

**Loyalties: A Son's Memoir**  
By Carl Bernstein  
Simon and Schuster, 262 pp., \$18.95

By Nelson Lichtenstein

# Of shifting loyalties and the family ties that bind

**C**ARL BERNSTEIN, OF WATERGATE fame, is a good reporter and a difficult son, which, taken together, give his memoir both its insight and its tension. There are two stories here. The first is a richly evocative tale of growing up Jewish and progressive in the still-segregated, half-Southern Washington, D.C., of the 1950s. The second is an awkward contest between father and son over what it meant to be a radical in the McCarthy era and what part of that past is useful today.

Bernstein has a fine memory of what the simple pleasures of childhood can offer: the joy of a new bike, the comradeship of other mischievous boys and the ever-widening exploration of his Chesapeake Street neighborhood. Along with so many others in the Jewish community, the Bernsteins moved to Silver Spring in the mid-'50s, to a suburban liberal enclave, just in time for Carl to embark on a rebellious adolescence.

All this he recounts with a sure sense of the significant detail: what it was like to smoke cigarettes during lunch at Blair High School and the thrill of drag racing down Colesville Road at midnight. To straighten him out, Carl's father got his son a job as a copyboy at the old *Washington Star*—the rest is journalism history.

**Childhood's end:** Bernstein's parents were not your ordinary Jewish liberals. They had been Popular Front progressives in the '30s, Communists for a few years in the mid-'40s, trade unionists, integrationists, defenders of the Rosenbergs and victims of the McCarthy era. Bernstein's memoir is therefore an exploration of the way that political currents of the time intersected and disrupted his otherwise comfortable childhood.

His parents were in the forefront of the effort to desegregate the Washington lunch counters and department store restaurants in the early '50s, but Carl hated these embarrassing expeditions that tore him from his playgroup, threw him together with children he didn't know and put him in an adult world he didn't understand.

The execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg was even more traumatic. The fate of this couple hovered over the Bernstein home as Carl's mother, Sylvia, threw her energies into organizing a Washington defense committee. By the time of their death, the Rosenbergs were "familiar," writes Bernstein. Indeed, the Rosenbergs had been married on the same day in 1939 as his own parents. "If they could be executed, what was to prevent the execution of one's own parents...?"

And then there were the congressional investigating committees, before which both of his parents were periodically hauled. The most painful experience came in 1954

after the House Un-American Activities Committee grilled his mother and other District leftists. Relatives and friends quickly ostracized Sylvia, a sociable woman who had been born in Washington and lived there most of her life. Neighborhood kids

## COLD WAR

stopped coming around to play, and Carl got into a nasty fight in the schoolyard when a classmate called his mother a communist. And to cap it all off, his little sister was expelled from the cooperative nursery run by the D.C. Recreation Department.

**FBI bar mitzvah:** Naturally, his parents both developed huge FBI files, which Carl quotes to good effect—it's practically become a literary convention for political memoirs of recent vintage. The FBI remained an unseen presence in all of the Bernstein family's affairs: funerals, Sunday afternoon get-togethers, even Carl's bar mitzvah. As late as

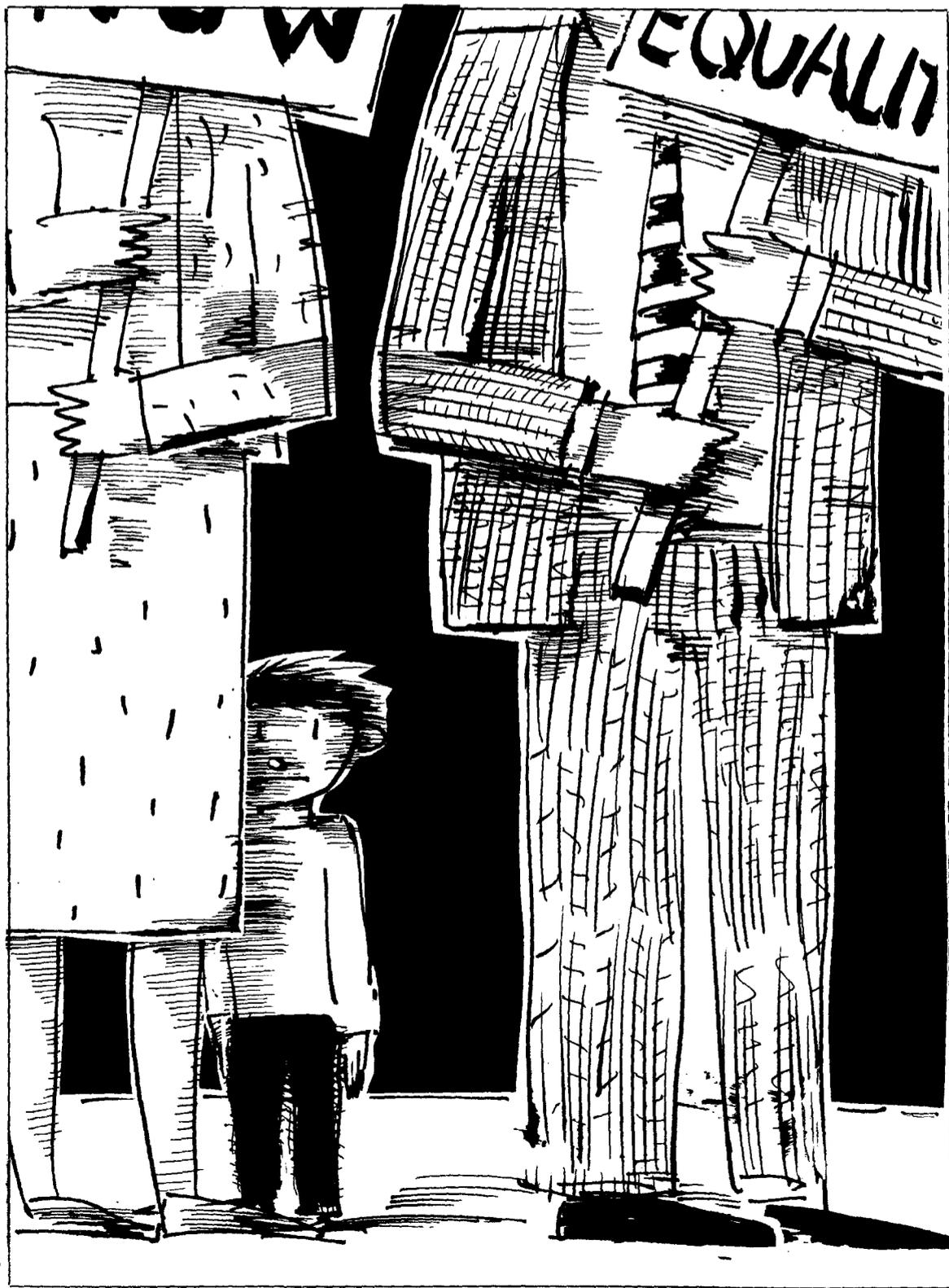
1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, the FBI kept tabs on the family and their friends; they remained on Hoover's list of people to round up if the president declared a national-security emergency.

Counterpointing this childhood memoir is the story of Sylvia and Al Bernstein—their extended families, political activities and conflicts with the McCarthy-era thought police. All is told as part of a tension-filled dialogue with Carl as he seeks to record their story and uncover the passions and commitments that

made their lives so difficult.

Sylvia seems to have come to terms with her past, but Al Bernstein is a figure both admirable and irritating. A graduate of Columbia Law School, he was one of the corps of young New Deal lawyers who sought to investigate and reform the American plutocracy in the late Depression years. Unlike so many others who mellowed after the war, Al was a natural organizer and threw his talents into building an industrial union of federal employees, the United Federal Workers, whose member-

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ship extended from mid-level white-collar professionals to the largely black janitorial and cafeteria staffs.

Al's work got really interesting in 1947 when President Truman inaugurated the McCarthy era by setting up a federal employee loyalty-security program. Within a few years the government brought almost 13,000 cases before its various loyalty boards, Star Chambers in which the accused knew neither the names of their accusers nor the exact charges against them. In his capacity as a union officer, Al Bernstein handled more than 500 of these cases, winning about 80 percent. One day Carl returned home to find a new TV set in the living room, a present from some of his father's grateful clients.

**Life (and death) of the party:** But the late '40s were hardly a triumphant time for Al Bernstein. His union was ground down, expelled from the CIO, and his livelihood destroyed. For a few years he operated a laundry on Georgia Avenue, until the McCarthy era abated and he could turn his considerable talents to fundraising for a series of Jewish and liberal charities.

But Al Bernstein still lives in a world in which the shadows of 1951 spread their darkness everywhere. "I don't want you to write a dishonest book," he tells Carl, "but I don't want you to write an evil book either." So he resists his son's efforts to probe the inner meaning of his transit through the Communist Party. To tell all, to uncover the passions and the personalities of that era, might still damage reputations and destroy what little political effectiveness his generation retains.

Al Bernstein's timidity exasperates Carl, and it unsettles the reader as well. After all, it's 40 years since those days, and dozens of once persecuted Communists, like Jessica Mitford and Julius Scales, have told their stories in recent years. But compared to these party members, the elder Bernstein's diffidence may have something of an explanation. Most of those ex-Communists who have spoken up were part of the generation of radicals who joined the Party in the '30s, often held full-time posts and then left after 1956. Their whole life was the party, and they now feel compelled to account for it.

But Al Bernstein's story is different: he joined the Communists at their most "liberal" moment in the war, and his most intense and rewarding years were bound up in building a union whose very survival depended on carving out an identity separate and distinct from the party. He was by nature a cautious man, yet his "punishment" was in many ways more severe than those more closely identified with the party. He never went to prison, but he lost his vocation, many friends and his chance to move the world. No wonder he had trouble telling son Carl about those days.

**Nelson Lichtenstein** is the editor of Harvey Swados' *On the Line*, to be reissued this fall by the University of Illinois Press.

## MUSIC



Influential rap group Public Enemy has been stuck "playing defense" after anti-Semitic interviews by one group member.

## Public enemies and public relations

By Dan Booth

**J**ANUARY, 1988: THE LARGELY white pop metal band Guns n' Roses, hot on the heels of their multiplatinum debut album, releases a follow-up, titled *G n' R Lies*. One album cut, "One In A Million," features racist stereotypes and homophobic, xenophobic paranoia. Within a few months, the new record sells two million copies.

June, 1989: black rap artists Public Enemy release the single "Fight the Power," featured in the film *Do The Right Thing*. A recent anti-Semitic interview given by one member of the group leads to criticism in the media. Within a few weeks, the new single is their first million-seller, but the band is temporarily sidelined by the controversy.

This is the recent story of two popular bands who have talked their way into dangerous political territory. The controversies, however, have varied drastically.

**The vinyl solution:** "Fight the Power" is only the most recent of Public Enemy's incendiary hip-hop tracts; their second album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, has sold almost a million copies.

They've come to dominate the music with their strong lyrical critique of the white power structure. Other rappers generally credit them with broadening both the music and the boundaries of what it can discuss.

But one member of the group has crashed into that boundary head-on. Professor Griff, who earned his place on the media soapbox as PE's Minister of Information, had tinted interviews with anti-Semitic remarks for more than a year before this interview with David Mills of the *Washington Times*, printed on May 22.

"I'm not saying all of them. The majority of them [laughter], the majority of them, yes."

"Are what? Jews are responsible for..."

"The majority of the wickedness that goes on across the globe? Yes. Jews. Yes."

When asked for sources, he cited Steve Cokely, an aide to Chicago's ex-Mayor Eugene Sawyer. Cokely was fired after speaking about the "international Jewish conspiracy" and declaring that Jewish doctors were injecting black babies with the AIDS virus.

Professor Griff is a sideman in Public Enemy. He runs the Security

of the First World, the group's paramilitary stage show, and lectures from the stage. In this instance he's like an offensive lineman who misses the quarterback's signals, letting in a full-scale blitz by the media and political organizations. Now Chuck D., the bandleader and lead vocalist, is stuck "playing defense," as he told RJ Smith, music columnist for the *Village Voice*, who reprinted parts of the *Washington Times* interview June 14.

Harry Allen, another *Village Voice* columnist and cohort of the members of Public Enemy, says that "Public Enemy's public rope-a-dope was mostly spurred on by the rebirth of the *Washington Times* article written by David Mills, as delivered by mid-wife RJ Smith."

**Threats and promises:** Chuck D. was angry enough at the column to phone Smith with these thoughts: "Any shit comes down on me, it's coming down on you. And that's a goddamned threat! Write this down! ... This nigger [Griff], if he's gonna get fucked, I'm gonna put the heat on him." But Chuck was a little late; the heat was already on. The Jewish Defense Organization was mailing Smith's article to record stores and

distributors, asking them not to stock "Fight The Power." Death threats, anonymous calls to members of Public Enemy's inner circle, had started to come in.

At a June 19 press conference, Chuck D. announced that Professor Griff was being fired and clarified the band's relation to Griff's statements, which he said were "not in line with Public Enemy's program at all... We're not anti-Jewish, we are not anti-anybody. We are pro-black, pro-black culture and pro-human race."

But this statement didn't turn off the heat. The following day Chuck D. announced that Public Enemy was disbanding.

The breakup has since been declared temporary, and Professor Griff has even been rehired, although he probably won't be giving interviews for some time. The band is trying to come to terms with a record label—but on their own terms. Their negotiations toward a record deal with MCA, which were active until June, were cut off after the label stipulated that the band would not be able to make comments about any religious groups. This leaves them back at Columbia Records.

On whatever record label, the band is expecting to release their next album, called *Fear of a Black Planet*, before the end of the year. Public Enemy will continue to use rap music as the medium for disseminating political information. "In hip-hop, what you're having are very sharp minds making our history funky, and thus digestible," says Harry Allen, self-styled Hip-hop Activist and Media Assassin.

On the next album, Allen says, "Public Enemy will explore some of the structure of white supremacy as a function, as it is based in the failure of the Caucasian people to repopulate.... They will talk about some of its structure, especially as that structure applies to the needs of white people (so-called) to maintain a psychological dominance, especially in light of their downwardly sliding birthrate, and the historical fact that they have never been the majority that they portray themselves to be."

**One in a nation of millions:** One white guy who needs to express a psychological dominance is Guns n' Roses lead singer and lyricist Axl Rose. Interviewed in the July 25 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Axl describes himself as someone who drives through gay neighborhoods, yelling, "Why don't you guys like pussy?" out the car window. He does this in the process of "explaining" these lyrics from their album, *G n' R Lies*.

*Police and niggers, that's right,  
Get out of my way  
Don't need to buy none of your  
gold chains today...  
Immigrants and faggots  
They make no sense to me  
They come to our country  
And think they'll do as they please  
Like start some mini-Iran  
Or spread some fucking disease  
They talk so many goddamn ways  
It's all Greek to me*

—"One In A Million"

The band's publicity department is refreshingly blunt about the song's content. "Yes, it's racist and homophobic," says Bryn Bridenthal of Geffen Records. The band was aware of that well before the record's release. But, she says, "they sort of decided among themselves that freedom of speech was more important."

Axl gives his perspective in the *Rolling Stone* interview. Both he and the interviewer, *Rip* magazine editor Del James, treat the words used as the objectionable objects, and not the stereotypes they represent.

The first problem word addressed is "immigrants." Axl says, "A lot of people from countries like Iran, Pakistan, China, Japan, etc., get jobs in these convenience stores and gas stations. Then they treat you like you don't belong here." The way he talks about a mini-Iran, you'd think we were being invaded via our Seventies.

Then Axl explains who he meant by "faggots." When asked if he's anti-homosexual, he evades by saying,



Racist and homophobic lyrics haven't kept metal/pop-rockers Guns n' Roses from selling millions of records.