



## THE GOSPEL RECONSIDERED

*Over the years, this magazine has become identified with a core of ideas—from drafting the affluent into the military to taking away their Social Security to making them pay higher income tax—jokingly referred to in-house as the “Gospel.” Longtime Monthly readers would be surprised to see an issue go by without mention of at least some of the Gospel. They would be equally surprised to find those ideas under attack. Some magazines consider themselves roundtables for discussion; not the Monthly. “Why should I publish something I don’t agree with?” has been the philosophy of Charles Peters, the editor in chief, since he founded the magazine 20 years ago.*

*Not surprisingly, this philosophy has been a source of occasional frustration among the editors who have worked here, who inevitably find themselves disagreeing with parts of the party line. This issue lets them have their say. As part of our effort to mark our 20th anniversary year, we’ve asked our contributing editors to tell us where they disagree with the Gospel. Eleven of them weighed in. Charles Peters responds on page 52.*

# The Rich Don't Serve

by Michael Kinsley

**O**ne chapter of the Gospel According to *The Washington Monthly* that I have some trouble with is Charlie Peters’s enthusiasm for a military draft. This bad idea in its own right also reflects two characteristic defects of the Peters Gospel generally. First, a slight authoritarian streak: a too-casual willingness to say that something ought to be required just because it would be nice (such as Charlie’s notorious proposal for a law banning banks from the ground floors of office buildings). Second, an occasional failure to think through the practical difficulties of achieving some desirable end through a seemingly simple policy initiative (such as the idea of giving a capital gains break to “new” and “productive” investments only).

It certainly would be nice if the armed services represented a cross section of the population; if every citizen made a patriotic contribution to America before going off on his or her own life course; if there were one guaranteed occasion of social class mixing in our increasingly stratified society. These are the advantages Charlie sees in a draft, based on his own experience in World War II. (These, plus saving the government money.) But telling people they must give up two years of their lives is a major infringement on freedom, for which there ought to be a major reason. “The defense of our country” is, of course, a major reason, but the defense of our country is not at stake. It is being defended adequately without a draft, by people who are in the military because they wish to be there. The people who make defense policy are not merely satisfied with current arrangements—they actively prefer a volunteer force to a draft, for obvious reasons. Are the genuine but amorphous spiritual reasons for bringing back a draft more important?

Nicholas Von Hoffman put the practical case against a draft in a nutshell many years ago when he wrote: “Draft old men’s money, not young men’s

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# — So What?

bodies.” One way to look at a draft is as a tax on the difference between what the Army pays you and what it would take to entice you into the Army voluntarily. At some level of pay and benefits, the military can meet its manpower needs without resorting to this tax. Von Hoffman’s point was: why not pay for the national defense by taxing the people who can best afford it?

Look at this economic point another way. Today, we actually *are* paying enough to fill the Army without a draft (though, of course, we are borrowing the money instead of taxing ourselves to raise it—a different problem). No more soldiers are needed. A draft, therefore, would be pointless unless it accompanied a reduction in pay and benefits to get rid of some of those volunteers and make room for the draftees. That might well make the Army more socially representative. But what would happen to those who join up voluntarily under current policies? One of two things. Either they would be in the Army anyway (as volunteers or draftees), only earning a lot less; or they would be doing something else (or possibly nothing else) when they’d rather be in the Army under current arrangements. In short, however “unfair” it may seem to fill the Army with volunteers, it’s no favor to would-be volunteers to shut off this option in order to put others unwillingly in their place.

In fact, today’s volunteer military is reasonably socially diverse. There aren’t a lot of Groton graduates, and the poorest of the underclass aren’t wanted or needed. But between these two extremes, it’s fairly representative of society as a whole. And to the extent it isn’t, so what? Why should the military be a perfect social cross section? In particular, if black Americans find in the armed services an especially good opportunity for self-advancement with less discrimination, and as a result are disproportionately represented there, I think that’s something America can be reasonably proud of rather than the reverse. In a way, it’s insulting to those who have chosen military service, either as a career or as a useful life experience that will lead somewhere else, to say that what they’re doing is so undesirable that others who aren’t in-

terested should be forced to do it in their place.

Even if military service is made so undesirable that there are *no* volunteers, there will still be the practical problem of what to do with all the draftees. The military needs only a small fraction of any age cohort. What about the rest? The Vietnam-era solution was a wildly generous and unfair system of exemptions. Since this episode was precisely the origin of the *Monthly’s* draft enthusiasm, that option’s presumably out. There are only two others: a lottery and a system of universal service that would include worthy nonmilitary work such as the Peace Corps and teaching in the inner city and so on.

A lottery would still be unfair, of course. It would just be unfair at random, rather than on perceived race and class grounds. If the volunteer army (as opposed to the old draft-with-exemptions) were truly unfair, that would be an improvement. But to snatch two years from just a small fraction of the population against their will, and to make room for them by reducing opportunity for people who want it, all in the name of “fairness,” seems insane. As for drafting everybody and then finding work for them to do, that surely would wipe out any conceivable savings from underpaying soldiers. You don’t have to be a neoconservative to predict that it would be a bureaucratic nightmare. And you don’t need to be overly pessimistic about human nature to doubt that involuntary timeservers are going to put their hearts into their assigned tasks.

Having made the case, now let me backtrack. First, I’m talking about a peacetime draft. Obviously soldiers are needed only in peacetime because of the risk of war, and as a deterrent to war. But there’s a difference between that risk and the much larger and more immediate risk to life and limb that comes from actually being in a war. If we ever find ourselves in an extended land war again—hard to imagine—that’s the time for a draft. Whether having a draft already in place would make starting and pursuing such a war harder—as the Gospel assumes—or easier is, at the very least, unclear.

Second, a new spirit of patriotic service of the sort Charlie longs for, in contrast to the reigning spirit of the Reagan years, is an attractive vision. You can imagine a culture where it was more or less assumed that everybody would do a year or two of military or civilian service after high school or college, before heading off into “the real world.” It wouldn’t even offend my libertarian principles too much if kids were given a slight nudge through provisos in student loans and so on. But it seems to me that encouraging voluntary service is a more promising way to create such a new spirit than telling young people: “OK, buddy, it’s either work with Alzheimer’s victims, go to jail, or move to Canada.” □



# Gee, I Kind of Like Fiction

by Joseph Nocera

A few years after *The Washington Monthly* was founded, Tom Wolfe, who was then promoting what he called The New Journalism, wrote the following: "So the novelist has been kind enough to leave behind for our boys quite a nice little body of material: the whole of American society, in effect." The New Journalism is quite passe, of course, even for Tom Wolfe, but I think that little sentence of his sums up rather nicely this magazine's stance towards both journalism and fiction. On the one hand, it has consistently banged the drums for a particular kind of extremely ambitious journalism—a journalism that tackled the major problems of American society with a combination of empathy and intensive reporting and hard, original thinking and literary grace. On the other hand, it has just as consistently dismissed virtually all fiction since Mark Twain, describing it generally (as Wolfe did) as out of touch, irrelevant to the modern world. Matthew Cooper's article last December decrying the lack of "a new Dickens" is only the most recent example.

Who can doubt that the magazine was right to champion its brand of journalism? In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the only "name" writers doing that kind of work were Robert Caro and David Halberstam. Now one sees it everywhere; last year alone gave us two stunning examples of how far the genre has come: Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*, and Taylor Branch's *Parting The Waters*. (See Annual Book Award, page 23.) Both are rich, empathetic studies of important American events—the former dealing with Vietnam, the latter with the

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## What Halberstam could learn from Dostoevski

civil rights movement—and both have a scope and an ambition that are staggering. To the extent that fiction has dropped the ball in examining large societal problems—and I won't deny that it has—journalism has taken up the challenge, and we are all better off.

Nevertheless, I think the magazine has been wrong to be so dismissive of the virtues of the modern novel. Yes, the scourge of minimalism abounds, and yes, there are too many novels revolving around life inside a university English department. Then again, there is also a lot of bad journalism. My point is simply that there are things a good novel can do—places it can go; thoughts it can think; depths it can plumb—that even the best nonfiction can never hope to approximate.

The case for the modern novel, it seems to me, is quite the opposite of *The Washington Monthly's* yearning for a fictional approach to social problems that will prick the conscience of the nation. A novel's purpose in the modern age—and I think it is a noble one—is to explore the inner life with a richness and a subtlety that nonfiction can never match. A writer who is dependent (as all journalists are) on the act of interviewing to collect his information can never get completely to the bone; there will always be a few layers left unpeeled. Thus it is left to the novelist to lay bare the interior life. This is no small thing, for it is there that one gets to the crux of why people act and think the way they do. It is in those