President Reagan was saying that he no longer believed this to be the case. Secretary of State Shultz has called for an increase in conventional arms to offset the INF nuclear accord and the Senate, controlled by Democrats, passed \$16 billion in aid to the Nicaraguan contras on December 12.

Etatist fantasies are clearly out of place. The next stage is one or more Peoples' Committees fostering a debate on economic renewal, leading to a national convention in the midsummer of 1988 and designed to contrast with the sterile procedures of the national conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties. Bulking large on this agenda will be the *glasnost USA* campaign, calling for popular access to the major means of communication.

The prospect then is for nurturing of a broad progressive movement for change and renewal in the United States, impelled by the fundamental principle of democracy from below, and liberated from the constrictions of the present one-party system inhabited by the Democrats and Republicans.

The Future of the Jackson campaign

The perspectives discussed above naturally provoke the question: What about Jesse Jackson? In my travels I encountered considerable debate about the proper attitude toward the man's campaign for the Democratic nomination. A number of recent developments have fortified uncertainty. The

somewhat unsparing description by Mary Summers, his former speechwriter, in *The Nation* (November 28), has been widely discussed, as has the murky affair of the rejected endorsement.

On December 4, the *New York Times* ran a story by Michael Orestes reporting that the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) were about to endorse Jackson as their preferred candidate for the Democratic nomination, but that this endorsement had been turned aside by Gerald Austin, one of Jackson's campaign managers, who made a sybilline distinction between his accepting of "support" or "endorsement," saying that in the case of DSA the former was preferable. Among socialist or radical groups who regard involvement in two-party politics as a waste of time, this development aroused a certain amount of malicious glee at a comical failure of the DSA to establish any political rapport with the man deemed to be one of the most progressive forces within the Democratic Party.

This reaction, while understandable, is not particularly creative. In 1984, younger members of DSA had been incensed by the refusal of the group's leadership to address itself to the issue of Jackson's candidacy. Irving Howe let it be known that if DSA said anything good about the reverend he would bolt, an act that should properly have raised the same philosophical reverberations as the old conundrum about the noise of a twig falling in the forest. This time around, after determined politicking by many of DSA's younger cadres, DSA came through with the endorsement properly rejected by Austin, a mainstream political operator from Ohio whose chief distinction in the Jackson campaign, alluded to on all possi-

ble occasions, is that he is Jewish. The malicious glee of the faction of DSA sympathetic to Howe's posture was swiftly in evidence; and in maneuvers surrounding the retirement of DSA Chair Michael Harrington, who is very seriously ill, this same faction had the better of it over their more radical opponents.

A day later Jackson himself—warned by advisers that the Austin rejection was enormously damaging both to the image and blurred reality of a Rainbow movement and to the enthusiasm of activists prepared to work long and hard for Jackson—announced that the DSA endorsement was welcome, causing Michael Harrington to lament the media-induced confusion. This may have showed that the candidate was sensitive to pressure from the left—a *sine qua non* in any relationship of a progressive movement to a Democratic candidate—but did not quell suspicions that Jackson has bolted himself into the diving bell of "responsible candidacy" and now often sounds like someone filibustering on behalf of the Council of Foreign Relations.

Consider what he said at the "presidential debate" on December 1, where massed ranks of candidates curvetted at the behest of Tom Brokaw. Brokaw had asked, "If there is a Soviet satellite state in Central America—another Cuba—would that bother you?" This question, which has the same scholarly detachment as Sen. Al d'Amato's recent poll to his constituents, "Should the U.S. be defending freedom in the Persian Gulf?" initially elicited from Jackson the response that "If we support self-determination and economic development...we can win Nicaragua." Excepting the unattractive conceptual connotation of "win," this is all right. But then he went on:

"Yes, we should negotiate bilaterally with Ortega. No foreign military advisers. No Soviet base. And if they, in their self-determination, choose to relate to the Soviets in that way, they must know the alternative. If they are with us, there are tremendous benefits. If they are not with us, there are tremendous consequences. If we are clear...the response will be clear."

In other words, if you are not with us, you are against us—and in case you're wondering what that means, read up on the history of Guatemala.

Insofar as Jackson articulates issues—Palestinians' rights, for example—normally expelled from mainstream political discourse, he nourishes a progressive movement. But there has to be some sort of accountability—dare we call it dialectical—between such a movement and its representative, also continuity of a movement beyond the personal tactical program of one mainstream candidate; otherwise dreams expire with a few balloons below the roof of the convention hall in Atlanta.

If considerations of personal security would permit, Jackson could certainly energize his campaign and distinguish himself more sharply from his competitors if he dares to go soon to Haiti, there to proclaim that the abuses to democracy—abuses underwritten by the U.S.—are as great as they were in the times that provoked the march on Selma; and to call publicly on the U.S. to give its full backing to the original electoral council that the U.S.' creatures, Namphy and Regala, have attempted to depose. Thus could a candidate placed on the defensive by hypothetical questions about Soviet bases regain the political and moral initiative. ■

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Nixon in China: Boy meets China, boy gets China, history gets trampled, opera gets trivial.

A Tricky Dicky dreamscape: doing Chinese with the Nixon mob

Nixon in China
Directed by Peter Sellars
Composed by John Adams
Libretto by Alice Goodman

By Joel Schechter

A WEEK BEFORE MIKHAIL GORBACHOV met Ronald Reagan in Washington, Nixon met Mao in Brooklyn. The new opera, *Nixon in China*, was performed in December at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Its 1987 premiere in New York and Houston provided odd musical accompaniment to reports of the Reagan-Gorbachov summit. Nixon's friendly visit to Mao in 1972, after he said for years that China had been lost to the Communists, was as full of contradictions as Reagan's agreement to sign an arms treaty with the leader of a bloc he continues to call the "evil empire."

Such Cold War ironies have been minimized by librettist Alice Goodman in her collaboration with composer John Adams and director Peter Sellars. The three agreed in advance not to stage a satire of Nixon. Instead the president is presented as an almost-innocent American abroad. The opera's portrait of Henry Kissinger is less flattering, but, in general, *Nixon in China* is not averse to the policies of its title character.

Growing old and soft: It could be called a revisionist history, ex-18 IN THESE TIMES DEC. 23, 1987-JAN. 12, 1988

cept that "history" is the wrong word to describe the dreamlike sequences set in the Peking Opera and the bedrooms of the Nixons and Chairman Mao. The post-minimalist music by Adams—with its simple scale progressions repeated and layered with flourishes—increases the daydream effect when Nixon recalls his hamburger stand ("Nick's Snack Shack") in the Pacific and Mao informs Nixon, "I'm growing old and soft, and won't demand your overthrow."

Like recent conservative attacks on Reagan for his treaty with Moscow, *Nixon in China* suggests that Nixon, the president who dreamed about hamburgers in China, was blissfully ignorant of all but the most superficial, ceremonial matters of state. Yet the opera comes closer to honoring Nixon than criticizing his naivete. Chairman Mao could be speaking for the librettist and director when he assures Nixon, "You've

got my vote. I like right-wingers."

The political and artistic biases of the opera surface most fully in Act 2, when Pat and Dick visit the Peking Opera. Attending a ballet, "The Red Detachment of Women" (choreographed in Brooklyn by Mark Morris), the Nixons notice that a dancer in the villain's role looks like Henry

OPERA

Kissinger. In fact, the same performer appears as the Secretary of State in other scenes, where he sings almost nothing.

The work's creators attack Kissinger indirectly, trivializing his statesmanship by double-casting him as a cruel Chinese landlord's factotum in the ballet. As the factotum, he torments a peasant woman bound in chains, and gloats: "This is the fate/ Of all who set/ Small against great." The Nixons are so disturbed by his cruelty that they interrupt it.

Chairman Mao could be speaking for the librettist and director when he assures Nixon, "You've got my vote. I like right-wingers."

Historical amnesia: The presidential couple become so sympathetic to an oppressed Chinese woman in this fantasy that they join the ballet; they offer weaponry and medical aid to the peasants. The highly implausible, comic scene shows Pat and Dick forgetting they once opposed Chinese Communism, forgetting they are witnessing fiction, and briefly assisting the Red Women's Militia. Soon Madam Mao, their host, is on the scene, too, choreographing the revolution while Nixon distributes bags of grain to hungry peasants.

The ballet sequence reveals more about the opera's creators than it does about the Nixons. In choosing to portray the president and his wife as gullible and charitable tourists—pro-revolutionary tourists, at that—*Nixon in China* becomes little more than an amusing, Disneylike tour of history.

Other scenes, also suitable for inclusion in Fantasyland or Edward Said's next edition of *Orientalism*, portray Pat Nixon petting a pig on a communal farm while the chorus sings "Pig, pig, pig"; Chairman Mao saying that Nixon's book, *Six Crises*, "isn't bad," and "these books of mine aren't anything"; and a boyish, patriotic Richard Nixon declaring after a banquet, "Never have I so enjoyed a dinner...outside America." These lines verge on comedy; but their staccato recitation to Adams' score makes them sound serious.

The opera's wittiest components are its scene and costume design, which mimic the photographs of 1972 newsweeklies. Officials posing at the airport and at banquet tables,

surrounded by cameras and microphones, turn Nixon's China into one long, colorful photo opportunity—as it was, from the perspective of the press. The Nixons and Kissinger descend to Peking from a nearly lifesize cardboard cutout of a jet plane that lands on stage; the cartoonish set suggests satire, though it rarely arrives. Later Chairman Mao, in a lime green Mao jacket, steps out of an enormous billboard featuring his own famous visage, to sing, "I am no one, I am unknown," another improbable moment. The Mao billboard, and the bright reds and greens of the costumes, evoke a world somewhere between Andy Warhol's pop art silkscreens of Mao and the agit-prop poster art of post-revolutionary China and Cuba.

The libretto's best lyrics recall that once popular cultural icon, Mao's little red book. He and others sing lines resembling his quotations, or parodies of them, such as Nixon's invitation to Chou En-lai: "Let us...start a long march on new highways/ In different lanes, but parallel/ And heading for a single goal." (Undoubtedly, his march would require federal funding to widen the highways.) The poetry maps an intricate world of dreams and diplomacy, but its compressed lines often leap past serious issues instead of exploring them. "I opposed China, I was wrong," is virtually all we hear from Nixon about his major reversal in foreign policy.

In the opening song, Chinese soldiers and peasants sing, "The people are the hero now." The tune changes considerably once Nixon arrives. If he is not the opera's hero, he is shown to be no worse than a highly enthusiastic, photogenic tourist. If he and Kissinger flew to China in search of the new markets and cheap labor that the U.S. subsequently found there, it is not acknowledged. (Mao warns, "Founders come first, then the profiteers," and he sings about a Chinese "plunge into the New York Stock Exchange," but his speculations are confined to a few lines of verse.) The lyrics tend to be as insulated from political conflicts and realities—as introspective and private—as Nixon's closing dream about a hamburger stand.

Nixon in China will be performed in 1988 in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and the Netherlands. Richard Nixon has so far declined all invitations to see it, but he needn't have worried. With no apparent irony, the libretto has Nixon compare his first steps in China to those of an Apollo astronaut walking on the moon. That this operatic character regards the most populous nation on Earth as an exotic, alien planet would not be so reprehensible, if the opera's creators did not seem to share the attitude, and celebrate it. ■

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