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Best of "The Abusable Past"

R. J. Lambrose

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## Best of “The Abusable Past”

*R. J. Lambrose*

### Introduction

“The Abusable Past” had its origins—or at least one of its origins—about twenty years ago when a series of “Public History Briefs”—excerpts from the press about weird or amusing uses of the past (Nancy Reagan recording the “social history of her White House term in two sets of elegant leather volumes”)—appeared in the October 1981 issue of the *Radical History Review*. This was meant as the starting point for something more regular, and with typical dispatch, the column made its first appearance in the tenth anniversary issue of the *RHR* in the fall of 1984.

Renamed “The Abusable Past,” the new feature came with its own mission statement. “With this issue,” the manifesto read, “the *Radical History Review* inaugurates a column of notes and comment on recent news stories that have a direct bearing on the work of historians and on the character of popular memory. The terms will range from the ephemeral to the immediately threatening, and we hope that readers will clip and send us contributions of their own.”

It was not an auspicious start. For one thing, the issue in which the first column appeared was very nearly the last of this journal, which was then teetering on the edge of financial insolvency. For another, the confident assumption that readers would provide Lambrose with items to fill his columns proved unfounded. Of course, a couple of very loyal readers—who understandably prefer to remain anonymous—have repeatedly come to the rescue with much-needed material. (And how about the rest of you? It’s not too late!)

Still, the warm response that the column has received over that past decade

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and a half has been more than gratifying; it has been inspiring. So it seems appropriate to close with a comment from one appreciative reader, who nicely sums up what R. J. Lambrose has been trying to do:

I do not believe that a serious and engaged intellectual publication needs a gossip column, let alone one that routinely reflects a condescending, smart-ass, and petty slant on almost everything it comments upon. This brings no dignity to the *RHR*. But you have obviously debated among yourselves the question of why you must retain this feature, so I hardly believe you are going to do away with it on the basis of my letter.

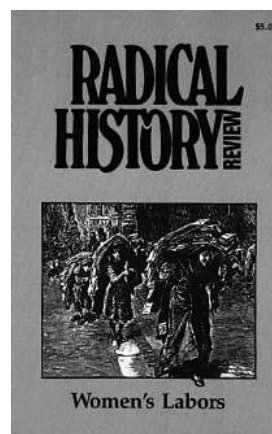
“Dignity to the *RHR*?” No problem. Marxists, as we know, do everything with class.

### Cantor’s Source

*Issue 35: Spring 1986*

As for Lawrence Stone, no sooner had he recovered from his *NYRB* [*New York Review of Books*] exchange than he found himself the subject of a new and unexpected assault on his right flank, in this instance from the medievalist Norman Cantor. Now Cantor is a name that only the most faithful readers of both the *New Criterion* and this column (a very select group indeed) are likely to recognize. Two issues ago, we singled out Cantor’s article on “The Real Crisis in the Humanities Today” as a particularly vivid example of the paranoid seizures to which neoconservative intellectuals seem increasingly subject. To give a sense of Cantor’s capacity for confusion, we described his hilarious nightmare vision of an academy taken over by regiments of militant WASP women and his Inspector Clouseau–like inability to sort out the differences among his foes, whether Marxists, structuralists, or deconstructionists. As an example of this befuddlement, we noted that Cantor had labeled Lawrence Stone a Marxist—a knee-slapper we thought worth sharing with our readers.

At Princeton they were not so amused. An indignant Robert Darnton wrote the *New Criterion* in December, protesting that his colleague is not and never was a Marxist but remained an “old-fashioned liberal.” Therefore, an apology was in order. An unrepentant Cantor took off his shoes, dug in his heels, and dragged his readers through five and a half columns of print (generously donated by the magazine’s editor Hilton Kramer) to “confirm” his charges against Stone. It is a performance that the late Peter Sellers would have envied, beginning as it did with one of



Cantor's more picturesque intellectual pratfalls. Stone, it seems, began his career as a disciple of "the leading English Marxist scholar of the first half of the twentieth century," R. H. Tawney. Having thus left the dear departed Tawney spinning in his grave, Cantor wades across the Channel to Frankfurt and Rome, where he raises the spirits of Adorno and Gramsci as "neo-Marxist" muses to Stone during his crucial middle years. Finally, snappish and travel-weary, Cantor arrives in Paris, where he identifies Fernand Braudel as Stone's most recent inspiration. "This is the updated Marxism that Stone now peddles," Cantor warns, "a more subtle and poisonous Marxism than traditional Leninism."

Now mind you, it's not that Norman wants to censor this "soft core . . . neo-Marxist orthodoxy." It's just that he wants the ingredients of "this Braudelian snake-oil" clearly listed on the label. And what might these ingredients be? Well, first there is Stone's alleged preference for the historians of "the inarticulate masses" over the historians of "kings and presidents, nobles and bishops, generals and politicians"—those historians who, in Cantor's words, "have the audacity to write about what actually happened in history." (If a peasant falls in the forest, does it make a sound?) That Stone once devoted some seven hundred pages to the "crisis" of the English aristocracy cuts no ice with Cantor, for there is also Stone's "rejection of the narrative focus of traditional liberal historiography"—this about a historian who was only recently pilloried in the pages of this journal and of *Past & Present* for proclaiming the "revival of narrative." But you can't fool Norman Cantor. He sees through the lurid mask of soft-core, neo-Marxist orthodoxy and its "ideological cognates," structuralism and deconstruction, to the hard core of interests and stratagems behind them.

Midway through Cantor's diatribe a dull thud is heard as Cantor lets drop the other shoe, the one he has been holding impatiently in reserve. Darnton's and Stone's defensiveness toward him, it turns out, is really due to their desperate desire to limit the fall-out from the David Abrahan "scandal" [see *RHR* 32], as it might affect the Princeton history department and its KGB-like control module, the Shelby Collum Davis Center. "Stone and Darnton want to have it both ways," Cantor crows, "to be Ivy League haute bourgeoisie using their positions of affluence and power to promote leftist ideology while denying their leftist orientation." Both ways indeed! When a neoconservative "humanist" wants to win the battle against the forces of reductionism, no class analysis is too crude for him. Why use snake oil, after all, when venom will do?

In fact, were it not for the venomous political style of Cantor's response to Darnton and Stone, the whole exchange would amount to little more than what we first took it to be: yet another chapter in the tedious narrative of academic jealousy (see Stone's review of Cantor's book *The English*, in the *NYRB*, February 1, 1968). But Cantor's rant is filled with references to the "neo-Marxist line," to the "pure

Marxist line,” and to his fantasies of Marxists and their motley allies taking over at NYU, Harvard, SUNY–Binghamton, Columbia, and Yale. WASP women seem no longer to count. The real enemy remains the same figure, painted in the same shades of parlor pink, that stalked the ’50s imagination: the commie dupe, the fellow traveler, the left egghead.

It is this renewed point of attack that makes Darnton’s letter of protest even more worrisome than Cantor’s splenetic reply, for the letter does not challenge Cantor’s premise, only his target. In this respect, Darnton revives the doomed, defensive tactic of so many of Joe McCarthy’s many victims, namely that of trotting out one’s “old-fashioned liberalism.” It didn’t work then, and it won’t work now. Cantor’s version of the Marxist threat is only funny so long as it continues to be revealed on its face as such. Otherwise, the history he seems so determined to repeat will once again appear as tragedy, not as farce.

### **Tory, Tory, Tory**

*Issue 35: Spring 1986*

Given the rising number of right-wing attacks on left historians, our readers may wish to consider joining the Organization of American Historians and taking advantage of its new membership benefit: Professional Liability Insurance. As the organization’s executive secretary Joan Hoff-Wilson explained the insurance plan, it would help “to protect yourself from a broad range of errors or omissions that are related to your performance on the job.” For a mere \$25 per year—a pittance compared to medical malpractice insurance—the “Trust for Insuring Educators” will guarantee your defense costs and up to a half-million dollars in damages should you be sued for your professional activities.

Before you laugh this off, you might do well to consider the bizarre tale of our Canadian comrade, Bryan Palmer, who last spring received a courier-delivered letter from a law firm bearing the rather Dickensian name of Tory, Tory, DesLauriers & Binnington, a letter that hinted darkly of legal actions soon to be taken against him for something he had written. The text in question was a critical book review that Palmer had dashed off for a small-circulation radical sheet, the *Socialist Studies Bulletin*. There Palmer had the gall to lambaste a book written by three pillars of the Canadian historical establishment—David J. Bercuson, Robert Bothwell, and J. L. Granatstein (hereafter B. B. & G.)—entitled *The Great Brian Robbery: Canada’s Universities on the Road to Ruin*. The book is a Canadian variant on a tune all too familiar here: universities are in a mess, standards have declined, students have too much power, everything was better in the Golden Age.

Palmer's response to this nonsense was appropriately scathing. His review was called "Three Blind Professors." B. B. & G.'s response was to T. T. D. & B. to demand that Palmer and *Socialist Studies Bulletin* issue a retraction, a blanket apology, and pay B. B. & G.'s substantial legal bills. In particular, the attorneys charged that the following choice sentences from Palmer's review were "false and defamatory of our clients, and reflect adversely on their reputations as professors and historians":

Bercuson, who owes his place in Canadian academic life to the struggles of western workers, has been driven from the field of labour history, his own theoretically stunted tail between his legs. Bothwell and Granatstein stand convicted, in the pages of the *Globe*, of doctoring evidence in their book *The Gouzenko Transcripts* in order to force the past in the direction of their own liberal Cold War premises. . . . Not, however, at York's History Department: there, in the midst of a university-wide strike of teaching assistants, Granatstein, the Graduate Chairman, defied Senate policy and violated students' civil rights by ordering graduate students to attend their classes on pain of failure.

What, you may rightly wonder, is libelous about this passage? Could Bercuson contest in court whether or not his tail was theoretically stunted? Actually stunted? Between his legs? No, the issue appears to have been whether Bercuson was, in fact, "driven" from the field of labor history. Driven? No thank you, one imagines him saying, I prefer to walk. Similarly, the problem in the next sentence involved Palmer's use of metaphor. Newspapers, of course, cannot "convict." And did the *Globe's* reviewer's charges that Bothwell and Granastein had cut passages and used sanitized transcripts to make their Cold War case legally constitute "doctoring"? Difficult to say. Perhaps physicians could have sued for professional defamation on that one. The tropics of discourse, as Hayden White would put it, are surprisingly warm in Canada.

Palmer had made two minor slips in the last sentence. Granatstein's memo was issued before rather than during the strike at York, and it had only implied, not stated, the threat of failure. But while all of this may seem as silly as B. B. & G.'s original book, that is not to reckon with the genuinely chilling effects of such threats of legal action on intellectual and political discourse. Are we to consult legal experts every time we write a book review? Need we anticipate the literalism of lawyers when choosing our metaphors? It is enough to make the sturdiest deconstructionist shudder.

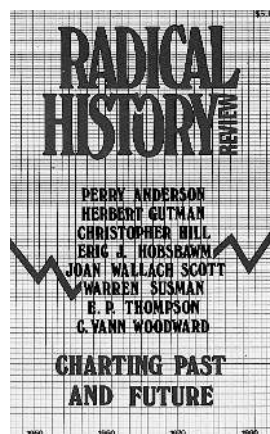
It is probably no coincidence that B. B. & G., who received many negative reviews of their book, chose to bring legal action against Palmer, who is well known as a dissident in Canadian historical circles. In fact, the results of this case indicate the potentially damaging effects flowing out of such litigation. The *Socialist Studies Bulletin*, advised by counsel and worried about the costs of protracted legal action,

issued a retraction, albeit a rather limited one. To his credit, Palmer refused to sign the apology and thus still faces the possibility of continued legal harassment. The radical historian's home is a bleak house indeed these days, particularly when its insurance policy must include a Red-baiting rider.

## Hartbreaker

*Issue 36: Fall 1986*

It is a pleasure to put the boot to those who would abuse the past, but it's even more satisfying, we must confess, when the abusers put their own feet firmly and irrevocably in their mouths. Humiliations of this order are by definition rare events and thus deserve to be circulated and savored—passed on and down. And so we pass on to you the story of Jeffrey Hart, a conservative columnist of no discernible intellect or talent but one who has managed—in this Reagan Reign of Error—to build a syndication among more than one hundred newspapers. No doubt he comes cheap, and, as we shall see, the papers get what they pay for.



Hart, it needs to be said, delivers his weekly editorial opinions between classroom lectures on eighteenth-century literature at Dartmouth. One looks vainly, however, for any trace in his prose of the polemical genius of a Swift or Pope. In fact, if there is anything of Grub Street to be found in his columns, it is his shameless cannibalizing of the books and articles of others in order to fill the space left void by the failures of his own imagination.

A recent Hart column of March 1986 caught our eye, both because it exemplified Hart's scissors-and-paste method and because it addressed the subject of history. Lifting his charges wholesale from the latest ranting of Accuracy-in-Academia, Hart headlined his column "Academicians and a Story's Accuracy." There, Hart recycled Henry Turner's view (in Hart's words) that David Abraham's "putative anti-capitalism subverted his scholarship." Then he went on to lambaste radical historian Howard Zinn as a "wacko" and "crybaby" for his absurd notion that the story of America should be told from the perspective of Native Americans, slaves, Irish immigrants, women workers, and Latin American peasants. Such history, Hart concluded, is a "fraud."

Now that we had Professor Hart's views on historical accuracy, we were particularly pleased to find that his very next column was a historical narrative. In it he delightfully recounted the story of George Bernard Shaw's historic visit of 1940 with a young Texas congressman by the name of Lyndon Baines Johnson. What tickled



Hart the most about this encounter was Johnson’s calculated cowpoke buffoonery in the face of Shaw’s witty barbs. Hart thought it absolutely hilarious that LBJ should have forced “huge slabs of beef” upon the shocked vegetarian, dressed him in an “ill-fitting cowboy suit and wooly chaps,” and then made him sleep on “an uncomfortable bed made out of wagon wheel.” A decade later, Shaw’s dying words were—Hart reports—“Don’t tell LBJ. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction.”

It is a funny historical vignette, you must admit. And it would be funnier still were it true, or as Hart might say “accurate.” Actually, the anecdote had been invented by Veronica Geng as part of a whimsical piece written for the *New Yorker* in June 1985. Despite her deadpan prose style, Geng made sure to telegraph her satirical purpose throughout the story. But the insatiable Hart appropriated everything in the piece but its intended meaning. (Indeed, Hart even unknowingly repeated one of the give-away lines: Geng has LBJ ask Shaw his opinion of a non-existent book with the title *Pratfall into the Abyss*. When Shaw says he has never heard of it, Johnson replies: “What’s the matter—you too dumb to recognize a joke when you hear one?”) That Geng’s send-up should have passed over Hart’s head is not entirely surprising, considering his track record as a political columnist. But for a specialist in the Augustan Age of English letters—the celebrated Age of Wit and Satire—it is a telling lapse. It is also a telling lapse that no one in the media—save Geoffrey Stokes in the *Village Voice*—seems to have picked up on Hart’s gaffe. And Hart himself has yet to issue a correction or an apology.

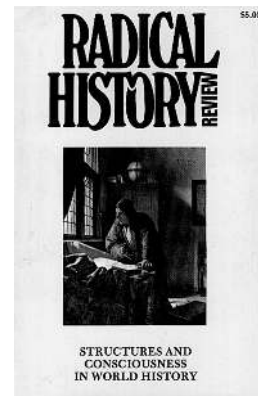
Meanwhile, we’re still wondering whether to write to Accuracy in Media or Accuracy in Academia about this one.

## Vanitas

*Issue 39: Fall 1987*

Robinson Hall is a modest, rectangular building nestled unobtrusively in an obscure corner of Harvard Yard. Around its upper cornice, one can find inscribed the names of the great Renaissance architects. But like so much else at Harvard, appearances are deceiving, for the structure houses not the architecture school but the history department. And by most recent accounts, the house is not much of a home.

Last spring, the same week that the *New York Times* was busy spotlighting Princeton’s “hot history department” (best cultural history, best physical plant, best thick shakes), the *Boston Globe* was reprinting a *Harvard Crimson* exposé of the Americanists in the Harvard history department. The problem, it suggested, was one of succession,





for the senior historians have for some years been unable to bring themselves to hire anyone from the outside or to promote anyone from the junior ranks. Catherine Clinton, an assistant professor and author of two books, was denied promotion to untenured associate, while Brad Lee and Alan Brinkley, both associate professors, were turned down for tenure. Lee, a twentieth-century historian, had won a teaching prize (the kiss of death), and Brinkley had drawn more than a thousand students to his lecture course (and later won the same damning teaching prize). If popularity were not indictment enough, Brinkley had had the bad taste to win an American Book Award for his first book.

Needless to say, the *Crimson* article provided ample opportunity for historians around the country, named and unnamed, to observe just how naked and wizened the Emperor had become. They pointed to the isolation of the Harvard Americanists from the profession as a whole; they noted the somewhat yellowed edge of Harvard scholarship, where paperback reissues pass for new work; they commented on the department's illusory claims to Renaissance breadth ("that's crap and it's always been crap," said one informant); and they acknowledged their reluctance to send their best undergraduates into the black hole of Robinson Hall.

Harvard's senior Americanists responded predictably to the *Crimson's* revelations. "Other universities have 30 to 40 historians permanently," Oscar Handlin retorted with the directness honed on his years of delivering editorials on Boston's Channel 5. "They can take any old bum they want to, and they often do." Harvard, by implication, has to be more cautious about the bums it chooses.

Meanwhile, the old bums that Harvard has are getting very old indeed; the average age of the senior Americanist is now 61, as one quantitatively minded member of the Harvard department has calculated. And the *Festschrifts* are beginning to issue forth. The one for David Donald (aptly titled *A Master's Due*) is already off the press, and plans are under way for yet others. Indeed, in a rare and rather unseemly display of the Oedipal impatience that invariably animates such enterprises, one proposed *Festschrift* unwittingly overestimated the festschrifttee's age by two years. Yet as Claude Pepper knows, these guys may die, but they will never retire.

But so what? History may still be served. Every summer an archaeological dig is conducted in some part of Harvard Yard. Why not make it Robinson Hall? There are enough fossils inside to satisfy the most curious student.

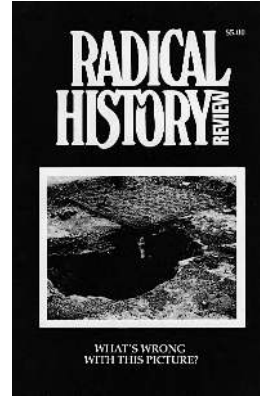
## Bloom County

Issue 40: Winter 1988

Whatever the future brings to Michael Jackson, however, it is unlikely to alter the disparaging judgment passed upon him by Allan Bloom in his best-selling neo-conservative jeremiad, *The Closing of the American Mind*. That Bloom, as self-styled champion of the Platonic tradition, should have thought it necessary to comment on the place of Jackson in American culture is itself something of a puzzle, until one realizes that the whole book is a weird ventriloquist effort to get the ghosts of Irving Babbitt and Leo Strauss to speak in the accents of Andy Rooney. In any event, Bloom does take time away from his dark thoughts on the impact of Heidegger and Nietzsche to vent his spleen over the nationally publicized meeting between Jackson and Ronald Reagan following the enormous popular reception of the "Thriller" album and tour. For the dyspeptic Bloom, the image of the Gipper "warmly grasping the daintily proffered gloved hand of Michael Jackson" sums up everything that has gone sour with American culture in the twentieth century.

One wonders, then, whether Bloom recalled these contemptuous comments on Jackson's Rose Garden appearance when he (Bloom) accepted Reagan's invitation last October to dine at the White House? No doubt Bloom preferred to think of the dinner as an occasion to recreate the experience of Plato's *Symposium*, a chance to "imagine that magic Athenian atmosphere, reproduced in which friendly men, educated, lively, on a footing of equality, civilized but natural, came together and told wonderful stories of the meaning of their longing."

And what an enchanted evening it must have been. Fresh flowers on every table, crepe paper and balloons hanging from the gleaming chandeliers, and over the Yamaha grand piano a beautifully lettered sign, painted in sparkles, that read: "A Magic Night in Athens." And the guest list! As many stars as ever looked down upon the pre-Socratics: Ralph Lauren, Cal Ripken Jr., Lorin Maazel, Lane Kirkland, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, José Napoleon Duarte, and many more. Did Bloom tell wonderful stories of his "longing" to newly-crowned Miss America, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko? Did he discourse on the German intellectual legacy with Ernest Borgnine? Did he point out Plato's position on music to Chet Atkins? Or was he fortunate enough to be seated beside Marilyn vos Savant? Not an "educated" or "lively" *man*, to be sure, but no intellectual slouch either. As current world-record holder for the highest IQ, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, surely she would have grasped Bloom's trenchant commentary on the romantic thinness of the modern



"relationship." After all, had she not herself just completed a nation-wide search for a suitable husband by deciding upon Dr. Robert Jarvik, after coming across a photograph of the artificial heart inventor barechested in a magazine? Ah yes, Plato must have spinning in his cave.

How to sum up such a heady cultural event? Well, how about this: "The high intellectual life . . . and the low rock world are partners in the same entertainment enterprise. They must be interpreted as parts of the cultural fabric of late capitalism." You said it, Allan.

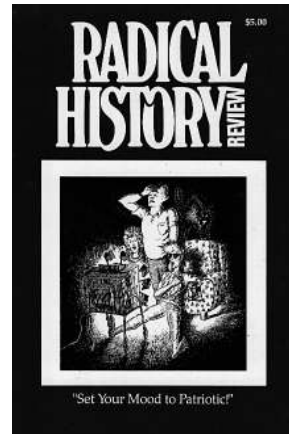
### **Names: A More Serious Item**

*Issue 42: Fall 1988*

Each age devises its own ways of memorializing its struggles and those who died fighting them, and our time is no different. As the '80s draw to a close, however, we are beginning to see and appreciate the different form that Americans have chosen to cope with the peculiarly tortuous politics of the various battles in which their friends, their comrades, and their children have fallen. Certainly, one may take the stark arrangement of surfaces of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington as mirroring the mixture of feelings that Americans bring to the memory of that war. The break that the memorial made with the monumental sculpture that preceded it paralleled the rupture the war itself caused in the nation's own sense of moral and military rectitude. Despite or perhaps even because of the continuing campaign to flank the memorial with images drawn from the more familiar iconography of military heroism, one realizes that American monuments, like the wars they commemorate, will never be the same again.

Another, and in some ways more compelling, instance of this departure from traditional forms of public memorializing is the current effort to honor the country's AIDS victims by means of a huge and ever-growing patchwork quilt of names. Begun a little over a year ago in San Francisco and first displayed at a Washington march in October 1987, the quilt is slated to return to Washington on October 8–10, 1988, following a 20-city tour. On the downtown Mall visitors will find a display of what are expected to be more than 5,000 names, each one stitched or painted onto a 3-by-6-foot fabric panel and arranged in blocks of 32 panels.

To some readers, the analogy of the AIDS quilt to the Vietnam Memorial may seem odd. After all, one conspicuous fact about the AIDS struggle in this country has been the government's adamant refusal to declare war, except perhaps on the



disease's victims. But then undeclared wars and friendly fire are scarcely unfamiliar phenomena to those who have survived the past three decades. Yet the metaphor is even more precisely experiential than that. To look out upon the thousands of panels—almost all of them marking a death within the past four or five years—is to feel a collective and indeed generational loss comparable only to the experience of a military cemetery.

And yet again, the comparison—the military metaphor—is not adequate or complete, for what separates the Names Project (as the quilt is called) from the endless rows of indistinguishable markers at Arlington or Normandy is the individuality of each panel. Whether it is humor or pathos that is being expressed, the artifacts of a life or a relationship that are being shared, or the feelings of lovers, friends, or family that are being stitched in fabric, the overarching impression one takes from the quilt is one of simultaneous singularity *and* community, death *and* life, despair *and* hope.

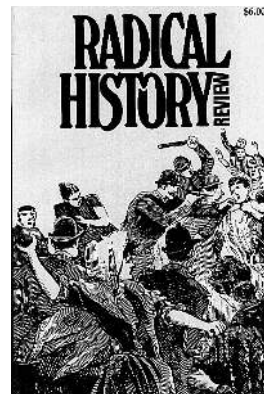
It is a truism by now that the events and movements of the '60s and '70s have permanently altered our sense of the past, from what it is we choose to remember to the forms we choose to remember it by. And so it is with the AIDS quilt. One cannot imagine such a memorial as the Names Project in the absence of the particular histories it commemorates. Not only does the quilt help shape our thoughts and feelings towards the past, but if the flowering of activity and organization around the Names Project is any indication, the quilt is also shaping our attitudes and actions in the present. See it if you can.

## Bush Reconsidered

*Issue 48: Fall 1990*

At some point in their administrations, most modern presidents have decided—in much the same manner that they might have called for an Alka Seltzer—that they needed a house historian. Kennedy had his Schlesinger, you may remember, and LBJ was known to have summoned the late Eric Goldman for several inspirational rendezvous. For Nixon, of course, it was a simple matter of ringing up his buddy Kissinger and taping the highlights. True, Gerald Ford barely had time to find the AHA directory, but the conscientious Jimmy Carter clearly pored over its contents, settling finally on Christopher Lasch as his mentor on malaise. As for Reagan, he allegedly started out to invite a historian but, somehow, the plan turned into an arms-for-hostages thing.

Which leaves George Bush. Voters across the country are asking themselves:



Who will be the signature historian for the Education President? Right now, the odds appear to favor David Herbert Donald, Warren Professor of History at Harvard. Last January Bush selected Donald to inaugurate a series of White House lectures on the presidency. The topic was Lincoln, the subject of Donald's next can't-put-down biography. To be sure, there is already a formidable list of Lincoln biographers, so one may be forgiven for asking why Bush would choose David Donald, who is perhaps best remembered by his colleagues in political history for his two-volume snoozer on Charles Sumner. Sure, one can understand Bush's skipping over Gore Vidal, but why not someone like, say, William Safire? "Ah," we can already hear Bush advisers whispering. "Wouldn't be smart." "Wouldn't be prudent. Too nasty. Too identified with the Right. We've got nothing to gain. Try David Donald. We've got nothing to lose. After all, didn't the man once write a puff-piece praising Lincoln's 'fundamental opportunism'?"

And of course the advisers would be right. Donald did indeed close his "Getting Right with Lincoln" essay, written more than thirty years ago, with a celebration of Abe's pragmatism. Lincoln, he wrote then, "can be cited on all sides of all questions." "My policy," he quoted Lincoln as saying, "is to have no policy." Can there be any doubt, then, why Bush's advisers urged him to give Donald a ring, not to say a penknife?

That's right, a penknife. At a poignant moment in the conversations that followed Donald's lecture, world-class name-dropper Dan Boorstin happened to mention his discovery in the Library of Congress of a shoebox containing the effects recovered from Lincoln's pockets the night of his assassination—effects that included a penknife. Upon hearing this story, Bush spontaneously reached into his pocket, pulled out his Swiss Army knife, and handed it to Donald. To what purpose, you might well wonder. Was the knife a token of Bush's esteem for Donald? Was it part of a potlatch ceremony with the departed Lincoln? Or was it merely something Bush no longer wished to be caught dead with?

And what, you demand, was Donald's reaction? Did he challenge Bush to a game of mumblety-peg? Did he slash Boorstin's school tie? Did he shake the president down for that celebrated Lafayette Park crack? No-siree-Bob. After a moment of (reported) speechlessness, David Herbert Donald told George Walker Bush, "I will always treasure this, Mr. President." So, no need to ask who will be the new White House historian, only what the Warren Professor will call the work that will inevitably come out of the experience. *Getting Right with Bush*, perhaps.

## The Study Group from Hell

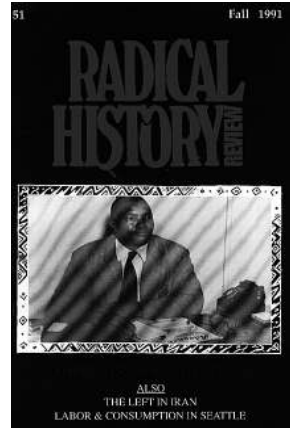
Issue 51: Fall 1991

Is there any word but theft for it? First the Right steals the methods of the Civil Rights Movement to bolster its flagging antiabortion campaign; then it expropriates the notions of "political correctness" and free speech for its own purposes. Now, as if all that were not insult enough, the Right seems to have adopted the model of the study groups, long a staple of leftist self-organization.

Consider, for example, the rather curious crew that has gathered together for a "public-policy seminar on world events" at the Federal Medical Center prison in Rochester, Minnesota. One of the organizers is Lee Alexander, the former mayor of Syracuse and head of the United States Conference of Mayors. (He's doing ten years for racketeering, tax evasion, and obstructing an investigation into a kickback scheme.) Then, there's television evangelist, the Rev. Jim Bakker—also up the river for fraud. Alexander describes the former PTL host as "very impressive, very sincere, very gentle."

But Alexander's greatest admiration is reserved for the group's third organizer—U.S. Labor Party leader, fascist loon, and convicted scam artist, Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr. (Those of us with longer memories recall that he used to lead classes on Marxist economics under the name "L. Marcus.") "The man's a walking encyclopedia," Alexander told the *New York Times*. "He knows more facts and dates and places than anyone I've ever met."

Alexander, unfortunately, did not supply the syllabus that this cadre has been following. But if you happen to flip by Tammy Faye Bakker on a cable channel at 3 A.M. and hear her talking about a narco-conspiracy involving Henry Kissinger and the Queen of England, you'll have some idea of what the Reverend Jim is learning in prison. Of course, things could go the other way, and we might well see LaRouche in some pretty heavy-duty eye makeup. Come to think of it, a Labor Party Theme Park sounds intriguing: twenty acres of Trilateral Water Slides, a nuclear fusion-powered Ferris wheel, PTL (Praise to LaRouche) video games, and information tables. And free to anyone who's done the reading.



## A True Story (The Little Tree Scandal)

*Issue 53: Spring 1992*

Last October, Emory historian Dan T. Carter broke the story that the best-selling nonfiction paperback of the summer, Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree*, was a fiction. More than that, he revealed that this "gentle memoir" of a Cherokee Indian's childhood was actually the invention of Asa Earl Carter, who until at least 1973 had been a "Ku Klux Klan terrorist, right-wing radio announcer, homegrown American fascist and anti-Semite, rabble-rousing demagogue and secret author of the famous 1963 speech by Gov. George Wallace of Alabama: 'Segregation now . . . Segregation tomorrow . . . Segregation forever.'"

Once the initial shock of the revelation wore off, it became, not surprisingly, food for thought-pieces. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. mused about the way in which Asa Carter's scam opened questions about the rhetorical dimensions of literary authenticity that went as far back as early slave narratives and as far forward as the fiction of Danny (James) Santiago. For himself, Gates did not bother to distinguish the variety of truth claims at issue—whether the "authenticity" of the author, the "veracity" of the content, or the "verisimilitude" of the rendering—since it was his aim to remind all jealous guardians of ethnic purity and "situated knowledge" of the inescapable interplay of fact and fiction. Never mind that David Duke was then borrowing the "fictions" of religion and cosmetic surgery to keep his candidacy "real" in Louisiana. Though the *New York Times* had moved the book from its nonfiction to fiction best-seller list, the University of New Mexico Press was content to buy space beneath Gates's rumination in which to advertise *The Education of Little Tree: A True Story*. After all, life is short, art is long.

## Lawnmower Man (Ken Jackson in Alaska)

*Issue 53: Spring 1992*

Columbia University grads interested in a different view of the Russian Thaw might want to check into the university's alumni Alaska-Siberia Travel-Study tour, which gets under way in August. The eighteen-day itinerary runs from Khabarovsk to Vancouver and features talks along the way by Kenneth T. Jackson, Barzun Professor of History and widely published authority on Russia's rugged Khrebgrassie Frontier. At \$5,830 per person (double occupancy) for a promenade deck deluxe stateroom, this walk with Ken is, well, a steal.



## Titles, Trios, Tedium (Matching Quiz)

*Issue 54: Fall 1992*

Fashions in academic book titles have changed over the years. One of our personal favorites—the triple alliterative—seems to have lately fallen from favor. In the hopes of reviving that practice, we offer the following quiz in which you must match up the title with its subtitle.

### Titles

1. Candidates, Consultants, and Campaigns
2. Campaigns, Congress, and Courts
3. Culture, Control, and Commitment
4. Culture, Curers, and Contagion
5. Culture, Conflict, and Coexistence
6. Conflict, Compromise, and Conciliation
7. Culture, Conflict, and Crime
8. Crime, Crusades, and Corruption
9. Power, Politics, and Purges
10. Power, Politics, and Progress
11. Profits, Power, and Prohibition
12. Pills, Pesticides, and Profits
13. Pills, Petticoats, and Plows
14. Pills, Pen, and Politics
15. Politics, Participation, and Poverty
16. Politics, Polemics, and Pedagogs
17. Protest, Politics, and Prosperity
18. Soldiers, Scholars, and Society
19. Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower
20. Soldiers, Sutlers, and Settlers

### Subtitles

- a. The Story of General Leon Jastremski, 1842–1907
- b. American-Soviet Cultural Relations, 1917–58
- c. A Study of Work Organization and Work Attitudes in the United States and Japan
- d. Readings for Medical Social Science
- e. Black Americans and White Institutions, 1940–75
- f. The Social Impact of the American Military
- g. The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War Against Revolutionary France
- h. Garrison Life on the Texas Frontier
- i. The Style and Substance of American Electioneering
- j. Development Through Self-Help in Kenya
- k. A Study of U.S. Technical Assistance in Education to Iran
- l. Alcohol Reform and the Industrialization of America
- m. The Making of Federal Campaign Finance Law
- n. An Account of the Communist Party in Poland and Hungary from World War II
- o. West German–Polish Normalization
- p. The Southern Country Store
- q. Prohibitions in the U.S., 1900–1987
- r. Social change in Rural Peru
- s. The International Trade in Toxic Substances

*The answers are at the end of “Best of ‘The Abusable Past’”*

## History from the Catbox Up (Pet Who's Who Directory, etc.)

Issue 55: Winter 1993

"The history of pets," Charles Phineas wrote a number of years ago in a famous review essay on "Household Pets and Urban Alienation" in the *Journal of Social History*, "has not received the historical attention it deserves." "Dr. Phineas's" tongue may have been planted firmly in cheek, but it now looks as if his prediction that attention would finally turn to his "ultimate in the history of the inarticulate" is coming to pass.

Or at least there are some promising signs. Just about two years ago we were moved to learn that Jerry Rosenbaum, the operator and caretaker of Bonheur Memorial Park, had established the Tomb of the Unknown Pets, honoring the stray or abused pets that die each year. A bronze plaque at the Elkridge, Maryland, cemetery (named for Rosa Bonheur, the nineteenth-century painter and sculptor of animals) explains: "The Unknown Pets. For the Millions of Lost and Abandoned Pets a Final Resting Place."

A stirring tribute, but can anything be done to reduce the tragic numbers of unknown pets? Fortunately, the answer is now yes, with the publication of the new compendium, *Who's Who in American Pets*. And the publishers have happily opted for a principle of inclusiveness in compiling the directory: The only criterion for nomination is that the owners believe that the pet has "made an important contribution to their lives." And what about those animals condemned to the relative marginality, if not anonymity, of Bonheur Park, their doelike eyes fixed upon us as they paddle aimlessly in Lethe's dismal waters? Well, you'll be relieved to know that the new guide thoughtfully includes a section on dead pets: "Who Was Who in American Pets."

Comforting news for pet owners, to be sure, but academic historians may want to keep in mind "Phineas's" warning that the field not be left to "animal lovers," who will "provide solid if antiquarian accounts of the evolution of various types of pets but nothing on their social significance." Is it too soon to hope that a more scholarly *Dictionary of American Pets* will displace the staunchly populist choices of *Who's Who in American Pets*?



## Block That Simile (Jim Banner's History SWAT Team)

Issue 57: Fall 1993

The hysteria over the presence of campus "thought police" has subsided somewhat over the past year, but the lull may signal little more than a shift to a low-intensity-conflict strategy. Just recently, for example, the *Public Historian* published a proposal from James M. Banner Jr. to create a history truth squad prepared to "spring into action . . . against weak historical reasoning, the irresponsible use of evidence, dangerous analogizing, or missing historical facts." "I have in mind," Banner explained, "a kind of History Watch, Shadow Council of History Advisors, or Historical Analogy Police." Banner, a historian of the Early National Period who previously taught at Princeton and now directs academic programs for the James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation in Washington, called for the formation of crack teams ("like the rapid-response team of a medical or fire corps") who could fax themselves to sites where the past has been abused. The use of history in the public discourse, Banner observed, "is appallingly bad."

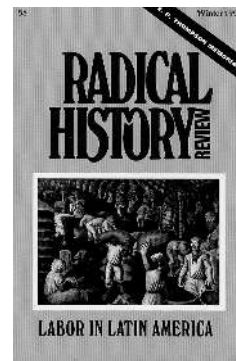
Well, we could scarcely argue with that. But then again, we probably couldn't argue with a historical SWAT team either, especially if they arrived in full interpretive riot gear, including the special Kevlar "No Flies on Me" Criticism-Proof Vest. When you come down to it, there's really nothing like a historian in helmet and leathers to cut those careless analogizers down to size.

## Humor in Uniform (Kathy Power/Othello)

Issue 58: Winter 1994

One could almost hear the last Earth Shoe of the '60s dropping to the floor when Kathy Ann Power surrendered to authorities in Massachusetts last September. Some twenty-three years earlier, the former Brandeis radical had risen to the top of the FBI's Most-Wanted List—where she managed to stay for fourteen years—when the \$26,000 robbery of a Brighton bank in which she acted as getaway driver left a police officer dead. Power went underground immediately thereafter, but neither the new life nor the new family she started in Oregon offset the clinical depression into which she fell, and, after much delicate negotiation, she finally turned herself in.

In the course of researching its profile of the aging—indeed New Aging—radical, the *New York Times* called the chairman of American studies at Brandeis, Jacob Cohen, who had been an assistant professor at the university in 1970. He



recalled Power as a young woman mesmerized by her lover and fellow bank robber, Stanley Bond, himself a furloughed convict at the time. “He was thrilling, like Othello to Desdemona,” Cohen told the *Times*. “From their point of view, and I would think from Kathy’s point of view, there was something exciting and romantic and even revolutionary about a criminal.”

Criminal? Rude of speech, perhaps, “and little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace,” yes. But is we remember correctly, Desdemona’s husband was a furloughed soldier, not a convict out on a pass. Twelve years of Reagan-Bush commercials and even the noble Moor begins too look a lot like Willie Horton. Now *that’s* radical.

## **New York Eskimo Boy**

*Issue 58: Winter 1994*

In 1897 explorer Robert Peary returned to New York from an expedition to northern Greenland accompanied by six Eskimos whom he had persuaded to join him by promising them, as one of them later recalled, “nice warm homes in the sunshine land.” What the Eskimos (people we would today call Inuit) didn’t know was that they were being taken to the United States as curiosities and anthropological specimens, not honored guests. When Peary’s ship docked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, thirty thousand people came on board to gape at the exotic spectacle. The next stop was the American Museum of Natural History, where they were literally put on display. (One of the Eskimos, Qisuk, was outfitted with an oversized coat and a loud pair of golf stockings. His son, Minik, in a similar costume, spent his time playing with the stuffed Eskimo dogs in the museum’s Arctic exhibit.) The museum’s scientists—including, it seems, the distinguished anthropologist Franz Boas—treated Qisuk, Minik, and their compatriots as just another scientific specimen to be observed, measured, and catalogued. One photograph records Qisuk and Minik standing naked on pedestals. Their “nice warm home” turned out to be the damp basement of the museum during a hot New York summer. Within months Qisuk and three of the other men were dead of tuberculosis. In an elaborately staged traditional Eskimo funeral, Qisuk was buried on the museum grounds.

Or, at least that’s what Minik thought. Actually, a log wrapped in fur had been substituted for Qisuk’s body; the hoax was intended as Boas later admitted, “to appease the boy.” And where was Qisuk? After doctors at Bellevue Hospital were done dissecting and studying him and the other men, they shipped his bones (after they had been processed and bleached) over to the museum for their collection of Eskimo bones, where they would remain for the next century. How young Minik learned of the deception is a matter of some dispute. The most sensational account

was offered by the *New York World* in 1907 in a full-page story headlined "Give Me My Father's Body." It reported that "the New York Esquimaux Boy," as the press dubbed him, had accidentally encountered a display case with his father's bones during a return visit to the museum. "I felt as though I must die then and there," the paper quoted Minik as saying. "I threw myself at the bottom of the glass case and prayed and wept. I went straight to the director and implored him to let me bury my father. He would not. I swore that I would never rest until I had given my father burial."

There are less dramatic versions of this tale, and museum officials deny the bones were ever displayed. One has it that schoolmates told Minik (who grew up as the ward of the museum's building superintendent) about the museum's Eskimo bone collection. But, for the most part, the story has been forgotten. Those involved did not bother to remind anyone: Peary, for example, expunged any mention from his two-volume memoirs of his Greenland expeditions. According to Wally Herbert's book on Peary's race to the pole, *The Noose of Laurels*, the explorer may have been worried that any talk about the bones would have led to another hidden scandal: his sexual relationship with a married Eskimo woman with whom he had two children.

But recently a campaign started by a Canadian businessman, linguist, and historian named Kenn Harper, who published a book on the case in 1986, as well as publicity from articles in the *Washington Post* and the *Toronto Globe and Mail* brought some retrospective justice. In July 1993—in the middle of the "International Year of Indigenous Peoples," which has included calls to return hundreds of aboriginal skeletons to their homes—the American Natural History Museum announced that it was returning Qisuk's bones to Qaanaaq, on the western coast of Greenland. On 1 August they were interred in with a pile of rocks on top of them and a brass plaque that reads: "They have come home." It was "not a Christian burial because they were pagans," the curator of the Thule Museum in Qaanaaq told the *Post*. Only Christians, it seems, bury logs.

## **Write This Down (Street of Martyrs . . .)**

*Issue 59: Spring 1994*

In Zagreb, according to NPR, the name of the "Square of Victims of Fascism" has been changed to the "Square of Croatian Geniuses."

## Cloak and Clio (Ameses as Historians)

Issue 60: Fall 1994

"Simpson case has Jewish angle," read the headline in an early July edition of *Washington Jewish Week*. Not an angle you may have been looking for, but localism is a venerable journalistic tradition. One of our personal favorites is the report the *Bronx Home News* issued on Trotsky's role in the Bolshevik seizure of power. "Bronx Man," the headline read, "Leads Russian Revolution." So perhaps you'll forgive us if we bring up an angle on the Aldrich Ames–CIA spy scandal that the media have hitherto neglected, for Ames is the son of a professional historian.

Now the involvement of academics—especially historians—in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor, the CIA, is well known; so well known, in fact, that critics within the Agency, according to Peter Novick, were occasionally heard to complain about "the overrepresentation of historians within its ranks." The problem, though, seems one more of nepotism and alcoholism than anything else; the Ames story, in fact, reads like a misbegotten version of *Harlot's Ghost*: less Mailer than Mel Brooks, and too long by half.

Aldrich (Ricky) Ames's father, Carleton, received a history Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin and started his teaching career in 1937 at what was then River Falls State Teachers' College (now the University of Wisconsin at River Falls), where his father, J. F. Ames, had been president for years. "Ninety percent of the faculty regarded Carleton as a first-class case of nepotism," one retired colleague recalled; "many of us felt Carleton had no business on the faculty." A heavy drinker, Carleton was in the habit of sending his friends into local bars to buy his whiskey, in order to keep his tipling a secret from his pious, teetotaling dad.

None of this mattered to the CIA, it seems, who hired him away from River Falls in 1951 and sent him off to Burma. "A Fulbright," he told his colleagues. Later, he served under Mr. Paranoia, James Jesus Angleton, who ran counterintelligence for the Agency. Ames still drank, of course, and would occasionally "disappear off the radar screen," as one former friend put it. But his long-suffering wife took solace in the fact that wherever Carleton ended up, the Company would find him and bring him back. More than that and in keeping with family tradition, Carleton managed to secure an agency position for his college-drop out son, Aldrich, when the youth turned twenty-one. Later, he would graduate from George Washington University with a degree in (you guessed it) history. Eighty proof.

With his degree and bottle in hand, Aldrich Ames then went on to make a truly professional career in history, delivering many, many papers—most of them to the Russians. Like it or not, he's a homeboy.



## Was Enola Gay?

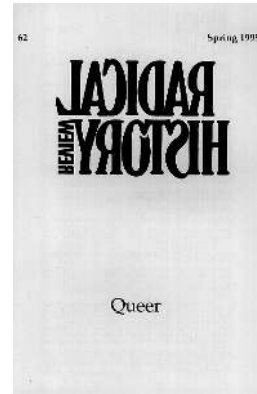
Issue 62: Spring 1995

As we go to press (January 28, 1995), it appears that the Smithsonian is about to cave in to pressure from veterans' groups and conservative congressmen and drastically scale back its planned exhibit on the Atomic Bomb and the end of World War II, which the vets had charged was too sympathetic to the Japanese. Veterans' groups had already won dramatic revisions in the exhibit script, but the election of the Republican Congress had emboldened critics to call for dropping the exhibit entirely and for firing the director of the National Air and Space Museum, Martin Harwit.

Now, the plan is apparently for a simple display of the fuselage of the Enola Gay (the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and that was named after the pilot's mother, Enola Gay Tibbets) with little commentary—an exhibit that Smithsonian Secretary I. Michael Heyman describes as "one which every American, and frankly, every citizen of the planet, can be proud of." The Smithsonian's display of cowardice won plaudits from House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who said he had recently found "a certain political correctness seeping in and distorting and prejudicing the Smithsonian's exhibits." "Political correctness," he continued, "may be okay in some faculty lounge, but . . . the Smithsonian is a treasure that belongs to the American people and it should not become a plaything for left-wing ideologies."

Political correctness? Somehow that term would more aptly describe the pressure exerted on the Smithsonian to ensure that its history conform to a particular uncritical format—one in which the story is always "one which every American . . . can be proud of." Slavery? Indian removal? Internment of Japanese Americans? Never heard of them. That was precisely the point that a group of historians led by Martin Sherwin and others made earlier when the Smithsonian first backed away from its original (more forthright) exhibit script. The Smithsonian, they charged, had become associated with a "transparent attempt at HISTORICAL CLEANSING" by removing key historical artifacts from the exhibit and suppressing the fact there was "a debate from the very beginning over whether the atomic bombings were necessary to bring about an early end to the Pacific War without an invasion of Japan."

But the reign of right-wing political correctness has not been confined to concerns about the *content* of the Enola Gay exhibit. Some have also apparently been offended by its *title*. When the *Northwest Herald* of Crystal Lake, Illinois, covered the Smithsonian controversy, the headline writer summarized the story as: "Atomic Bombers Criticize Enola Homosexual Exhibit."



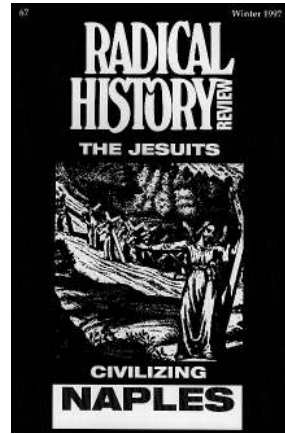


**Capitalism and Its Discontents (Cold War Made Cap Help Workers)***Issue 67: Winter 1997*

We were more than a little bemused the other day by a “Viewpoint” column entitled “Beneficial Capitalism, R.I.P.” in the business pages of the *New York Times*. Written by Alexei Bayer, the director of an “economic consulting firm,” it remarked on the surprising resurgence of nostalgia for communism that the Russian presidential election has stirred. “While there is no reason to mourn the death of Communism,” he observed, “that is not true for the capitalist ideology, which had its roots in the great battle of ideas that broke out after World War II.”

Baffled, we read on. To defend against the promises of communism, Bayer argued, the United States “took upon itself” the task of showing that under capitalism, “owners of capital, management, government and employees would get their fair share.” And so trade unions defended the system and, in return, “management let workers share the success.” The Great Society was “both the high noon of capitalism and the beginning of the twilight”—shades of Koestler and Harrington. From the opening of China to Glasnost and the collapse of the USSR, the failure of communism released Americans from this consensus and allowed a harsher, free-market ideology to triumph: “In retrospect, the capitalist ideology was a rare breed: it was benign and inclusive, and it aspired to provide a decent life for the largest possible number of people.” “Its passing,” Bayer concluded, “should be mourned.”

Apart from the implicit credit given to farseeing capitalists who “let their workers” share in their profits, Bayer’s narrative is familiar to us under other guises: the rise and fall of “moral capitalism” (Lizabeth Cohen), for example, or of the “New Deal Order” (Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle), or of the Era of Great Expectations (James Patterson), or more simply “Happy Days.” What is new, though, is to see this nostalgia for “beneficial capitalism” paraded across the business section of the great gray *Times*. The Cold War was perhaps the longest and most successful cover story ever developed for the class struggles and settlements eked out in the decades after 1945, and now that the story has been blown, we are being asked to remember the benefits it brought and forget the price we paid.



## High Test Voting (George Will on Voice Votes)

*Issue 67: Winter 1997*

In what appears to have been a fit of testosterone poisoning, George F. Will produced a column last year with the indignant title: "In a Real Democracy, Voters Wouldn't Have to Cast Their Ballots in Secret." Using Oregon's experiment with mail-in balloting as his pretext, Will lashed out at the whole notion of secret ballots as having abolished "a communitarian moment that is a valuable part of our civic liturgy—the Election Day coming together for the allocation of power." "Abolish secret voting," he declared, "have every voter call out his or her choice in an unquavering voice and have the choice recorded for public inspection. You probably will have a smaller electorate, but also a hardier, better one." An electorate closer, that is, to Will's historical ideal: "Back when democracy was vigorous and the results did not make you wince, back when voters were electing Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Clay and Webster, oral voting, often conducted around a whiskey barrel, was common."

You can fairly smell the heady mixture of alcohol, tobacco, and musk wafting off of these lines, the robust, back-slapping paternalism that Will regards as the essence—the attar, so to speak—of "real democracy." Never mind that this Old Spice view of politics would further reduce the already scandalously low turnouts of elections in America. No one whom Will knows, after all, would wince at the election of John Calhoun. And no one he respects would blink at the repayment of debts—to the squire or the ward-heeler—that open balloting in this country long performed. All one need remember is Rhys Isaac's marvelous description of colonial Election Day in *The Transformation of Virginia*. "For humbler men," he wrote, public "voting was less an opportunity to confer a favor than a chance to show gratitude or to secure the goodwill of a powerful neighbor." For more years than we can count now, the good Will's column has been delivered in the voice of "a more powerful neighbor"—a neighbor dreaming of those halcyon days before women and blacks got the vote and the nerve to cast it (and him) out of sight.

## Out of Sync (French Sync Swimming and Holocaust)

*Issue 67: Winter 1997*

Buried in all the hoopla surrounding the summer Olympics was the abortive attempt of France's synchronized swimming team to perform a number memorializing the Holocaust. According to a brief item in the *New York Times*, the team had planned to don black bathing suits, goose-step to the side of the pool, and then, once in the

water, “to re-enact the arrival of Jewish women in the death camps, their selection by Nazi doctors and their final march to the gas chambers”—all set to the soundtrack from Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* and to chants sung in the Warsaw Ghetto before the Holocaust.

France’s Sports Minister, Guy Drut, nixed the program on the grounds that it might offend crowds in Atlanta. France, which deported some 75,000 Jews to Nazi death camps during World War II, was presumably a different matter.

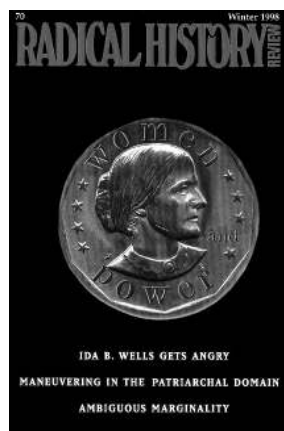
## Down from Communism (The Littlest Browder)

*Issue 70: Winter 1998*

“Capitalism with a Vengeance” read the headline on the front page of the 5 October 1997 Sunday *New York Times* “Money & Business” section. And, indeed, it was a story we had all read many times before in these days of postcommunism. In largely celebratory tones, author Edmund L. Andrews recounted the exciting arrival of the stock market to the heart of what was once known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. “Russia is hot,” Andrews wrote, noting the *Moscow Times* stock index had skyrocketed from 150 to 375 in a mere nine months. Western speculators had of course reaped the heaviest profits in this fevered market; shares in the Hermitage Fund, started in April 1996 with a \$25 million stake from New York’s Republic Bank, had already increased sixfold in value.

The *Times* did admit to some potential qualms about the stock boom, acknowledging that “Russia’s economy is still a mess. Growth is essentially zero” and “outside the glitter of Moscow, this remains a land of bleak poverty.” Then there was the even less appealing fact that these stock profits have come through looting the assets of previously socialized companies. Thus, managers of a government-owned fleet were able to purchase 51 percent of the company for \$2.5 million even though the company owned 100 ships that had been built within the past 10 years for as much as \$20 million each. Not a bad way to halt the falling rate of profit.

The farseeing capitalist whom the *Times* credited with first spotting the opportunities in Russian stocks back in 1993 (before there was even a Russian stock market) was Bill Browder, who had learned his free-market wisdom at the University of Chicago. “Wearing dollar-sign cuff links,” the *Times* enthused, “Mr. Browder, now 33, runs what could be the most successful investment fund in the world this year.” Browder had come to Russia as Salomon Brothers’ 29-year-old manager for Russian equities: “I came here, saw what was going on and said, ‘This is incredible.’”



Incredible indeed. The *Times*, as usual, didn't know the half of it. "Dollar" Bill is the grandson of Earl Browder, whom our readers will remember as general secretary of the American Communist Party from 1934 to 1945, and two-time party candidate for president. Though Earl's "revisionist" transformation of the Communist Party into the "Communist Political Association" led to his expulsion from the revived party in 1946, his long career of political opportunism seems not to have been lost on his grandson. So, though it may be arguable whether Earl was the Gordon Gekko of the Old Left, Bill seems bent on becoming the Joe Stalin of the new Russia. The *Times* article noted, for example, that Russian holding companies have been diverting profits from subsidiary companies. But Browder, who detected the profit shift early and moved his investments into the holding companies, remains unconcerned: "When a company does terrible things to the subsidiary, I would rather be on the side with power."

Grandpa Earl must be turning cartwheels in his grave: thanks to the likes of his grandson, communism has indeed turned out to be twentieth-century Americanism.

## Photographic Memories (Atomic Testing/Kodak)

*Issue 72: Fall 1998*

The recent controversy over nuclear testing by India and Pakistan reminded us that more than a half century has passed since the first shock waves of the Trinity Test passed through the sands of New Mexico and the consciousness of most Americans. "Life under a cloud," Allan Winkler has called the postnuclear experience, and with good reason. At the very moment that Walt Disney was making and marketing his first True-Life Adventure, *The Living Desert* (1953), the desert skies were raining down death and disease upon unsuspecting citizens. To have protested these effects at the time was of course to have risked charges of disloyalty in a Cold War as sinister, and choreographed, as the infamous dance of the scorpions in Disney's immensely popular film.

That particular cold war ended seven years ago, and it has been decades since the United States set the first limits to its own testing program. Nonetheless historians, physicians, scientists, and anthropologists are still trying to clear away the cloud of lies, denials, and double-think with which the Atomic Energy Commission and other government agencies clouded public understanding of the medical consequences of nuclear testing. Thanks in part to the "openness initiative" of former Energy Secretary Hazel Leary, and also to the persistent efforts of organizations like the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER), we have been gaining a sharper and more precise picture of the fallout—in the broadest sense of that term—of American and Russian nuclear

testing after 1945. Only last year, the National Cancer Institute released a 100,000-page study (commissioned by Congress in 1982) estimating that radiation damage from testing had been sufficient to produce some 25,000 to 50,000 additional cases of thyroid cancer in the United States. The study concluded that between 1951 and 1962—the year Rachel Carlson published *Silent Spring*—the radioactive releases from the Nevada test sites alone were at least ten times larger than those caused by the 1986 explosion at Chernobyl.

One of the more obscure yet intriguing sidebars to this half-told story was uncovered at roughly the same time by the IEER. During the late 1950s, it was revealed, the Eastman Kodak Company once threatened to sue the AEC for damage done to its film by radioactive fallout from atmospheric testing. The same Iodine-131 that had contaminated milk around the country had also penetrated the corn husks from which Kodak made the packing for its film and thereby fogged the negatives. To avoid litigation from Kodak and its competitors, the AEC agreed to alert all film manufacturers to their testing schedule, thus allowing them to defer the production of the packing material until radioactive levels had dropped. The film, like the public, was to remain in the dark.

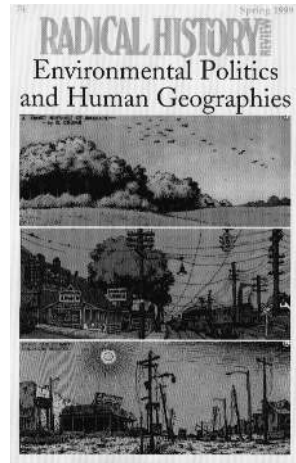
No doubt there is a free marketeer somewhere who would see in the AEC's accommodation to Kodak an inspiring vindication of Free World Values: consumer sovereignty, market democracy, and the virtues of tort law. The glass half full, in other words, though half full of what is anybody's guess. A more jaundiced—or irradiated—view might be inclined to see Kodak's success as more closely conforming to the neutron bomb ideal of the corporate state: protecting marketable assets while putting manipulable citizens at risk. In keeping with the company's signature slogan, Kodak executives—like so many other fifties Organization Men—were content to whisper to the AEC: “You press the button—We'll do the rest.”

## Speaking of the Past (Mario Savio)

*Issue 74: Spring 1999*

The efforts of wealthy alumni and corporations to disseminate or memorialize some right-wing cause or ideology at universities is an old and frequently repeated story—the kind of thing that Thorstein Veblen was railing against back in 1918 when he wrote in “The Higher Learning in America” about the exertions of the rich and powerful to turn education into “a merchantable commodity.” When the gifts come from a different direction, they are more likely to throw universities into some upheaval, as happened, for example, when the playwright Larry Kramer attempted to endow a professorship in Gay Studies at Yale a couple of years ago.

The University of California at Berkeley has also been rather grudging in response to pressure to commemorate the Free Speech Movement (FSM) that rocked that campus back in 1964. As a California friend writes, "It took years for local artists to get permission to install a five-foot circle of granite dedicated to free speech in Sproul Plaza, outside the administration building. And even when the monument was built in 1992, officials insisted that it not include the words 'Free Speech Movement.'" Only after FSM leader Mario Savio died of a heart attack in 1996 did the administration permit the installation of a small bronze plaque on the steps leading to Sproul Hall that reads: "Mario Savio Steps, Dedicated 1997."



Even when alumnus Stephen Silberstein offered \$3.5 million to commemorate the FSM, university officials initially seemed a bit troubled about whether to accept the gift. Ultimately, however, the decision was to take the cash, as they used to say on "Let's Make a Deal." University fundraisers were not unaware of the fact that a new generation of Berkeley graduates were now moving into the ranks of potential donors, and that some of them might have made a bundle in industries like computer software where Silberstein hit it big. With large sums of money now at stake, Berkeley Chancellor Robert M. Berdahl, announced that the time had come to "reconcile ourselves with history."

Silberstein himself was not a campus activist—just a witness to the events of 1964. But he said that the ideals of FSM had long stayed with him and that he wanted to share with a new generation the ideas of a movement that "had a tremendous effect on me personally and every student on campus." "Mario Savio and the leaders of the Free Speech Movement symbolize the very best of Berkeley, surely just as our top researchers, scholars and athletes," Silberstein told a group of 1960s alumni. "They are inextricably part of Berkeley history and the Berkeley tradition and we are proud of that."

His gift will fund the preservation (and presentation online) of the FSM archives; the purchase of books in the name of the "Mario Savio/Free Speech Movement Endowment," and a Free Speech Movement Café that will include rotating exhibits about the movement.

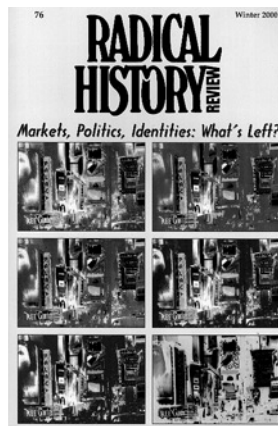
Of the café, Savio's son said: "It sounds like a wonderful place to plot righteous rebellion."

## Feed Your Head (DEA Museum)

*Issue 76: Winter 2000*

Visitors to Washington can now take a side trip, so to speak, to Drug Enforcement Agency headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, where a new museum was opened to much fanfare last May. The exhibit tracks the history of drug use and drug enforcement in the United States, beginning with the opium brought by Chinese laborers to California during the 1849 gold rush. No mention is made of tobacco, the first profitable export of the American colonies, for this awkward fact might make the Virginia patriots appear as, well, the world's first narco-terrorists. Nor, for that matter, is there any mention of the on-again, off-again relationships between American intelligence agencies and countless opium growers, heroin manufacturers, and cocaine smugglers in Sicily, Marseille, Afghanistan, Turkey, Southeast Asia, and South America since the end of the Second World War.

On the other hand, the museum features the carefully reconstructed storefront of a 1940s drugstore, a 1960s head shop, and a 1980s crack house. You can also find plenty of examples of drug paraphernalia as well as a photo morgue of rock stars dead from overdoses. The museum is open by appointment from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M., Tuesdays through Fridays. And, rumor has it, the first visit is free.



## The Red Red Robbins (FTP Project film)

*Issue 77: Spring 2000*

After a brief but welcome lull, the *New York Times*'s Official Cultural Critic, Richard Bernstein, appears to have resumed his investigation into the crimes of Political Correctness, a campaign that we thought had reached its anticlimax in his *Dictatorship of Virtue* (1994), an interminable screed against multiculturalism on campus. Now the Giuliani of Ideas has decided to target recent films that play "fast and loose with history." The difficulty, though, as Bernstein has had to acknowledge, is that even Shakespeare had "allowed himself to invent scenes that never happened and to put words into the mouths of historical figures who never said them." So how to distinguish the "good" historical distortions of Shakespeare from the "bad" distortions of contemporary filmmakers? Well, quoting Columbia University literary critic James



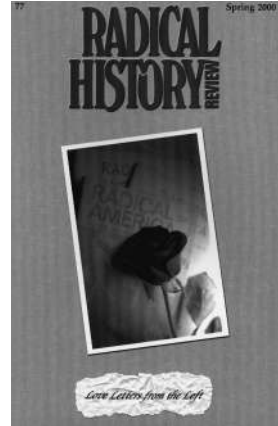
Shapiro, Bernstein argued that Shakespeare was different in the large number of "historical sources he read" and his interest in "how history works" rather than in the writing of "polemic." By contrast, current filmmakers make movies that "are closer to propaganda," the most egregious of these being Tim Robbins's recent film on the Federal Theater Project, *Cradle Will Rock*, which, Bernstein declared, spun "a kind of reductive Manichean morality tale that makes a shambles of history."

One of the examples of Robbins's reckless disregard for history that particularly infuriated Bernstein was his treatment of "a congressman who investigates the Federal Theatre Project . . . [as] so blithely imbecilic that he doesn't know who Shakespeare was." The Bard, Bernstein triumphantly reminded his readers, "didn't do things like that."

Perhaps not. One can scarcely ask Coriolanus what he thought of Shakespeare's freewheeling characterization. On the other hand, in the example that Bernstein singled out, Tim Robbins appears to have stayed a bit closer to the archive than his chief critic. For one thing the imbecilic congressman in *Cradle Will Rock* fails to recognize the name of Christopher Marlowe, not that of Shakespeare. And for another the section of the film that so outraged Bernstein directly quotes from the transcripts of the Dies Committee's 1938 hearings on the Federal Theater Project. In those hearings, Congressman Joe Starnes of Alabama closely questioned FTP head Hallie Flannigan about an article in which she had described workers' theater as being invested "with a certain Marlowesque madness." Starnes, then, memorably asked Flannigan: "You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?" A startled Flannigan replied: "I am very sorry. I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe."

Unfazed, Starnes insisted that Flannigan give Marlowe up to the Committee. "Tell us who Marlowe is," he ordered, "so we can get the proper reference." A weary Flannigan complied: "Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period immediately preceding Shakespeare."

Now how did the Culture Critic manage to miss this part of the record he reproached Robbins for distorting? As Shakespeare's stage manager, Philp Henslowe, used to say: "I don't know. It's a mystery."



**Ratz (Hantavirus in Archives)***Issue 77: Spring 2000*

Few besides the columnist Chuck Shepard took note last year of a two-week hearing in Washington, D.C., where two Cabinet secretaries—Interior’s Bruce Babbitt and Treasury’s Robert Rubin—were threatened with contempt citations by an irate Federal Judge for failing to obey a court order to turn over documents. Nearly three years earlier, Judge Royce Lamberth had ordered Babbitt and Rubin to submit all records relating to federal trust funds held for Native Americans, but neither had as yet complied. “Among the excuses offered by the two departments,” according to Shepard, was the claim that a Southwestern federal records depository was “contaminated with rat droppings,” with the result that researchers would not enter for fear of catching the dreaded hantavirus. So Babbitt and Rubin were covered: even if the dog had eaten their homework, he would have died with the evidence still in him.

**Title, Trios Tedium (Answers to Quiz)***Issue 54: Fall 1992*

Answers to quiz: 1-i; 2-m; 3-c; 4-d; 5-b; 6-o; 7-none; 8-q; 9-n; 10-r; 11-l; 12-s; 13-p; 14-a; 15-j; 16-k; 17-e; 18-f; 19-g; 20-h