

Gold Cross, Black Helicopters

by Philip Jenkins

Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning
by Joel Dyer
Boulder: Westview Press;
304 pp., \$24.00



Maybe in another decade or so we will be ready to assess the full political and psychological impact of the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, but already we can observe some of the major effects. The partisan impact became clear last year, when Bill Clinton's reelection owed so much to the radical shift in the public mood caused by the act: overnight, the torrent of media hostility and suspicion directed against the White House became associated with extremism, conspiracy thinking, and violence. The bombing also reversed American attitudes on domestic terrorism and political violence. After blithely ignoring for 30 years frequent acts of domestic terrorism by various political and ethnic groups, the American media suddenly decided that Oklahoma City was just the tip of a very large iceberg, and 1995 witnessed what we can in retrospect term the Great Militia Panic. Capitalizing on transformed public sentiment, federal agencies have spent the last two years engaged in the tactics of infiltration and provocation which they so regularly used against the left in the 1960's and 70's, with painfully predictable results. Every few months now, we hear astonishing claims that the FBI has once again saved us from the savage onslaught of some militia band—only to learn later that the sole suggestions of violence stemmed from Bureau provocateurs themselves.

Harvest of Rage reflects something of the Militia Panic, in that Joel Dyer sees the attack on the Murrah building as a portent of a cataclysmic revolutionary breakdown: "The bomb's fuse had been lit somewhere in the economically devastated landscape of rural America . . . the people who live in the nation's hinterland have finally reached the edge of the abyss. The fertilizer and diesel fuel that once enriched the soil and powered

the machines that plant and harvest will now be used to destroy their perceived enemies, primary among them, the federal government." Throughout this book we must separate such hyperbole from the author's underlying analysis of the social and political situation, which is thoughtful and significant. Even if Oklahoma City is the beginning of anything in particular (and that is far from certain), it is very difficult to link the perceived threat with the distinctive problems of rural America, and the structural economic failures collectively known as the farm crisis. Dyer has important things to say about the latter, but the connection to terrorism is tenuous. Readers attracted by the Oklahoma City subtitle will be disappointed; others who would profit from the book's main argument may be put off by its emphasis on "terrorists."

Joel Dyer is a Colorado-based journalist who has worked with community groups seeking to investigate the growing economic and psychic crises of rural America. He argues that these tensions have literally traumatized millions of citizens who have proceeded to respond to desperate circumstances in a series of once unthinkable ways, including suicide and domestic violence. Anomic country-dwellers are ready takers for a variety of conspiracy theories assuming overtly or covertly religious forms, deriving ultimately from familiar notions of the apocalyptic and presenting a lively cast of villains: international bankers and Jewish manipulators, the Beast of the Apocalypse and the Federal Reserve, black helicopters and Soviet tanks, the New World Order and the rise of Antichrist. Sometimes ideas are cemented together by a "Christian Identity" theology, linked to the right-wing anarchism of the Common Law movement. Very commonly, the political framework assumes the betrayal and perversion of the United States Constitution. So far, so good; the strongest parts of *Harvest of Rage* are undoubtedly the case-studies which Dyer presents of farmers and their families adopting some or all of this bizarre intellectual mélange in order to make sense of the disasters wrought upon whole regions and states. Some are members of questionable groups like the Freemen and the Republic of Texas, while others are straightforward individuals. It is helpful to have their ideas explained by a sympathetic populist observer who does not automatically view

conspiracy thought as the prerogative of the Nazi or the lunatic, and who sincerely respects the principles of the strict constitutionalist. In this sense, *Harvest of Rage* is a welcome corrective to far more hostile books on the "militia movement" by authors like Kenneth Stern and Morris Dees.

Problems do arise, however, from Dyer's general thesis. First, I am far from certain that the apocalyptic cocktail here described is all that new in rural America. In the 1890's, Midwestern farmers were preparing to defend themselves against the imminent armed onslaught of the Jesuits and the Knights of Columbus, and in the 1930's their fears were wilder still. Second, Dyer asserts—rather than proves—that the attitudes and beliefs he describes have more resonance for rural Americans than for, say, suburbanites, many of whom respond to their fears by moving to the hinterland. Though the survivalist compounds may be in Idaho or Arkansas, they are often populated by uprooted city-dwellers from California or Michigan. Apocalyptic thinking is not necessarily a product of the farm crisis; and the degree of violence is unlikely to be decided by the shifting fortunes of rural America.

Yet Dyer's book offers a heartfelt portrait of conditions in the American farm-belt and fingers the real culprits responsible for its woes: corporate agribusiness, the soulless mandarins of the Federal Reserve system, and the politicians who long ago gave up any pretense of trying to regulate them. If Oklahoma City serves to focus attention on these injustices, then some good may yet come of that disaster.

Philip Jenkins is Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University. His most recent books are Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania 1925-1950 (University of North Carolina Press) and A History of the United States (St. Martin's Press).

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Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

Looking Backward

A man from Mars visiting the United States at the beginning of 1997 might have thought that the country was wobbling on the brink of political crisis. He would have learned that the White House was occupied by a gentleman immersed in so many scandals that even supermarket tabloids could not keep track of them and that this same gentleman, having been reelected without a majority of voters behind him, faced a Congress controlled by an opposition party sworn to working a revolution in government. Surely the Martian would have lost whatever passes for money on the Red Planet by wagering that the President would soon be thrown out of office, if not into jail, and that his opponents would mount a *coup d'état* that would deliver the state into their hands.

The Martian would have lost his money because nowhere else in the galaxy could he have experienced any political force as inept, incompetent, and worthless as the Republican Party. Throughout the year Republicans in both houses of Congress have lurched and wobbled like a drunken acrobat, ignoring opportunities for weakening the Clinton administration still further and again and again allowing the President to score political points. They allowed major issues like immigration, affirmative action, and activist judges to flop out of their hands and had nothing important to say in criticism of Mr. Clinton's foreign policy—his locking the nation into a continuing and expanded commitment to NATO, his pursuit of global government in one guise or another, or his support for extending Most Favored Nation Status with China. By the end of June, the Martian would have been pining to leave the planet and take himself off to some other, more politically dynamic vista such as the craters of the Moon.

To be fair, the death of politics in the United States—not only this year but for the last several years, despite the “Republican Revolution” of 1994—is not entirely the fault of the Grand Old Party itself. There are few real political issues in the United States today because there are few real political divisions within the

Ruling Class, of which the leaders of both political parties are members in good standing, and there are few political divisions within the Ruling Class because at last that class has consolidated its power to the point that there is very little left for its members to argue about. Republicans and Democrats may bicker over the budget and quibble over nominations and electoral questions, but on the main architecture of the leviathan state and the functions and services it provides they have no quarrel. That much was evident in the presidential election last year, when both candidates had to puff and wheeze to fabricate something to debate over, but the ensuing tedium of the presidential race was not simply the result of the lackluster personalities involved but rather of a more far-reaching and underlying crystallization of the national power structure that they both represent.

As I have often indicated before, elites are not bad things in themselves, and whether you like them or not, they happen to be inevitable in human society. The relevant issue for people who don't like a particular elite or ruling class is not how to get rid of it and get along without any social and political hierarchy, but rather how to get yourself another elite that is more suited to your preferences—that is, to your social interests. With the emergence of the Populist Right in the last few years and its Middle American following, there is the prospect, remote as it may seem, that an alternative elite is already beginning to form that will eventually be able to challenge and replace the incumbent dominant class.

I have also indicated before that the most accurate analysis of the incumbent ruling class remains James Burnham's theory of the managerial revolution, a theory formulated in 1941 and often pulverized by academic sociologists and economists, but a theory also which keeps coming back, in one form or another, to provide—after a dozen other analyses and theories—the most reliable depiction of the realities of power in 20th-century America. Just last year, Burnham's theory of the managerial revolution came back yet again in a new book that revives and restates it.

The book, *America's New Economic*

Order by neo-Marxist economist Donald Clark Hodges, is dedicated to Burnham, who was Hodges' teacher at New York University in the 1940's, and, despite certain flawed assumptions and analyses in Professor Hodges' Marxist formulations, it is of some importance not only as a reminder of the enduring truths that Burnham discovered about American society but also for certain new insights that Mr. Hodges brings to it.

The Burnham theory, crafted just as Burnham was defecting from Trotskyism, held that a new kind of economy and society was evolving in the United States, as well as in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, that was neither capitalist nor socialist. The new society was what he called “managerial,” and it consisted essentially in the seizure of control of the largest corporations by their managers from their stockholders. The argument was that the managers—meaning those professionals equipped with the technical and managerial skills to run the advanced economy that the corporations dominated—were evolving into a new class that would replace the “capitalists” or stockholders because the capitalists simply did not have the skills to run their own companies.

As an ex-Marxist himself, Burnham then believed that control of the economic power of the corporations was by itself sufficient to determine the structure of a new ruling class, but he also extended the concept of “manager” to state bureaucrats. Like corporate managers, the munchkins of the emerging leviathan state did not hold formal rights of ownership to their offices, but they did have the technical skills to make their offices function. Those who did have a formal “right” to their offices—the citizens who “own” the government and the officeholders they periodically elect to office—in reality exercised no more real control of the state than petty stockholders did over corporate assets and operations. Thus, the managers in the economy joined with their cousins, the managers of the state, to coalesce into a new ruling class. Unlike the old capitalist or bourgeois class, the new class did not depend for its power and position on rights of property and ownership or on classical democratic-republican and con-