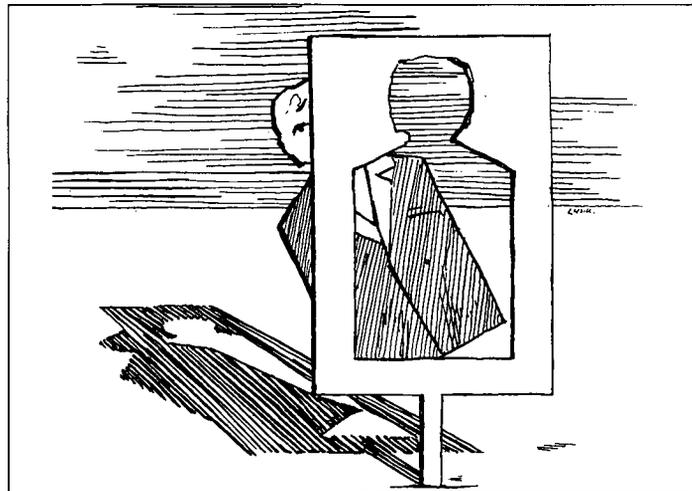


# The American Crisis Without Alternative

by E. Christian Kopff



The most important event of the waning years of the 20th century is the collapse of the last of the great national socialist powers whose rise and fall dominated the generations after World War I. The Axis easily defeated their liberal and imperial opponents, but were crushed by the national socialist regimes of the Soviet Union (*alias* communism) and the United States (*alias* liberalism). The Soviet Union and the United States then dominated the globe in a symbiotic hostility that structured their ideologies and economies for some four decades. The collapse of the Soviet Union, weighed down by imperial obligations and domestic deficit spending, has removed the putative *raison d'être* from America's regime. It too is sinking fast under the weight of the same burdens that ruined Spain, bankrupted England, and disrupted the Soviet Union. Our victory is like the one that ends *Rocky II*. The winner is reeling to the canvas even as the referee announces his opponent's defeat.

The question thoughtful Americans are asking themselves in 1992 does not concern the presidential campaign, which can scarcely effect matters at this late date, but rather the nature of the regime that will follow the collapse of the one installed by President Roosevelt. We cannot afford to be caught like the Roman Senate after the assassination of Caligula, debating the future while the Praetorian Guard escorts Claudius to the troops to settle matters. What are we going to do when the government collapses? Do we want to restore classical republicanism or accept the principle of recrudescing nationalism?

The United States may not remain united, any more than the republics of the Soviet Union. Those who dwell in New York and Washington may be impressed with the homogenization of American society. Examples abound from around the world. My son made friends in his Italian preschool by marching into class waving his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toy (purchased here for about three dollars and worth six times that much in Europe) and proclaiming "Ecco Michelangelo!" The cultural unity implicit in this incident has economic and political implications, but Italy's future lies with the hegemony of a federalist Germany dominating a Europe where language and cul-

ture will keep the divisions as real as the very real economic unity. A similar economic unity with cultural division will probably reign in the states of the former Soviet Union. Those who live in the land ruled from Washington and New York know that a superficial homogenization exists side by side with profound sectional, cultural, social, and racial divisions.

The partition of the former United States into republics, with the states maintaining the minor role that they currently play, is not unthinkable. The Rocky Mountain states may join with the Northwest. Texas may attract the Southwest. The South is still a unity in many respects. California and Quebec may go their own ways. Economic unity there will still be, but political unity may not survive the breakdown of order that may follow the collapse of public credit. Anticommunists liked to say in the waning years of the old Soviet Empire that everybody talked like good Communists, but "nobody believed in the system." The serious sectional and racial divisions of today's America are nonetheless real because they are not discussed by our "free press."

Any government that hopes to succeed the current regime after its economic collapse has to take into account the divisions of American society. The lessons of history indicate that proclaiming restoration is the soundest basis for founding a lasting government. Compare Augustus with Pericles.

Pericles dominated Athens in the middle third of the fifth century, B.C. By the time he rose to power the Athenian democracy had already formed its distinctive institutions and had used its role in the national opposition to Persia to create a maritime empire that dominated the eastern Mediterranean and controlled the grain trade from the Crimea. Pericles was a realist, who used the tribute from the Delian League not only to maintain Athenian naval supremacy, but also to pay the Athenians to perform their duties as citizens and to finance major public works projects. (They got the Parthenon; we get Mapplethorpe.) He proposed a law to limit Athenian citizenship to those born of citizens on both sides. There is reason to believe that he openly spoke of Athenian hegemony over other Greek cities as a "tyranny." He did not pretend respect for the moral and religious ideals of Athens. He left his wife and took a foreign mistress and then tried to get citizen

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status for their son. (After his death the son, Pericles “Junior,” was granted citizenship.) He passed his time with Anaxagoras, who proclaimed the sun no god but a hot rock about the size of Southern Greece, and with Protagoras, for whom “Man was the measure of all things.” Pericles combined clear-eyed political realism with what amounted to open contempt for traditional values. He died shortly after involving Athens in yet another of the imperialistic wars that had marked his rule. Periclean democracy collapsed a generation after his death and the restored democracy of 403 proclaimed its attachment to the moralistic Solonian regime of the early sixth century, not to the antitraditional Periclean model.

Nineteen-year-old Gaius Octavius found himself adopted by his uncle Julius Caesar after the latter’s assassination in 44 B.C. The old Republic of aristocratic hegemony tempered by annual elections and tribunician vetoes had succumbed to the pressures created by Rome’s dominance of the Mediterranean following her victory over Carthage in the late third century. The date of the crisis of the old Republic is debatable. I see it in the attempt by the patrician Claudian family to assume virtual control over the Roman system by means of the brilliant young aristocrat, Tiberius Gracchus, tribune for 133. Under the guise of providing farms for Roman soldiers, Gracchus attempted to seize all the public land in Italy to be distributed by a committee consisting of himself, his teenage brother, Gaius, and his father-in-law, Appius Claudius, the richest man in Rome. To support his plan, he seized control of the tax revenues of the wealthiest state in the Mediterranean, Asia. A riot led by the Pontifex Maximus ended in Tiberius’ death, but the lesson that a combination of welfare for the “deserving poor” and imperialism for the ambitious rich could be the basis for power was well learned by the Roman aristocracy. By 44 B.C. the Mediterranean was in ruins and most of the old Roman nobility dead. The free state was lost, according to Cicero, but it was a “crisis without alternative,” in the words of German historian Christian Meier. No other system seemed acceptable. Julius Caesar sought the imposition of a monarchy, openly asserting the death of the old regime. The knives of Brutus and Cassius vetoed the proposal. Octavian, as Gaius Octavius was called after his adoption, had another plan.

He proclaimed the restoration of the old Republic. He gave control of the free state back to the Senate and the People. In return he received the honorary title Augustus and held the powers of the old Tribunes on a permanent basis. He controlled appointments of commanders of the army and had veto power over senators when they ran provinces. He was thus able to put a stop to the aristocratic feeding frenzy that had nearly bankrupted the Mediterranean in an orgy of welfarism at home and interventionism abroad. If the nobility refused to play by the rules of the common good, the *res publica*, there was now a Princeps, a First Citizen, to act as umpire.

It was clear to ancients and moderns alike that this was not the old Republic. Augustus’ hypocrisy extended beyond politics. He passed laws to enforce sexual morality although he had married his wife when she was pregnant. He boasted of building and restoring temples where he never worshiped. The parallels with Ronald Reagan could be extended. His cynical hypocrisy in manipulating public opinion, in instituting the monarchy his adopted father had planned while publishing his restoration of the Free State has been memorably etched in Ronald Syme’s 1939 classic *Roman Revolution*. Only in his last pages does Syme admit that the Augustan regime rescued the

Mediterranean from a century of violence and exploitation and gave it two hundred years of growth and prosperity. Trade was free from Britain to Egypt, from Syria to Spain. Cities sprang up all over the empire. Moderns can travel a hundred miles into the Libyan desert to visit Roman villas and pass by Roman aqueducts. Literature and art achieved marvelous levels of ambition and accomplishment. Europe dreamed for a thousand years of this government. It fell in the early third century, A.D., after the reign of the realist Septimius Severus, who openly based his government on control of the army and contempt for the facade of constitutional government.

No society that repudiates its traditions prospers. Classical republicanism has roots deep in the ancient world, beginning with the development of democracy from sixth-century *isonomia* and continuing on to the critiques of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle, the application of philosophical theory to the Roman Republic by Polybius and the exemplification of that theory by Sallust, Cicero, and Livy. It was no accident that Machiavelli’s most important work took the form of a commentary on Livy. The Athenian democracy, the Roman Republic, the Florentine state, the American federal Republic were very different states. They all form part of a political tradition that is as old and as important as the intellectual tradition of science. There are other traditions, but this one has deep roots in our nation’s moral infrastructure. The example of Augustus hints that if we are to move beyond our own crisis without alternative, we must do so by proclaiming a restoration.

We moderns must place ourselves inside traditions if we want to innovate. The ancient Greeks could create what no one had dreamed of before, but we are not like that. We create best when looking backwards, like Leopardi’s Italians and Yeats’ Irish. “Cast your minds on other days, that we in future days may be still” what we were and can be again, even though it be something very different from anything “we” ever were. The motto of the party of progress must be “Keep it like it was.” For good or for ill, republicanism is our political tradition.

Augustus’ use of tribunician power bore only a tenuous relationship to the historical Tribunes of the Plebs and their very concrete rights of intercession. There will be many areas where we shall have to improvise in ways that form no part of classical republicanism. We should not hesitate to do so, nor should we heed cries of inconsistency shrieked by bookish republicans and centralizing opponents. There will be advantages in using republicanism to construct our new government. We shall keep decisions on the lowest level and have a good excuse to dismantle hostile institutions. We should not, of course, be led by ideology to attack friendly institutions. The NEA must go; we must encourage the NEH. One promotes pornography; the other encourages the traditions of scholarship that go back to Alexandria. One is a friendly institution, the other hostile. That is not all we know on Earth, but in building a new national order, it is all we need to know. Patrick Buchanan was urged to reject federal matching funds in his campaign. Had he done so, he would have disappeared down the memory hole. Dissidents need to fight with the weapons at hand. We must be loyal to the time-tested principles of the past, but use the living institutions of the present to create our new future.

The “Restoration of Republicanism” will allow us to avoid perils raised by nationalism in three paradigmatic areas: isolationism, protectionism, and immigration. The ideals of a Republic are virtue and autonomy. They do not involve telling oth-

er lands how to behave. The 18th century saw in loyalty to monarch the essence of political virtue. Our Founding Fathers came to think otherwise, but they did not proclaim the superiority of our system to all others. It was better for us and that was enough. It should be enough for us too. We should recognize de facto governments in all countries—Croatia, Haiti, Algeria, China, wherever. We do not know that military dictatorship is worse for Haiti or Algeria than what democracy can offer them. President Nixon tells us that “we cannot remain at peace in a world at war.” We did so for a century, with occasional lapses due to clumsiness and inexperience. Nationalism has traditionally needed enemies to foster unity. A republic aims at attaining the security of its citizens, and that effort takes all its energies. Given our disastrous economic and educational situation, the way of republican virtue is also the way of national prudence. If we devote ourselves to educating our citizenry, trading with everyone not at war, and discouraging predatory trading within our boundaries—and it is opposition to predatory trading that has led some to call us “protectionists”—we shall have done our duty. We shall still need a standing army to defend our nation in the dangerous period that is coming. Its commitment should be to defend the American Republic, however, not “democracy.”

European nationalism developed out of the monarchies that formed the nation-state. Citizenship was given to all born in the king’s domain, *les régnicoles*. Republics from Athens on down have had another ideal. The citizen is chosen by the group. Parturition on alien soil after swimming the Big River establishes nothing. Even generations of habitation is not enough to validate the citizenship of a metic. Without this distinction, one implicit in ancient political thought and essential to our national identity since Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, our nation cannot recover from the financial and cultural ravages of a dying national socialist regime founded on and historically heir to an imperial ideal. Again, national prudence is linked to republican virtue. If the republican insight needs validation, let us hold a national plebiscite. We support states’ or regional rights on many topics—abortion, education, public support for the arts—but not on citizenship. There is no area where traditional republicanism has more to say to a new American regime.

So we proclaim the restoration of the old Republic, knowing that we shall be founding a new state. Are we not Jesuitical casuists, perhaps even Straussians? Are we not hypocrites like Augustus? Would it not be better to imitate Pericles, who was an honest man and a realist? Well, was he a realist? “Righteousness is an essential part of *Realpolitik*,” the great German historian Hermann Strassburger tells us. Who molded a system that brought prosperity and creativity to most of the known world for centuries, and who led his country dancing the downward path to defeat and ruin? Augustus forged a new system by proclaiming its roots in and its loyalty to the old Republic. Pericles ruined his state by undermining its foundations in traditional morality and religion. The new is born out of the old. Nothing is born from a barren desert.

We cannot expect the government that will emerge from the collapse of the Roosevelt regime to resemble the Constitution Washington helped create, never mind the loose confederation that won the tax revolt against the British Crown. As Augustus saw, the only basis for creating the new institutions we need in the face of economic and moral bankruptcy is a commitment to the ideals that served as the basis of national unity and personal creativity in the past. The attainment of truth, freedom,

and creativity rests on belonging to a tradition that fosters those ideals. Not all traditions do, but we have access to one that does. I cannot predict what government will emerge from the confusion of the near future. The American nation that we have to create may not even have the same boundaries as the United States of America. If we proclaim the ideals of classical republicanism and the public religion, ethics, and education typically associated with that tradition, our new government will win the hearts of the people and will serve as the basis of prosperity, creativity, and, yes, perhaps even of freedom. We must not believe that a healthy society, or a creative individual, can live on bread alone or on scientific observations alone. In the end, men live by stories, by myths, by examples of virtue and excellence, by religion. As George Washington said, “Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

As we strive to create a new government, we must never forget our duty to awaken our nation to anamnesis, to remembering what we knew. The laughter and slander of the lackeys of a dying regime must not deter us. “To keep it the way it was” was the motto of the Monkey Wrench Gang. These are not the words of Responsible Conservatism. The pragmatist and the realist will mock them for their self-contradiction. We know in our hearts and from history that these words are the truly pragmatic, the truly realistic motto for creating a future where our fathers could have been at home and where our grandchildren will be. No matter what form that government will finally assume, if we do our duty, we shall one day be able to look in our grandchildren’s eyes and say to them without blinking, “When we had affairs in our hands, we restored the Republic.” ◊

## LIBERAL ARTS



## BUSING CONTINUES

The plan to “bus affluent pupils to low-income neighborhoods” in La Crosse, Wisconsin, met with bitter opposition, the *Los Angeles Times* reported last March. The objective of forced busing “based on family income rather than race” was to provide “equal educational opportunities” and lessen the “burden” on teachers with low-income pupils. Instead, “the latest attempt at social engineering” sparked a backlash of heightened class division and a campaign to recall members of the school board, which Kevin O’Keefe, a lawyer for the opposition, said lacks “sensitivity to the wants and desires of the taxpayers.”

# Now

(In the bicentennial year of the American Constitution)

by Harold McCurdy

1.

Between the tornadoes and the blossoming pears,  
Hard rock, hospitals, daycare centers, bombs,  
We sometimes, under stress, give way to prayers  
Of gratitude or terror; but God numbs  
Us to old visions and allows no new,  
Except computers, and, of course, TV,  
Before which we have knelt, as formerly we  
With more affection knelt, Lord Christ, to you.

2.

Turing's invention threatens to stop us cold  
And flatten us to a shape we've never been,  
One-dimensional, binary, fixed in a mold  
Completely heartless, artless, and without sin,  
No further needing love or hands or faces  
But only one number each, which, though as long  
As Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, will be no song;  
No, but the small grist of the data bases.

3.

Is it too late to ask, once more, for more?  
Our West has closed its vast horizons down,  
Our vertical space has been preempted for war:  
This is that Progress that turned country to town,  
Town to a city, city to a slum  
More dismal than a bog. If we escape  
New Hiroshimas in the new Turing shape,  
Will this then be the Kingdom that was to come?

4.

Computers have no wishes, dreams, or fears  
Etched in their micro-circuits. We still do.  
And in this interim before the years  
Bring us to mega-crimes without a clue  
In any intent of ours, Lord Christ, we rest  
Our case with you. Pity us here on the peak  
Of our accomplishments, alienated, weak,  
Who have exhausted the inexhaustible West.

5.

Our duty was to remember—remember with love—  
Christopher, the Christ-bearer; how he came  
Attended by a great multitude, a cloud of  
Martyrs, witnesses, planting in God's name  
The Red Cross here. Not having done that, we  
Yield memory to the computer, and forget  
Our lineage and our mission, though stars yet  
As Cross or Swan burn in the galaxy.

6.

Stretched on the cross of secular affairs,  
Taking no comfort in the Pentagon,  
Or secret agents, or the stout-lunged players  
Strutting upon the stage in Washington,  
We sweat into the future. Denied escape  
Except by entrepreneurial makeshift hope,  
Or Ouija board, or space voyages, or dope,  
We talk like parrots, chatter like an ape.

7.

Meanwhile, Peacekeepers, multiple-headed, nest  
In desert burrows ready to be called  
By a red button imperatively pressed  
To spread their dove wings under the Eagle's sprawled  
Imperial rage, should the Great Bear resist  
Pure reason. Such the public rhetoric.  
Secretly, the computers whirl and click  
And weave inevitabilities as they list.

8.

Their empire, which begins by requiring us  
To copy account numbers on our checks, expands  
Toward unimaginable limits. Pelagius,  
Founder of this Republic, waves his hands  
In blessing over it. Who needs Mercy or Grace?  
Programmed, society will now fulfill  
All the hubris of the Pelagian will,  
And, unbaptized, confront the Black Holes of Space.

9.

In truth, no one can know what no one knows.  
But Fear and Desire still struggle against loss,  
And, should a nova flare, or a great rose  
Of ice-light blazing round a parhelion Cross  
Unfold above the Dew Line, hope might spring  
A second time in the all-too-human breast,  
And a cry, tearing the death-veil from the West,  
Ring out, "Sing, children! Enter the Kingdom, and sing!"

10.

Until such miracle, we of the West  
Focused on Me and Now, have little room  
For tag-ends of the Holy, rags of the quest  
That started in Jewry at an empty tomb  
And brought us, late, to a far cactus land  
Where deeper than the round-eyed burrowing owl  
MX's burrow, and the seismic growl  
Of underground nuclear testing shakes the sand.