

## Letter From Washington

by Samuel Francis

### Left, Right, Up, Down



Since the time of the French Revolution, the labels "left" and "right" have served as universal symbols on the road atlas of modern politics. The exact meaning of the symbols has never been clear, especially when they are applied outside the narrow streets of practical politics and extended to the broader ranges of philosophy, religion, and even aesthetics. Nevertheless, like "A.M." and "P.M." or "A.D." and "B.C.," left and right have become indispensable to the mental and verbal organization of otherwise incomprehensible phenomena.

Because they originally pertained to the different sides of parliamentary assemblies in the wake of the French Revolution and served to distinguish those, on the left, who supported the revolution and its legacy from those, on the right, who opposed it, left and right might retain some clear meaning if employed in that sense. Insofar as the ideological legacy of the revolution is captured in its motto of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," and insofar as contemporary politics still revolves around these terrible pleasantries, then we might continue to lump certain schools of politicians and political thinkers as "left" and others as "right."

But throughout the 1980's (and probably henceforward) such schools seem to be out for a long vacation. What is called the "right" in American politics today seems to invoke and take seriously all the slogans and clichés that derive from "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" and that would ordinarily locate their exponents on the left. Its champions talk of the "global democratic revolution," universal "human rights," "equality as a conservative principle," and the final emancipation of mankind from war, racial and national

prejudice, tyranny, and poverty through universal economic and technological progress. No noble savage of Enlightenment lore nor his less noble descendants who pulled the ropes of the guillotine in the Year One would raise an eyebrow at the rhetoric and ideology of the contemporary American right.

Things aren't much different on what is called the "left." While once only rightish pessimists such as Spengler or Henry Adams talked about the decline, suicide, or dissolution of the West, today that theme is a staple on the rubber chicken circuit of liberal Democrats. Newly elected Democratic Majority Leader Richard Gephardt sounded the note when his colleagues elevated him to his new post in the House, and last year he ran his presidential campaign on the issue of "economic nationalism," which Michael Dukakis also picked up when his own campaign ran into trouble. Whatever the economic merits of their ideas, that issue presupposes the reality and significance of national identity and contradicts the universalism implicit in the "Fraternity" that *sans culotte* armies spread across Europe in the 1790's.

Moreover, *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen, whose writings usually seem to be archetypal expressions of what the collective unconscious of conservatives want liberals to say, recently penned a column that older conservatives ought to find unexceptionable. Mr. Cohen inveighed against the homogenization of America through shopping malls, fast-food emporia, motel chains, housing developments, and "restorations" such as those in Williamsburg and Old Town in Virginia. The ideological premise of such homogenization, of course, is again the cosmopolitanism and universalism that informed the French Revolution and that liberated souls such as Mr. Cohen have trumpeted throughout their careers. Whether he has as yet grasped the contradiction between his recent column and his lifelong convictions I do not know.

One gentleman of the left who has

grasped it, however, is the radical historian Christopher Lasch, whose recent writings reveal a profound suspicion of the abstractions that lurk in "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." In a recent essay in the *New Oxford Review*, Mr. Lasch dwells on his intellectual autobiography, showing how his personal and intellectual development eventually led him to shatter the very idols of the left to which he had paid homage all his life. Noting that the left's own road map of America was divided between New York and Washington on the one hand and what it regarded as "the vast hinterland beyond the Appalachians—the land of the Yahoo, the John Birch Society, and the Ku Klux Klan" on the other, Mr. Lasch expressed his emerging disenchantment with the contours of that map.

By the late 1970's and early 1980's I no longer had much confidence either in the accuracy of this bird's-eye view of America or in the progressive view of the future with which it was so closely associated.

"Middle Americans" had good reason, it seemed to me, to worry about the family and the future their children were going to inherit. My study of the family suggested a broader conclusion: that the capacity for loyalty is stretched too thin when it tries to attach itself to the hypothetical solidarity of the whole human race. It needs to attach itself to specific people and places, not to an abstract ideal of universal human rights. We love particular men and women, not humanity in general. The dream of universal brotherhood, because it rests on the sentimental fiction that men and women are all the same, cannot survive the discovery that they differ.

Mr. Lasch's thoughts in this passage, one would think, would induce our keepers of the conservative flame to

spread a feast of welcome for him. But don't unfold your napkin just yet.

Mr. Lasch neither calls nor thinks of himself as a conservative, and in that he is probably wise. Were he to do so, passages such as the one quoted above would be greeted with the most vituperative abuse from those who claim that title today. The self-appointed swamis of the right, from their yachts and Alpine retreats, would compare him to excrement, even as they perspired over the closing of the American mind and preached the virtues of pluralism. Cries of "anti-Semite," "xenophobe," "nativist," and even "agrarian" would pierce the walls of his study and silence his animadversions on the subjects of progress and universalism. His academic career would be threatened by unsolicited phone calls to his dean from spiteful colleagues. The Tories who prance through the parlors of Manhattan and Georgetown would make sedulous inquiry as to his thoughts during the civil rights movement while awarding bountiful grants to decrepit social democrats and second-rate defectors from SDS. Were Mr. Lasch to spread his sails to the winds from the American right today, he would soon find himself marooned in an archipelago of small towns, intact families, and agrarian communities far from the political sear lanes plied by the clipper ships of self-proclaimed "conservatives."

Alas, Mr. Lasch is not typical of the contemporary left, however, nor are the ruminations emitted by the estimable Cohen or the honorable Gephardt. Mr. Lasch is correct that the mainstream of left-liberalism in America today remains nearly comatose with dread of the mainstream of America itself. But the great fear on the left seems to be matched on the right by an almost equal aversion to the American heartland. The contemporary right by and large much prefers the pina colodas of the secularized, deracinated megalopolis of the Northeast and the California Fringe to the white lightning of the piney woods, the Rockies, and the Great Plains.

Today, the right talks and thinks like the left, and the left, sometimes, sounds like the right. That kind of confusion suggests that both labels have outlived their usefulness and ought to be put to sleep. They have become prisons that house so many different and conflicting

forces that the interests, values, and aspirations incarcerated in them are unable to find coherent political expression.

The political conflict of the future is likely to be not on the horizontal plane between left and right but along a vertical axis: the Middle-American stratum, which is wedded to the integrity of a distinct national and cultural identity, is sandwiched between an unassimilated underclass and an alienated and increasingly cosmopolitan elite that has subsumed left and right and shares more common ground with snappily dressed Soviet commissars and Japanese corporate executives than with farmers in Kansas, small businessmen in Ohio, union members in Detroit, or fundamentalists in Alabama.

That conflict, of course, is not new, and the American right has waxed fat and happy by claiming to represent one side of it. But today its enchantment with global democracy, a global economy, and a global culture that will displace national particularity render that claim transparently fraudulent.

If the remaining nucleus of American civilization is to survive, it will have to find a new label by which to identify itself and new guardians to lead its struggle.

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## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Of Collard Greens and Kings



My godson was graduated from a Chicago high school last May. To my delight, he wanted to go to a Southern college. Unfortunately he picked Duke, which means that his idea of the South will probably come to include things like the rice diet, deconstructionism, Mercedes Marxism, and holistic therapy with crystals ("voodoo rocks," my buddy Fetzer calls them). Everything's up-to-date at Buck Duke's place, alas.

Nevertheless, the lad is moving in the right geographical direction, and since he will be physically present in Durham for the next four years he may also discover things like Levi Garrett and Shirley Caesar's gospel music and the Durham Bulls (not entirely destroyed by the success of the movie about them). So for a graduation present I gave him a copy of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, produced by a team at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi and just published by the University of North Carolina Press. "Here are a few things you ought to know," I told him.

About 1,300 things, as a matter of fact, that being the number of entries, written by nearly 800 authors, spread over 1,634 pages, and ranging alphabetically from Aaron (Hank) to Zydeco. The time has come, apparently, to talk of many things—of gays and grits and shotgun shacks, of collard greens and Kings (Martin Luther and Elvis I). At \$50 (\$60 after New Year's), this book doesn't cost a great deal more than a good country ham these days; weighing in at nine and a half pounds on my bathroom scale, it's cheaper by weight than rib-eye. Recently a review in *The New York Times* said that the new *Oxford English Dictionary* is a bargain at 11 cents a page: well, this sucker will cost you only three.

Of course, the book is so cheap (yes, yes—relatively speaking) because it has been heavily subsidized, especially by the National Endowment for the Humanities. In other words, it's your tax dollars at work again, and I know nobody asked you. But consider the alternatives. It beats a Congressional pay raise, doesn't it? As Confucius might have said: if extortion is inevitable, relax and enjoy it.

And there is a lot to enjoy here, by no means exclusively for Southerners. One of the pleasures of the book is browsing for odd juxtapositions. In the catchall "History and Manners" section, for instance, a charming sequence of entries goes:

Gardner, Dave  
Gays  
Goo Goo Clusters  
Grits  
Hammond, James Henry