

BOOKS

# The New Deal dealt them in

**FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT AND THE CITY BOSSES**  
By Lyle W. Dorsett  
Kennikat Press, 1977  
\$8.95 (hardcover, \$4.95 (paper)

In this engaging study Lyle Dorsett examines the relationships between Franklin D. Roosevelt and seven big city politicians of the New Deal era: Boston's James Michael Curley, Memphis' Ed Crump, New York City's Ed Flynn and Fiorello LaGuardia, Chicago's Edward J. Kelly, and Jersey City's Frank ("I am The Law") Hague.

When he launched the project, the author's primary concern was to establish the fact that contrary to novelist Edwin O'Connor's thesis in *The Last Hurrah* "the New Deal did not destroy the bosses and machines." Although this theme remains central to the book, he fastens his attention on the nature of the relationships that FDR established with each of the seven bosses.

They fall into two categories. There were the men Roosevelt personally despised but nonetheless accommodated, and those with whom he had amiable dealings. In the former group were Curley, Crump, Pendergast and Hague; in the latter LaGuardia, Kelly and Flynn. Dorsett notes that FDR proved capable of using friends no less than enemies to serve his political needs at any given moment and could be negligent in bestowing rewards for past favors. He reminds us that it was Eleanor Roosevelt who consoled Flynn after the fiasco of his putative nomination to a wartime diplomatic post, while the President said as little as possible about the incident. Dorsett concludes from Eleanor's letter that she possessed "deeper feelings of personal loyalty than her husband." Some friend, but then, as we also know, some husband!

It has been said that FDR had a two-pronged policy for the na-

tion's cities: satisfying the bosses where possible (because they produced those bountiful electoral majorities) while simultaneously initiating a reform design, premised on the notion of metropolitan regionalism. Dating at least back to his first inaugural, he appeared taken by the prospect of decentralizing inner-city slum dwellers and hence recasting the very structure of urban society. Unenlightened bosses like Curley, Crump, Pendergast and Hague blocked this strategy.

To counteract such opposition FDR toyed with the idea of interjecting independent Democrats—articulate local liberals committed to implementation of the New Deal—into the political leadership of several cities. Such agents would function within the Democratic party to wrest control of its apparatus from the tradition-bound bosses. If not a daring move to the left, the plan at least had the potential to move beyond the first square in the direction of metropolitan regionalism. Yet Roosevelt's abiding concern was neither refurbishing urban politics nor reshaping the cities. It was, rather, the electoral yields produced by the existing Democratic organizations.

James A. Farley, who served his President loyally during the first two terms, told Dorsett in a 1966 interview that at one juncture he broached to FDR the possibility of prosecuting Frank Hague for tampering with the mail of his enemies. (Known as "The Hudson County Hitler" for his harassment of CIO organizers as well as Norman Thomas, Hague had come to regard Jersey City and Hudson County as his own personal fiefdom, hence the appellation "I am The Law.") But Roosevelt, swallowing his intense dislike for Mayor Hague, instructed Farley to "forget prosecution...tell Frank to knock it off... But keep this thing quiet because we need Hague's support if we want New Jersey."



Drawing by David Levine. Reprinted with permission of New York Review of Books ©1977, Nrvb, Inc.

Two other figures no longer considered indispensable—Pendergast and Curley—subsequently landed in prison on federal convictions. In Curley's case the author faults Roosevelt, claiming that "there was not one piece of concrete evidence" to support the conviction.

This book provides a lesson on Roosevelt who, like him or not, remains central to our understanding of American political

culture 45 years after his first term began. Much that the author has to say about the fact that some bosses and some reformers are "bad" and others "good" is old hat. Moreover, much of the evidence he has drawn upon is widely known to readers of memoirs written by New Deal figures. But Dorsett deserves credit for developing the analysis conveniently, if too narrowly. What is missing is a sys-

tematic effort to place the urban political policies of FDR into the theoretical perspective. Dorsett appears to be satisfied to expose the clay feet of the apostle of Democratic liberalism. He also had an opportunity to analyze Roosevelt's designs for whatever ideological dimension they possessed.

—Michael H. Ebner  
*Michael Ebner teaches social and political history at Lake Forest College.*

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## FILM

# A major studio film on the war that still isn't

## THE BOYS IN COMPANY C

Directed by Sidney Furie  
With Stan Shaw, Andrew Stevens,  
James Cannings, Michael  
Lembeck, Craig Wasson, Scott  
Hylands, James Whitmore Jr.  
and Noble Willingham  
Columbia Pictures, Rated R

To a large extent, Vietnam was always the war that wasn't. Here, our reason for being there was never really explained by "the best and the brightest." There, Americans tried to fight "Charlie," about whose culture they knew nothing and whose face they almost never actually saw. Today, the war still *isn't*, having been largely repressed in the national consciousness.

*The Boys in Company C*, the first major studio film on the war, follows a motley cross-section of Marine draftees from the dehumanizing basic training at Camp Pendleton, where they're called "shit," "maggots," and "vomit," through a whole series of comic, futile and lethal encounters (culminating with the January 1968 Tet Offensive) in Vietnam.

Except for Tyrone (Stan Shaw), a street-wise, hardened and gutsy black, the five protagonists are all white innocents abroad. They include Billy Ray (Andre Stevens), a "white cracker jock," Vinnie (Michael Lembeck), an over-sexed, happy-go-lucky kid from Brooklyn, and Dave (Craig Wasson), who looks like Jesus Christ and is a conscientious objector. The film's episodes are narrated by Alvin (James Canning), a budding writer who is keeping a journal of life in Company C. Among the company's officers are the avuncular Lt. Archer (James Whitmore Jr.), the red-neck Sgt. Curry (Noble Willingham) and the inevitable Capt. Collins who, when not hysterically barking orders, is obsessed with having his men achieve record "body counts."

If the characters are somewhat stereotypical, director Furie (*The Ipcress File*, *Little Fauss and Big Halsey*, *Gable and Lombard*) still

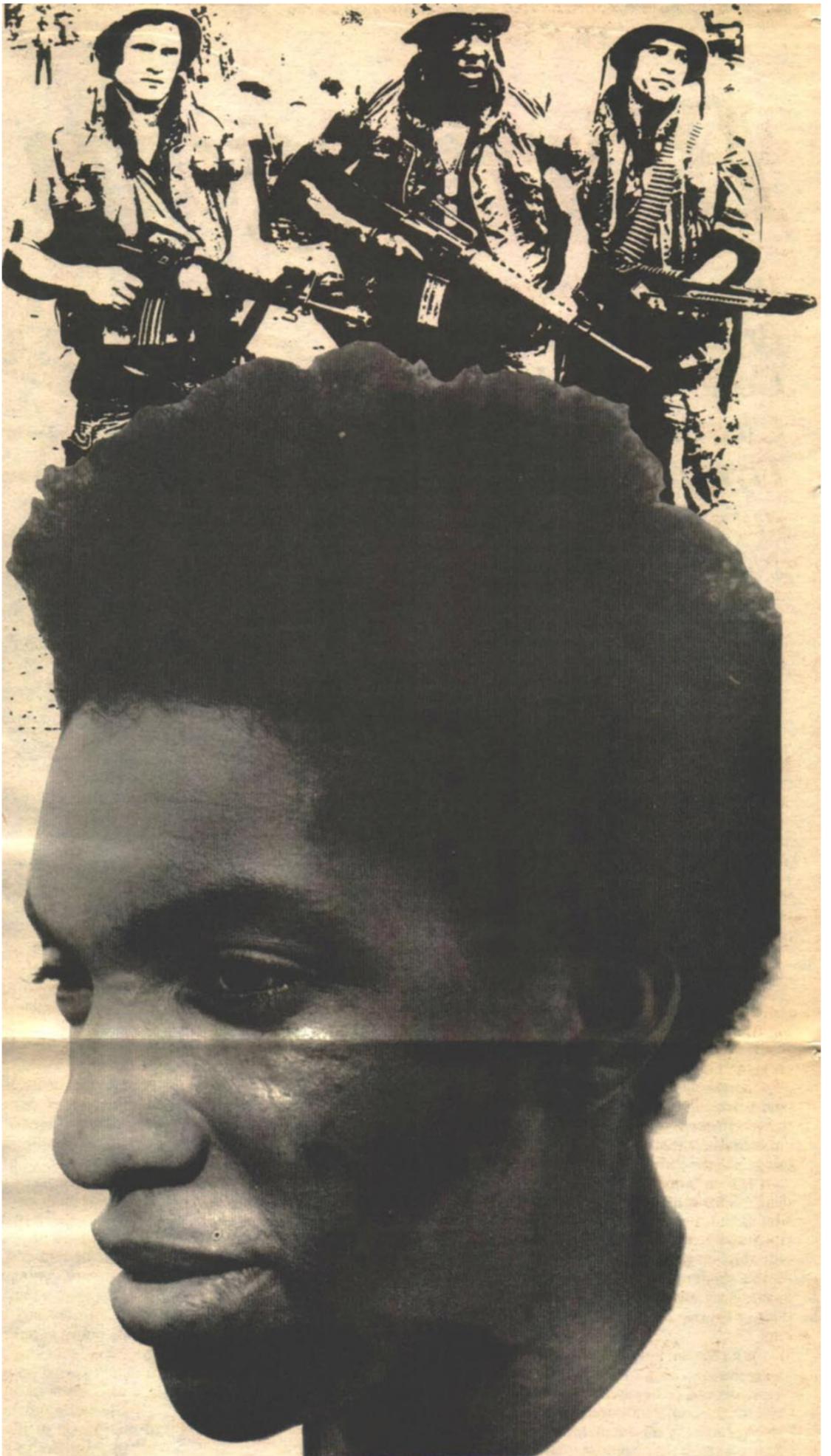
manages to pull off an entertaining yet unsettling film thanks to a brisk pace that juxtaposes drama and black comedy *a la M.A.S.H.*

You don't come away from *Company C* with your political consciousness raised very much. It only touches on the extent of the destruction America wreaked on the people and the land, and on the corruption of Thieu and his followers. But certain scenes and episodes "stick." For example, suspecting that a village harbors Vietcong, Captain Collins orders it shelled into oblivion. When the men enter the smoking remains, they find mainly old people, cowering and dazed. Collins still demands the "body count" which, after a pregnant pause, is reported as "two chickens and a duck."

In the film's final episode, the Company C soccer team (the "Muthuhs") is promised exemption from field duty if it will throw a match to the South Viet Security Police Dragons in order to build inter-allied morale. In what is an obvious metaphor for the war's prolongation, the boys can't bring themselves to do it, preferring "winning" to "living." It hardly matters, as the soccer stadium is hit by a barrage of mortar fire—part of the Tet Offensive.

Before the credits come on, we're informed that of the 110 men in the actual company C, 41 were killed, 51 injured, and two are still missing-in-action. With all its sardonic vignettes, *The Boys in Company C* leaves a bitter aftertaste. It makes you wonder how America—especially the men who fought in Vietnam—put up with the whole fraudulent, cursed thing for so long. Capturing the grotesque farce of Vietnam—the chasm between Marine macho rhetoric at Pendleton and the fear, racism and futile dying in Vietnam—*Company C* makes you realize why we've rushed to forget about the war.

—David M. Szonyi  
David M. Szonyi reviews films and books regularly for IN THESE TIMES.



Three members of Company C: Andre Stevens as "a white cracker jock"; Stan Shaw as "A street-wise, hardened and gutsy black"; and Michael Lembeck as "an over-sexed, happy-go-lucky kid from Brooklyn."

# A people's-eye-view of the revolution

## VIVA PORTUGAL

English version produced by  
Marc N. Weiss for Infoscope  
80 minutes, color, 16mm

Gil Scott-Heron says that the revolution won't be televised. But seeing *Viva Portugal* makes you wonder.

Three German TV film-makers went to Portugal shortly after the coup that overthrew the Caetano regime in April 1974 and spent the next year recording the unfolding events there. The result is a moving documentary of the efforts of the Portuguese people to regain control of their society after 50 years of fascism.

Dramatic scenes abound. Relatives greet political prisoners

freed from Caxias prison, notorious for its underground dungeons that fill with water at high tide. Transport union members refuse to carry right-wing demonstrators to Lisbon for a possible counter-coup, and leftist soldiers search incoming cars for weapons. Former leaders of the PIDE (the fascist secret police) are taken to jail in their own van.

*Viva Portugal* does not focus on leaders vying for power. The film's strength is its ability to capture the spirit of everyday people engaged in becoming actors in history for the first time. Peasants who have seized an absentee landlord's estate are seen meeting in a windmill to discuss setting up a cooperative to farm



their land. Bank workers explain how they have labored at copying records proving that the bank has illegally channeled funds to right-wing organizations.

In an extraordinary sequence, the camera follows a paratrooper assault aimed at neutralizing the barracks of RAL 1, sometimes known as the Red Regiment. Two paratroopers crouch against barrack walls as a RAL 1 soldier explains that they don't understand what's happening.

Mike in hand, a TV reporter stands by as the contending forces negotiate over whether they are to shoot at each other. The rank and file come to realize they've been misled by their superiors and end up running to embrace their comrades in the barracks.

The film does not analyze how

Soares was able to gain control of the government or why many of the moves toward more popular control have been reversed. But it shows political change as the sum of a multitude of small, practical decisions, and a human activity, one subject to twists and turns.

For example, villagers are shown debating whether it was right to occupy a rich family's mansion to house a medical clinic. "Won't the owner be angry?" wonders someone. "But he's never here," comes the reply. "Shouldn't he have at least been talked to," demands another. A woman who apologizes for being illiterate sums up the popular view of the situation: "I can't say anything about big political decisions...But one thing I know—the house has got to be ours!"

*Viva Portugal* has been shown widely in Europe, both on TV and to live audiences. New York film-maker Marc Weiss saw the original German version at the 1975 Mannheim Festival, where it won first prize of the International Film Critics Association. He has produced an edited version in English, using the voices of a theater group from Antioch College. The decision to use voice-overs rather than subtitles was a wise one, for it preserves the sense of real-life drama essential to this people's-eye view of politics.

—Doug Honig  
The film can be obtained through the *Viva Portugal* Project, 140 Waverly Place—6C, New York, New York 10014.  
Doug Honig writes for the *Northwest Passage* in Seattle.