

Alex Cockburn's Popular Front

The Nation's Wittiest Soviet Apologist Has an Eye for Rich Men's Daughters

Charlotte Hays

When the *Village Voice* ejected columnist Alexander Cockburn for a relatively minor infraction of journalistic ethics, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz compared the situation to “Al Capone’s going to prison for income tax evasion.” Cockburn’s misdeed was neglecting to inform his editor about a \$10,000 grant he’d received from an Arab organization in the U.S. The money was supposed to defray travel expenses for a book on Lebanon that Cockburn (pronounced “Coburn”) never got around to writing, a fairly common occurrence, among authors.

As scandals go, it was pretty mild stuff. But Alexflap (as the *Wall Street Journal* dubbed the incident) quickly developed into a Major Topic on the New York literary circuit: The 43-year-old Alex Cockburn, a Soviet apologist who seemed to have an eye for rich men’s daughters, had been caught with his pants down. Finally. Some New Yorkers giggled that the Arab money was a “bridge loan between heiresses.” An earlier remark by syndicated columnist and *National Review* editor Joe Sobran was repeated often: “Alexander Cockburn’s scorn for the men who created the wealth of America is exceeded only by his admiration for the women who inherited it.”

The admiration is mutual, especially among the literary set. Cockburn is newly married to novelist Kathryn Kilgore, granddaughter of Barney Kilgore, the legendary *Wall Street Journal* editor of the 1940s and 1950s. Previously he squired around Lally Weymouth, who writes for *New York* magazine and *Parade* and is the daughter of *Washington Post* chairman Katharine Graham. Cockburn’s first wife was a feminist novelist, Emma Tennant, sister of Lord Glenconner. Moving from England, Cockburn arrived in New York with Emma II—Emma Rothschild, author of *Paradise Lost*, a study of the decline of the auto industry, and today a professor at MIT.

Many conservatives are irked that the *Wall Street Journal*, where Alex writes a column, didn’t complete Cockburn’s disgrace by booting him off the op-ed page. But the *Journal*, in an avuncular editorial, dismissed the whole business as ridiculous. “We didn’t hire Alex to be a button-down Caesar’s wife. In fact, we didn’t hire him to

be objective. We hired him because of his biases, which we’re sure are totally incorruptible.” The editorial went on to tease Alex affectionately about constantly being late with his copy. At present, Cockburn is also roosting at *The Nation*, a far less visible (and significantly less lucrative) perch than the *Village Voice*.

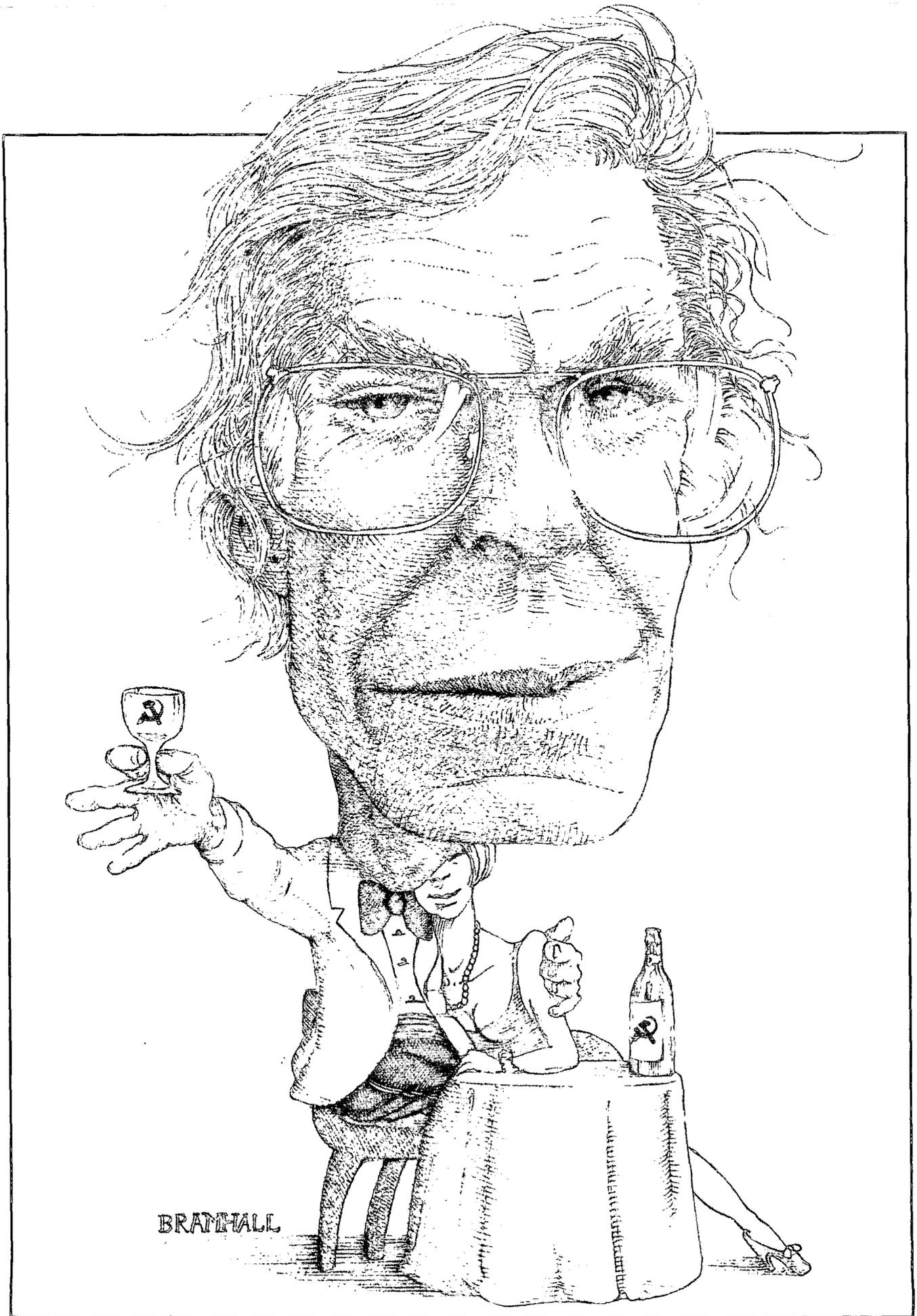
Virulently anti-Israel, Cockburn attributes much of the fallout from his misadventure with the Arab money to a deeply ingrained prejudice against Arabs in the U.S. His severest critic at the *Village Voice* was reportedly the radical feminist editor Ellen Willis, whom he described as “the worst Zionist at the *Voice*.”

Victor Navasky, editor of *The Nation*, suggests that Cockburn’s petty slip was simply an excuse to get rid of him. “I would not be surprised,” said the dapper, bearded Navasky during an interview in his Greenwich Village office, “to learn that any number of conservative columnists have an affiliation with the American Enterprise Institute. Nor would I be surprised that any number of left-leaning columnists have an affiliation with the Institute for Policy Studies. If that’s so, what’s so different about the Arab Institute?”

Navasky credits the *New York Times*, whose executive editor, Abe Rosenthal, has been savaged often by Cockburn, for blowing the incident out of proportion. The *Times* deemed the miniscandal sufficiently important to put it in its index of major events of the day twice; according to Jack Newfield, an investigative reporter at the *Voice*, “Once it got into the *Times*, and the *Washington Post*, [Voice editor] David Schneiderman felt he was being judged.” Gossip columnist Liz Smith offered an only slightly less Machiavellian interpretation of the fiasco. “Ever since Watergate, people are standing around hoping you’ll forget to pay your maid or whatever.” Cockburn, she thinks, is the victim of “an awful lot of hysterical, self-righteousness within the press.”

Toeing the Soviet line while mingling with high society is an old Cockburn tradition. Alex is the son of Claud Cockburn (1904–81), one of England’s most respectable

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Drawing by Bill Bramhall for Policy Review

left-wing journalists, a man canonized by Philip Toynbee as “the patron saint of the 30s.” The elder Cockburn edited the communist journal *The Week* (Edward VIII was a subscriber and almost a contributor) and was briefly *Pravda*’s London correspondent until his Kremlin contact was executed and Cockburn’s dispatches abruptly ceased to run. He also contributed the term Cliveden Set to the lexicon to denote the English aristocrats who cavorted about the Astor estate and advocated appeasement to Hitler. Alex’s mother is Patricia Arbutnot Cockburn, daughter of a rich Anglo-Irish family, who chronicled Claud’s career in a book entitled *The Years of The Week*.

A number of Alex watchers have noticed Cockburn’s remarkable devotion to his father. “It’s the thing I kind of like about him,” says James Ring Adams, a member of the *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial board, “and it explains his behavior. I sometimes have the idea that Alex’s left-wing ideology is loyalty to his father. He’s too cynical to be a real leftist. But if one has to be a leftist, that’s the most appealing reason. It’s obvious from his writing that he worships his father.”

Alex’s own interpretation is slightly different. “I thought my father was very admirable,” said Cockburn, as he sat in Bocuse, a green-awned Upper West Side restaurant. Looking like a scruffy version of Rupert Brooke, with his orange and white kerchief tied around his neck and his felt hat resting on a chair, Cockburn said, “I respect my father as a writer and radical journalist, and obviously I’m aware that I live in the shadow of what might be described as a family trade. I thought my father was a hero, but to say I worshipped him implies some blind, unthinking fealty.” As he sipped his red wine, he moodily said that people who attribute his beliefs to filial loyalty “will use anything to disqualify a guy from being an intellectual contender.”

Nevertheless, Alex chose to honor his father by naming his new *Nation* column “Beat the Devil” after a 1950s novel by Claud Cockburn (under the pseudonym of James Helvick) that became a money-making John Huston movie. (The proceeds paid for the educations of Claud’s three sons.) And, oddly for a dedicated Marxist, Alexander Cockburn admits to feeling “kinship” and warmth for such ancestors as Henry Lord Cockburn, the great Scottish magistrate and author of *Memorials of His Time*. He bragged to a reporter who had come up from Washington that morning that another of his forebears, Admiral Sir George Cockburn, had torched Washington during the War of 1812. And Alex is *notoriously* not averse to letting drop his kinship to the snobbish novelist Evelyn Waugh. (Waugh is a cousin.)

Polonius, Attila, & Bull at the Voice

Alex grew up in Ireland, went to Glen Almond, a boarding school in Scotland, and read literature at Oxford’s Keble College (not very fashionable but the same college Claud attended). He then embarked on a London journalistic career. Too old to join the halcyon days of student revolt at Oxford, he and Robin Blackburn, son of a member of Parliament famous for morality crusades, edited a 1969 collection of essays entitled *Student Power*.

In the introduction, Alex extolled “the astonishing works of Mao Tse Tung” and explained how radicals could turn their universities into “red bases.” The style was grimly serious and heavy on dialectical analysis.

Cockburn was also a prominent member of the *New Left Review*, a neo-Marxist journal on whose editorial committee he still serves, an editor at the *Times Literary Supplement*, and a contributor to the *New Statesman*, the left-wing weekly founded by Beatrice and Sidney Webb. But Cockburn’s most memorable London journalistic adventure was the founding of a radical news weekly called *Seven Days*. The radicals on the journal raised money by throwing parties, and the short-lived newspaper published dramatic photography and stories on such topics as a Nazi reunion and reports on the

Even many of Cockburn’s adversaries enjoyed his press column for its refusal to take U.S. journalists as seriously as they take themselves.

Oman War written by Fred Halliday, who is working now at IPS.

It was around the same time that Cockburn’s marriage to Emma Tennant, several years his senior, was breaking up. New York gossip columnist Taki described Tennant as “wiser, less rich and a better writer” after the end of the Cockburn marriage. Cockburn and Tennant have a teenaged daughter named Daisy, who lives in England with her mother. Alex adamantly rejects the heiress label for “poor old Emma Tennant” who “doesn’t have a dime.” He attributes this sorry state to England’s inheritance laws, which are weighted in favor of males; Tennant’s brother Colin Tennant (Lord Glenconner) is undeniably very rich. (Aside from Alex Cockburn, Emma Tennant has also been married to the British writer and *Private Eye* founder Christopher Booker and also to a son of the Oxford novelist Henry Green. During the mid-1970s, Tennant was editor of the avant-garde literary magazine called *Bananas*, which Auberon Waugh dismissed as pretentious rubbish.)

According to *Private Eye*’s editor Richard Ingrams, Cockburn hadn’t made much of a name in British journalism when he left for New York in 1972. He was simply known around town as a radical journalist. But the U.S. offered Alex scope for his talent: His Mandarin style was a novelty in the U.S. As a recent arrival, Alex parlayed some vague connection with the *Village Voice*’s Bartle Bull into a luncheon invitation. Bull wasn’t charmed and was quoted disparaging Alex as “an admiral in the British sponge fleet.” But publisher Dan Wolf was captivated, and he gave Cockburn the job of running the *Voice*’s fledgling book division, which he did for two years. During this period Cockburn managed to bring

out only one book: a psychoanalytic study on chess by one Alexander Cockburn—*Idle Passion: Chess and the Dance of Death*.

When the book operation folded, Cockburn started writing the “Press Clips” column that gave him his niche. He also wrote political stories with James Ridgeway, but it was in “Press Clips” that his witty, snobbish style fully came across. Certainly “Press Clips” was the only column around that routinely dropped recondite references to various Roman emperors, Monsignor Knox, and characters from Evelyn Waugh novels. Cockburn sprinkled Latin phrases about the page.

Unlike stodgier American journalists, he enjoyed a nasty, *ad hominem* attack. Once he twitted *New Republic* editor-in-chief Martin Peretz (whose pro-Israel politics do not endear him to Alex) as a man whose “saddle bags bulge with money from his second wife, an heiress to the Singer fortune.” He alluded to columnist James Reston’s long-winded seniority by referring to the venerable Timesman as Polonius. He named another Timesman, Max Frankel, Attila the Hun. His unkindest cuts, however, went for Norman Podhoretz, whom he dubbed The Frother. Silly comments would often appear bracketed in a box headlined “The Frother Seal of Approval,” and Alex loved to imply that Podhoretz was an embarrassment to his publishers at the American Jewish Committee. Podhoretz in turn said over the telephone that he is “still unhappy with the *Wall Street Journal* for giving him that column.” (Originally, *Journal* editor Bob Bartley received so much criticism for hiring Cockburn that he printed up “Alex Cockburn Complaint Tickets” and distributed them to carpenters.)

Even many of Cockburn’s political adversaries enjoyed his press column for its refusal to take U.S. journalists as seriously as they take themselves. Cockburn, for example, once quoted the *Washington Post*’s premier political pundit, David Broder, glooming over “a pensive, introspective Christmas season in America” and then reported: “I saw David Broder a few days ago in New Hampshire. Appearances can deceive, but he did not look notably troubled to me. Not frisky, mind you, but then I doubt that Broder ever looks frisky. He bears the responsibilities of office too heavily for that.” In his final “Press Clips” column after his suspension from the *Voice*, Cockburn recalled that *Voice* editor David Schneiderman had been “touchingly pleased” to be invited to serve on a Pulitzer Prize committee. Cockburn compared the honor to “the owner of the town brothel being invited to the annual bash of the Chamber of Commerce.”

Socializing for a Free Lunch

Aside from his father, Alex Cockburn’s main media hero was Larry Stern, national editor of the *Washington Post* who died while jogging on Martha’s Vineyard in 1979. Cockburn and Teofila Acosta of the Cuban interest section eulogized Stern at a memorial service held at the Friends Meeting House in northwest Washington. Later Alex wrote a revealing obituary for Stern entitled “Death in August” in the *Village Voice*. He praised Stern as a journalist who “knew what the facts were long



Admiral Sir George Cockburn, a forebear, torched Washington during the War of 1812.

before he discovered what they actually were” and who was “not one of those pallid souls who need a roadmap to get from a gas shortage to Exxon headquarters.” He recalled that Larry Stern had been “a Trotskyite in his hot youth” and elegantly concluded with a Latin tag: “*Timor mortis conturbat me.*” (Larry Stern’s death had also been a personal loss for Cockburn. Stern had been part of a foursome, also including English journalist and nuke-knocker Peter Pringle and John Ritch of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that for several years gathered at Cockburn’s New York apartment for Christmas dinner.)

Many journalists can be very tiresome delivering homilies on the theme of objectivity, but Alex Cockburn has flaunted his contempt for this rubric of the profession. He has, in fact, written several flattering articles on an escapade in which his father and Otto Katz, a famous 1930s propagandist, invented a battle whole cloth to further the cause of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. The Battle of Tetuan was designed to convince Leon Blum, premier of France, whose government was officially noninterventionist, to unofficially continue allowing arms for the rebels to cross the Catalan frontier. “Our chief anxiety,” the elder Cockburn wrote, in his memoirs *I, Claud*, “was that, with nothing but the plans in our guide books, which were without contours, we might have Democrats and Fascists firing at one another from either end of an avenue that some much-travelled night editor would know had a hump in the middle.” The day the story appeared a delegation of Communists



“Barbarous ethnics” in Afghanistan. “If ever a country deserved rape,” wrote Cockburn when the Soviets invaded, “it is Afghanistan.”

called on Blum, and their requests regarding arms were met.

One of the main questions about Alex is his personal view of the Soviet Union. He capably deflects inquiries on the subject by conjuring up the specter of cold-war hysteria. Certainly his father never wavered from his support for the Soviets, even during the disillusioning days of the Soviet-Nazi Pact. He did quietly resign from the Party in 1948, but he never gave his reasons. Christopher Hitchens, the *Nation*'s Washington correspondent and a friend of the Cockburn family, thinks that Claud was highly critical of those who publicly recanted their Soviet sympathies. His departure from the Party remains a mystery.

“The real question for Marxists,” Hitchens said during a conversation at Suzanne's, a trendy wine bar in Washington, “is the Soviet Union. Almost no school of

Marxism now believes that the Soviet Union is a socialist society. I don't think Alexander believes it is. My view is that the Soviet Union is an enemy of socialism. But Alex takes a longer view of history.” Cockburn even defended the Soviet downing of the KAL airliner, and he was positively ferocious about “the barbarous ethnics” of Afghanistan when the Soviet army rolled into that country. “I yield to none in my sympathy for those prostrate beneath the Russian jack-boot,” he wrote, “but, if ever a country deserved rape, it is Afghanistan.”

The Big Question about Alex, of course, is not his politics, but why he's so fond of heiresses. Alex is visibly weary of the subject. “If you can prove that I've spent my life living in the lap of luxury and floating around in Rolls Royces,” he said, “then you'd have a point. They [people who bring this up] fantasize a wonderful life for me, and maybe their lives are s--tty. Maybe they are boring people.” Hitchens thinks Alex “lost money on the deal” because “going with rich people is expensive.” Alex is frequently “strapped for the price of lunch.” Nora Ephron says: “Alex gets under people's skin because he's immensely charming and such a wonderful writer—it doesn't seem fair that he gets to be left wing and have so much fun. It's as if he's supposed to be suffering. People act like to be a serious member of the Left you have to walk around in blue jeans and eat Blimpies.”

As a matter of fact, Alex lives in a rather elegantly dilapidated co-op on Central Park West. The apartment is

furnished in randomly bought Art Deco objects with a garish 1950s TV with a smoked-mirrored console. Bucose, where Alex consented to give an interview after weeks of cajolery, is a few blocks away. (As for the interview, everybody had accurately predicted that Alex would play the reluctant debutante and give in charmingly.)

Successful writers traditionally have the run of society, but Cockburn's party line raises eyebrows at the *Village Voice*. “I think he lives in a different world from mine,” said Jack Newfield. “He goes to Elaine's. He gets invited to dinner parties at Lillian Hellman's. There are a lot of writers and celebrities he hangs out with, and they're not people like [*Voice* columnist Nat] Hentoff and me.” When Liz Smith spotted a picture of Alex escorting Lally Weymouth to a party in *Women's Wear Daily*, she

dashed off a note teasing Alex that “your father would turn over in his grave to see you in black tie going to a party at the Bill Paley’s.” Actually Claud was quite capable of enjoying a country house party with aristocratic neighbors at Youghal (in Ireland) and even kept hunters in his stable.

Invisible Wit

Even so, the elder Cockburn had to struggle to keep going financially. “Alex’s father,” said Hitchens, “was used to them sending the van around to get the furniture. He’d say ‘F--- you! I’m going to have an article in Malcolm Muggeridge’s magazine, and then I’ll pay you.’ The Cockburns didn’t have a petit bourgeois fear of disgrace.” As a young journalist, Alex often had to weigh in with financial support for Claud during his final years of sickness in Ireland.

Alex at times sounds a bit like a right-winger manqué. He exults over his beloved 1962 Chrysler Imperial as “one of the perfect expressions of postwar American confidence.” He says he came to the U.S. because it is “one of the most fascinating places in the world” and because “like many before me I realized there is a vast potential for the realization of man’s noblest ideals in America.” “But some things make me bitter,” Alex complains. “Being called anti-American by William F. Buck-

ley! I’m anti-Buckley but not anti-American.”

This is a crucial point in Alexander Cockburn’s career. The drab *Nation* is a far less influential forum than the *Voice* and doesn’t offer Cockburn as much exposure. Cockburn was on indefinite suspension without pay from the *Voice*, but he refused to return when Schneiderman offered him his old job back in April. Some critics of Cockburn may rejoice that (at least for the time being) the country’s wittiest philoKremlin isn’t quite so visible.

Meanwhile, Alex Cockburn is carrying on the tradition over at the *Nation*. His first column, which unfortunately hit the newsstands during Yuri Andropov’s funeral, was devoted to peddling the official Soviet line of the previous week—namely, that Andropov wasn’t deathly sick. “Yuri Andropov and Franklin Roosevelt have more in common than is generally supposed,” began a column that quoted Zhores Medvedev to the effect that Yuri Andropov would soon appear in a wheelchair. Alex brightly implied that this would be a boon for “disabled people in the Soviet Union, who have scandalously few facilities of the sort available in the West.” Then Alex teasingly offered Andropov some advice: “If he had any sense,” Alex wrote, “Andropov would press for a summit at Yalta with Reagan and appear in his wheelchair, wearing a cloak and gripping a cigarette holder at a jaunty angle.” Carry on, Comrade Alex! 

The Big Story in 1984 Is Economics

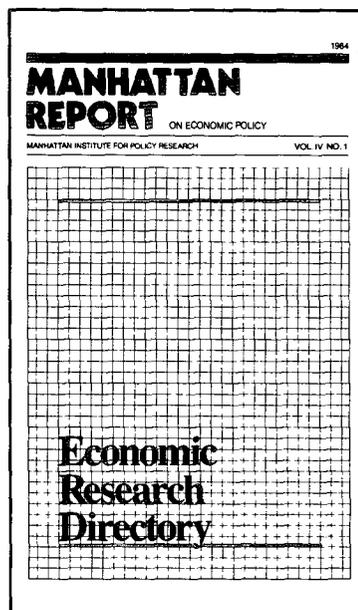
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Medicine in the Conservative Opportunity Society

Representative Newt Gingrich

Health care is today the most expensive sector in American life. It takes one and a half times as large a share of the gross national product as national defense, and of all our activities, its costs have risen the most dramatically. Within a generation, if health expenditures continue to rise at their present rate, they will amount to 20 cents of every dollar earned in America.

This is hardly surprising. In a free society, people will exert great pressure on their political leaders to ensure access to medicine and doctors. Our public commitment to a healthier nation has yielded many happy results, including longer lifespans, an easing of pain, and a remarkable drop in death rates.

Our greatest success in health care over the last 200 years has not come from better hospitals and doctors, however. The real advances have come from eliminating the epidemic diseases that once took so many lives.

The eradication of cholera, smallpox, yellow fever, typhus, typhoid, and bubonic plague has saved more lives than all other medical breakthroughs combined. Thanks to the destruction of the parasites that caused these dread diseases, we now live in a fundamentally new era of human history.

The model of this great change may be the eradication of polio, only 30 years ago a common affliction. Thousands upon thousands of children were paralyzed and faced the prospect of living their lives in an iron lung. Their only hope was from improvements in iron lung technology or from better techniques of rehabilitation. But Jonas Salk's polio vaccine transformed the world, moving beyond these marginal improvements in treating the symptoms, to the virtual elimination of the disease itself.

Today, as we try to achieve quality health care at reasonable cost, we are trapped by a focus on tactical or at best operational changes within the existing vision and strategies of health care. We are trying to invent marginally better iron lungs. What we need are breakthroughs that will reshape the system of health care.

Otherwise, the inexorably rising costs of the current system are going to lead to an even more bureaucratic structure of semisocialized medicine. A recent liberal

Democratic proposal called for jailing doctors for six months if they failed to obey government regulations on accepting Medicare patients while working in a hospital that receives government funds. First we designed a Medicare system with so much red tape that people didn't want to work with it. Then we threatened to jail people for failing to participate in a system we had fouled up. It was arrogance of big government at its worst.

The Reagan administration has also failed to break out of the liberal welfare state mentality. The administration is imposing a uniform set of payments for "diagnostically related" treatments, which will involve more bureaucracy and more paperwork. Any national bureaucratic response, even the best intentioned, is ultimately doomed to failure because of the basic nature of the centralized welfare state.

We need a less expensive, less centralized approach to providing quality health care for everyone. Here are seven ideas for getting there:

- *Preventive medicine through personal responsibility.* Within a decade, a combination of good health habits and home health care could reduce the total number of hospital days by 20 percent. That would save substantially more money than the bureaucratic controls we are moving toward.

We must shape a vision of personal responsibility, so that people take care of themselves by watching their diets and habits. We may want to reward people who do not need health care.

For instance, we could simply offer a \$500 year-end bonus to people who have not used Medicare during the year. This would make it worthwhile for citizens to pay up to \$500 on their own care instead of using the Medicare system. The long-term effect of rewarding people for watching their health, taking care of themselves, and being responsible for minor health costs would more than pay for such a year-end bonus.

NEWT GINGRICH, a Republican congressman, represents the Sixth District of Georgia. This article is adapted from a chapter in his forthcoming book, *Window of Opportunity*, written with Marianne Gingrich and David Drake.