As a public service,

THE LAUCKS FOUNDATION

from time to time calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification or understanding of issues affecting world peace. The accompanying reprints constitute Mailing No. 49.

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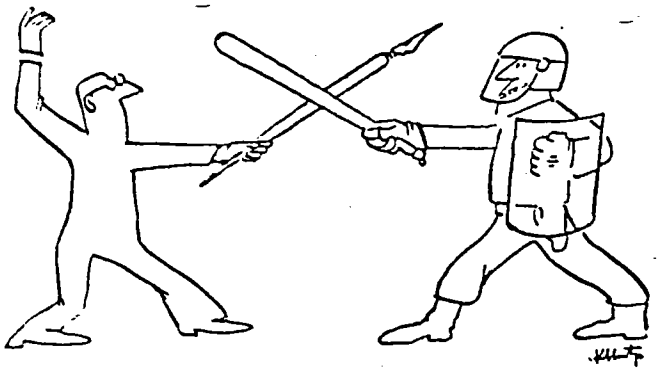
June 20, 1983

EXCERPT from the Foreword of the 1946 Edition of Brave New World. by Aldous Huxley (Harper & Brothers, N.Y.):

"All things considered it looks as though Utopia were far closer to us than anyone, only fifteen years ago, could have imagined. Then, [Brave New World was first published in 1932] I projected it six hundred years into the future. Today it seems quite possible that the horror may be upon us within a single century. That is, if we refrain from blowing ourselves to smithereens in the interval. Indeed, unless we choose to decentralize and to use applied science, not as the end to which human beings are to be made the means, but as the means to producing a race of free individuals, we have only two alternatives to choose from: either a number of national, militarized totalitarianisms, having as their root the terror of the atomic bomb and as their consequence the destruction of civilization... or else one supra-national totalitarianism, called into existence by the social chaos resulting from rapid technological progress in general and the atomic revolution in particular, and developing, under the need for efficiency and stability, into the welfare-tyranny of Utopia."

FROM: In Front of Your Nose--The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell, 1945-1950, p. 174. Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., N.Y., 1968):

"The slowness of historical change, the fact that any epoch always contains a great deal of the last epoch, is never sufficiently allowed for. Such a manner of thinking is bound to lead to mistaken prophecies, because, even when it gauges the direction of events rightly, it will miscalculate their tempo."



The defense of private decency

KEITH BURRIS

MOST PEOPLE know that Mr. George Orwell wrote a book called *1984* about a counter-utopian, oligarchical collective in which Big Brother is always watching, and the average citizen is always anxious, manipulated, and alone. Some of us use the term "Orwellian" to describe aspects of modern life which seem to us particularly abstract and dehumanizing. And we are dimly aware that next year will be the time when we celebrate Orwell's dark portrait and relentless warning. The first shot, however, was fired a year early with an essay by Mr. Norman Podhoretz in the January, 1983 edition of *Harper's* magazine. Podhoretz claims that if Orwell were alive today, he would be not a socialist (he had been a rather unfaithful and unorthodox one in his time), but that brand of American former socialists called neoconservatives. These are persons committed to competitive social justice, a welfare state of vigor but limited aspiration and power, and an extremely skeptical view of the USSR. Podhoretz was countered in the *New Republic* by contemporary American socialist Irving Howe. According to Howe, Orwell believed that socialism was inevitable and the only relevant question is whether or not it can become humane.

This sort of talk, and the discussions that will continue throughout this and next year in classrooms, in print, yes, even at cocktail parties and on radio call-in shows, is good. Though it may at times turn trivial, or partisan, "Orwell talk" helps us to focus upon the central political and social questions of this century. Even when he was too hopeless about the future, too sure about humanity's inherent distaste for freedom and civility, too angry to see ways out or away from destruction, he did see the world, the rich, amoral, and too often barbarous modern world, with clarity. Orwell saw that there is something about modern civilization that is out of control.

He saw that we had not assimilated the power and scope of technology. He understood that this kind of progress had far outstripped man's moral and reflective development. And he knew that such a situation would result in a natural tendency toward bigness and centralization. The direction of the world, Orwell knew, would be toward complexity, specialization, rationalization, and bureaucracy. Partly because of the times he lived in, which saw the rise and conquests of historical fascism and totalitarianism, and partly because of the sort of person he was, Orwell foresaw what G.K. Chesterton in an earlier time had called "the abolition of man." *1984* is a portrayal of just that. Anyone who sits down with the book and reads it seriously will think more than once about terming all that is bizarre or simply unpleasant in America "Orwellian." The book remains the most effective nightmare description ever written of the totality of absolute rule by the modern state.

The appetite of totalitarianism—control not only of actions, but of thoughts and emotions—is not portrayed better in any work of modern fiction or journalism. We ought also to remember that the book portrays life after the conquest of totalitarianism world-wide, and imagines what life would be like if the Stalins and Hitlers had won. Won not only (perhaps chiefly) on the battlefields, but through the acquiescence to and imitations of totalitarian assumptions and methods by democratic states.

ORWELL WAS a prophet all right, but not in the way people misuse and misunderstand the term today. His journalism was not, nor did he mean his fiction to be, a palm reading or a weather report. He was a prophet in the true sense of the Old Testament. Orwell was trying to help us see the labyrinths of the twentieth century and the temptation such a century would present. He was urging us to take precautions, to repent of our naiveté and our foolishness. He was not by temperament a modern man. Listen to this self-description:

> Outside my work the thing I care most about is gardening, especially vegetable gardening. I like English cookery and English beer, French red wines, Spanish white wines, Indian tea, strong tobacco, coal fires, candlelight, and comfortable chairs. I dislike big towns, noise, motor cars, the radio, tinned food, central heating and 'modern' furniture.

It was not merely taste that made him a contemporary Jeremiah. As with Camus, Orwell understood that the stakes had been raised, and tragically, foolishly, made political. Though he never tells us in *1984* how things got so far, and we may reasonably doubt (hope?) that they could not, he *does* understand how they began. This is what Orwell wrote in 1940:

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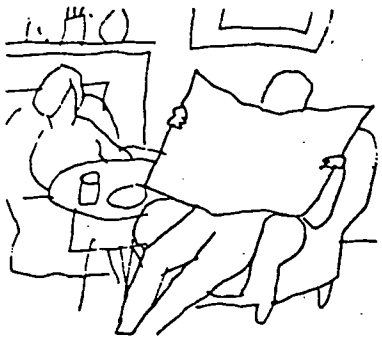
Commonweal: 20 May 1983

Religious belief, in the form in which we had known it, had to be abandoned. . . . Consequently, there was a long period during which nearly every thinking man was in some sense a rebel, and usually a quite irresponsible rebel. Literature was largely the literature of revolt or of disintegration. Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Shelley, Byron, Dickens, Stendhal, Samuel Butler, Ibsen, Zola, Flaubert, Shaw, Joyce — in one way or another they are all of them destroyers, wreckers, saboteurs. For two hundred years we had sawed at the branch we were sitting on. And in the end, much more suddenly than anyone had foreseen, our efforts were rewarded, and down we came. But unfortunately there had been a little mistake. The thing at the bottom was not a bed of roses after all, it was a cesspool full of barbed wire.

What is to George Orwell's everlasting credit is his understanding that the modern world not only tends to concentrate power (invidious enough from the viewpoint of any democrat), but that it does so at the expense of privacy. Hence the totalitarian virus in our world is not only fed on the death of common public spaces and the joy of citizenship, but on the constant threats to the plain and sheltered dimension of life in which people work out their individuality, aspirations, and cares. Orwell's strength as a thinker and a writer sprang from his ordinary decency. Both words matter. In an era when men, especially intellectuals, were not satisfied with "bourgeois" happiness or the corny old civilities, he wrote a hair-raising story about what life would be like without either. He made prosaic domesticity seem poetic and common sense heroic.

According to Orwell's friend, the British novelist Anthony Powell, Orwell was in some ways rather stern and priggish. He apparently had trouble being non-serious, having fun, not feeling a sort of generalized, perhaps class-based guilt. This may explain the blackness and rage one finds in his novels, particularly *1984*. Some critics have complained in various ways that Orwell carried the sadism of The Party functionary, O'Brien, too far in the book, thus marring it. But it is not only



what is in *1984* that is bothersome; what is lacking in the book may be its greatest flaw. In the face of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, one might reasonably, after all, imagine man's capacity for inhumanity to his fellows as virtually limitless. This part of the book was not as breathtaking as Orwell's lack of affirmation in it of even the slightest hope for return, renewal, and redemption. At the end of *1984*, the totalitarian circle closes: "a boot stamping on a human face forever." Man is doomed.

This lack of hope in Orwell is not evident in his journalism and essays. And, in fact, I think his essays are both of a higher quality of craftsmanship and humane sensibility. It was here that Orwell showed himself an artist and a man of fairness, empathy, and contradiction. In the novels, curiously, one sees the simplifying polemicist and his extreme lack of kindness.

ORWELL ACTED the role of the English empiricist at times and had little use for the German or French existentialist movements. While I am inclined to think his initial judgment about Jean-Paul Sartre (which was low) may become a more commonly accepted one, even in academic circles, there is in his reaction to these movements something of the crude positivist. His lack of, to use the term broadly, religious sensibility limited him as a creative writer and as a critic. He did not understand the work of Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene, for example. This is probably, again, a lack of hope and humanity to balance an uncompromising view of man's evil.

And Orwell was wrong about capitalism going under, though right about centralization. He thought it would be the state exclusively that would limit our freedoms and it turns out that society itself has become bureaucratized. Orwell, if he were alive today, would make a worthy opponent for the multinational corporation. He could have made an idea and a book on "organization man" stand up and sing. Orwell would, I think, have opposed the American intervention in Vietnam, but would not have become an America-hater, and would have continued to cast a cold eye on the Russians.

I believe he was not finally a very astute political scientist. He took Marxist notions of class too seriously. He held a simple and romantic view of the working man. He hoped for a "liberal" socialism respectful of privacy and individual liberty. But he paid little attention to how such an arrangement might be guaranteed. American democracy has been threatened both by elite and mass fascist tendencies at various points in our history, and usually saved by constitutionalism. Old James Madison trusted neither worker nor intellectual, nor, alone, common sense. Orwell should have read him, when worrying about how to slow the totalitarian tide.

THERE ARE better books. Huxley was probably nearer the mark in some ways. Totalitarianism in America will not come by The Party and the boot, but out of excessive comfort, passivity, and indolence. Anthony Burgess wrote a book a few years ago that looked a good deal more like the end of the road the West is now heading down. And Burgess *does* have a sense of humor and religion (are these related, I wonder?) But George Orwell understood first and best what the modern world would make of a society once it had lost its love of freedom and of the private simple joys old-fashioned liberty allowed men.

Orwell was the last of the Victorian liberals, the men who most valued clear thought, pure language, and individuality. He saw more clearly than any man in our century, the constant threat to personal liberty. He saw the totalitarian disease, not, perhaps, in all of its forms, but most definitely in all of its strength and persistence. If Hannah Arendt was the chronicler of totalitarianism who most clearly saw its destruction of the public and of the citizen, it was Orwell who saw most cogently its destruction of the private; the husband, father, friend, and finally, inner man. He was not a saint, secular or otherwise. But he did prophesy.

END-OF-THE-CENTURY QUESTION

THERE seems a sense in which the typical human of the present has no more influence over the course of events affecting his life than a private in the army of Alexander the Great. This, at any rate, was a conclusion that emerged from reading the daily paper and an article in the March *Atlantic*. The paper reported on our country's "quiet military build-up in Central America," with figures in the millions on armaments provided to a country struggling with guerrilla uprisings, and the increasing number of military personnel supplied as "advisers."

As for our own "military build-up," a well known political commentator remarks that we have no way of knowing whether the present administration thinks war with Russia is avoidable, since it does not say. "There are conflicting statements, but no provable consensus." There is also a long report on the growing number of hungry and homeless people in the United States, anywhere from half a million to two million, with only a small fraction receiving help. The need, relief officials say, is "unmatched since the Depression." Another story notes that the laws to protect the environment from pollution by industry are expiring, and that Congress seems uninterested. On what is supposed to be an upbeat note, financial specialists exclaim over the healthy condition of mutual funds, with four pages devoted to the gains of investors and dozens of ads by investment houses. Only the people who have money can make it, seems the verdict.

Then, in the *Atlantic*, Robert Reich, who teaches business and public policy at Harvard, says that the American standard of living "will continue to decline," and explains why. Today the big companies which dominate and establish policy, he says, have become paper entrepreneurs, which means that their profits come mostly from mergers and similar manipulations which take advantage of tax and other laws, instead of making better products more efficiently. Meanwhile the developing countries have been learning our production methods, applying them, and capturing markets we once enjoyed. Their low labor cost makes it impossible for American manufacturers to compete. American industry, moreover, is set in its ways, so inflexible that the Japanese are running circles around us—the reason why General Motors found reason to get together with Toyota. Our own "trusted formulas" no longer work and business bureacracy has grown out of bounds. "By 1979, half the employees of Intel—the microprocessor manufacturer—were engaged in administration."

> Bureaucratic layering of this sort is costly, and not only because of the extra salaries and benefits that must be paid. Layers of staff also make the firm more rigid, less able to make quick decisions or adjust rapidly to new opportunities and problems. In the traditional scientifically managed, high-volume enterprise, novel situations are regarded as exceptions, requiring new rules and procedures and the judgments of senior managers. But novel situations are a continuing feature of the new competitive environment in which American companies now find themselves.

Concerning paper entrepreneurialism, Prof. Reich says:

> The set of symbols developed to represent real assets has lost the link with any actual productive activity. Finance has progressively evolved into a sector all its own, only loosely connected to industry. And this disconnectedness turns business executives into paper entrepreneurs—forced to outsmart other participants, or be themselves outsmarted. . . . Paper entrepreneurs produce nothing of tangible use. For an economy to maintain its health, entrepreneurial rewards should flow primarily to products, not paper. . . .
>
> Increasingly, professional education in America stresses the manipulation of symbols to the exclusion of other sorts of skills—how to collaborate with others, to work in teams, to speak foreign languages, to solve concrete problems—that are more relevant to the newly competitive world economy. . . . The world of real people, engaged in the untidy and difficult struggle with real production problems, becomes ever more alien to America's best and brightest.

Meanwhile, the coming generation at Harvard Business School is majoring in finance. Only 3 per cent of the 1981 graduating class took jobs in production. Another survey revealed that 24 per cent of Harvard freshmen were planning careers in law, doubtless because large law firms are now starting recruits at $48,000 a year. The legal fees which grow out of paper entrepreneurialism are enormous and continuous.

One needs no course in social science to see that the country is fast becoming a playground for manipulators, who are replacing the producers of yesteryear. And it is easy to see that these bright young men are planning to base their lives on short-term profits, which can do nothing but hasten the general economic decline. They are, you could say, unconscious followers of Callicles (in Plato's *Gorgias*)—unconscious because they know nothing of Plato—yet followers of the man who insisted that the strong and astute are right to pursue self-interest at the expense of the simple and the weak. Callicles and those who agreed with him dominated Athens, affirming that "the superior and the stronger" are imitating "nature" in acquiring the possessions of other men. Yet like the schemers of the present, they believed in appearing to be virtuous while carrying on their high-toned brigandage at the cost of the common good. Robert E. Cushman says in *Therapeia* (1958):

> The situation was never more ably described than by the hard-headed Callicles: Either Socrates is joking when he contends that injustice in the soul is the worst evil that can befall a man, or, if it is really true, the life of human beings is turned "upside-down," and most men are doing exactly the opposite of what they ought to be doing. The observation was valid, for the prevailing motivations actuating men in the city-state were based upon the unexamined supposition that the good for men is prescribed by their nature as physical beings. The prevalent success philosophy of the age was nicely rationalized by the teaching of the Sophists.

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Indeed, Socrates had little chance of turning Athenian life rightside-up, although this deterred him not at all from trying. Similarly, the prospect of turning life around in our own time seems highly unlikely, even though writers like Prof. Reich on business, dozens of critics on agriculture, commentators on foreign policy, scientists like Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner on the environment, the Odums on ecology, and Wendell Berry on the conduct of life keep pointing out, not merely the folly, but the amoral stupidity of our ways.

Has anyone ever been successful in turning a society around? Is there no hope? If we take a leaf from Schumacher's famous book in our search for such a transformation, encouragement may be seen. And in the *Indian Express* for Feb. 11, a journalist, Yogesh Sharma, tells the story of a village in northern Gujarat which was turned around by an aging Gandhian. This man, Ravishankar Maharaji, now in his hundredth year, arrived in the village of Sunsar fifty years ago, a place where the men made their living stealing cattle at night and burglarizing the surrounding area. Today the place has been "transformed into a community where most of the people earn their living by farming and send their children to school." The reporter talked to an oldtimer about what the village had been like.

> Ravaji Thakore, an ace cattle lifter of those days, told me that one day a tall middle-aged man with a staff in his hand and clad in khadi walked into the village.
>
> "We all curiously watched the man who chose a corner, took out his charkha and began spinning," said Ravaii. He talked now and then with those who came to him, but did not tell them why he was in their midst.

At this time the state police were applying a scheme to lessen crime in the area. Three times a day they held a roll call in the village for all male adults. For not being present the penalty was six weeks in jail. It did not work very well, but the roll call was enforced, working a hardship on the people. This gave the Gandhian, who had come to be known as Dada, his opportunity.

> As days passed the villagers began trusting him and some of them complained to him about the roll-call system. One day two villagers vowed to the saintly man that they would not indulge in any kind of theft and he immediately took them to the police officers at Mehsana and got them exempted from the ordeal of roll call.
>
> Others followed and soon most of them left the age-old tradition. "It was not easy and despite our assurances the old man would find some of us bringing cattle into the village," said Ravaji.
>
> Though Baroda state had made schooling compulsory, the villagers preferred to pay the fine of Rs 3 a year for not sending their children to school. Dada himself began teaching youths and elderly people in his hut. As the number of his pupils grew, he shifted to classes in the open. And while [after seven years] leaving the village he built a school and donated about 100 books with his signature on them. Ravishankar never lost contact with the village and the villagers still remember him with great reverence.

Other of his accomplishments:

> The Dada got Sunsar's village pond deepened and 12 irrigation wells sunk in the area. These wells still supply water to the arid fields. . . . The only road link between Sunsar and Dhinoj, a village about seven km away, was also a result of the efforts of Dada.
>
> Above all these things, it was Dada who changed the hearts of the notorious criminals of Sunsar and they now live as decent citizens. During a visit to Sunsar, I met a few old men who had known Maharaj in those days: Their toothless faces glowed as they recounted his activities in the village about 50 years ago. . . . Some of the villagers still go to meet Dada.

This is a modest tale—only, as we say, a drop in the bucket. Yet a principle is illustrated by what Dada was able to accomplish. If the social unit is *small* enough, its transformation is at least possible through the influence of a single man. A similar effect was obtained by Socrates, although it was not sufficient to alter the habits of a city the size of Athens. The people allowed Socrates to be put to death for his pains. Yet in the hands of Plato his execution became an immeasurable source of good for later generations, as readers of the *Apology* and the *Phædo* will all agree. Was, then, Socrates a failure because not enough Athenians took him seriously?

The same question might be asked about Gandhi's career. Is there any point in being a "minority of one" that is sure to be overwhelmed by common opinion? Is the life of principle a useless gesture unless the man who lives by principle "wins"?

This seems the question needing to be applied to most of the "decision-making" of the present. Its answer turns on how far one goes in developing the implications of justice. In the last book of the *Republic,* shortly before he recites the myth of Er (which proposes the immortality of the soul, and the consolidation of human character through many lives on earth), Socrates declares that one thing has been demontsrated in the dialogue—"that we have proved that justice in itself is the best thing for the soul itself." But when, in the *Gorgias,* Socrates expanded the argument, maintaining that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it, he encountered only stubborn antagonism. Callicles, for one, declared for what he called *natural* justice, arguing that the strong and astute have a natural right to more possessions and pleasures than the weak and ineffectual. In short, justice is what the powerful say it is.

In the eighteenth century, the demand for justice, spurred by the pain of long ages of oppression, led to revolutionary struggle for political freedom in both Europe and America. The Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man embody the conception that justice is to be obtained through a political establishment with power to guarantee justice under the law. So freedom was won. In time, however, the exercise of power became more important than the preservation of justice. And the power, men said, always needed to be increased because of growing threats to freedom. In time, however, governmental acts of extreme

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injustice were "justified" in behalf of power but in the name of justice. Modern nation-states claimed to be the caretakers and exemplars of justice, and the argument made by Callicles was endlessly repeated by their spokesmen, although without his candor.

This course of history became plainly evident in the nineteenth century, so that angry men argued, with measurable success, that power should be taken away from national governments and given to "the people." And since power was obviously economic in origin, the revolutions of the twentieth century took possession not only of government, but of property too, with the result that the new governments became enormous corporate enterprises in political and economic competition with the "private enterprise" societies. In terms of moral justification, the argument was that only states had sufficient power to preserve justice and freedom, with the qualification that once a truly free and just society had been established, the state would "wither away." It did not, of course, since the new political arrangements in no way reduced the belief in power. The good life, in other words, required for its preservation the same means that tyrants and oppressors use to inflict injustice. The Socratic maxim, "It is better to suffer than to do wrong," was amended to say that it is better to do wrong than to live under the threat of injustice. The present armaments race is ample evidence of this view.

The dilemma is clear. Policies of nations are determined by aggressive self-interest, leading to an international situation which is not only intolerable in its continuous threat of war, but also in the economic and social disorder it produces. On the other hand, how can we do without the guardianship of the nation-state?

Various questions arise. We habitually define justice and freedom in political terms. We assume that the excellences achieved by human beings are represented by and stored in political arrangements, yet we now see that they are also destroyed by political arrangements. In these circumstances, it is not remarkable that the seminal thinkers of our time interest themselves in politics hardly at all. Nor are they concerned with the achievement of power. They point out that the best qualities of human beings, the best social relations, the ideal objectives to which we are attracted, never result from the exercise of power. Power is irrelevant to the development of human good, although it obviously may get in the way of that development. The most that power can do is to establish and enforce mechanical arrangements. Mechanical arrangements have their place, but we live by feeling and idea, by motives which are uncoerced, and we count as worth doing what we do voluntarily, not what we are made to do. Self-ruled lives come close to being the only spontaneous goals we know.

Power cannot generate living things; it can only confine, exploit, or put them to death. Only the crudest sort of regulation is obtained by power. Compare a machine with a living thing, the computer with a brain. Life confronts us with numerous mysteries, but the greatest of all is that control and regulation come from within. Living things are self-starters, self-maintainers, self-directors. We don't need a political education to see this: we've *had* a political education, learning from it what politics cannot do. We do need an ecological education, which means instruction in the delicate balances of symbiosis, the unchartable interrelations and interdependencies of living things.

And that, happily, is where the true genius of our time is to be found—in the study of life. The roll of honor, today, is the listing which begins, for Americans, with George Perkins Marsh, with Rachel Carson, and is made up of scores or perhaps hundreds of others who are slowly revealing a little of the wonder of the "constitution" of nature. E. F. Schumacher's books are on basic human ecology, on the scale of relationships and undertakings in which human potentiality flowers most abundantly. Schumacher was also an unembarrassed moralist—that is, he added to the practical dynamics of everyday economic life the conception of humans as beings in whom moral decision gives tone and direction to all other activities. He wanted a society in which the few who have external authority give the least possible orders to its members, as Thoreau recommended a century and more ago. The trouble with giving orders is that it removes the initiative from those who are ordered, making them dependent on outside direction, so that every time you give an order, you have to give several more. Eventually everyone begins to feel boxed in by a manifold of orders and laws which are not only too numerous to keep track of, but often contradict each other. The record shows that they can be turned to purposes wholly at odds with what the original law-makers had in mind.

Schumacher was the kind of Socrates that our times called for. He is concerned with the nature of man, with the moral struggle in each one, and with the circumstances appropriate to a reasonable chance of the good in man coming out on top.

This, we submit, is the real issue we are called upon to decide during the closing years of the twentieth century. Drawing on Plato's metaphysics of immortality might make decision a lot easier, but applying an intelligent pragmatism may be the only way many Americans can make a beginning at clear-seeing. According to Plato, the man who lives by principle is never short-changed by either history or circumstance, whatever the appearances. If the soul is immortal, if it is the carrier of all human progress, all evolutionary achievement, all wealth of mind and heart, how can true good ever be lost?

The Stoic view, that whether or not you survive death, a man should behave like a man, uncaring of reward in the future or punishment in the now, has its existentialist attraction for the hardier lot. But for platonist or stoic, the time has come to choose. This is not only because of the threat of nuclear death. We must all die out of our present bodies, sooner or later. The decision now called for is whether or not we are the kind of people willing to *use* the threat of nuclear death—whether the right thing, for its own sake alone, should play the determining part in our lives.

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"We should accept the idea that virtue is not relative at all. It is very definite. It means love, generosity, and responsibility, not only for yourself and your family, but for other people. It means private citizens and public officials who have the honor and courage to do what is right, whatever the risks. It means not simply the ability to distinguish that right from wrong, but a restless quest to do good and seek justice. Until we start talking about it and teaching it in those terms—until we realize that virtue really does mean something—we won't stop crime or callousness or any of the other symptoms of moral disintegration."

— Kathleen Kennedy Townsend

(*From "A Rebirth of Virtue—Religion and Liberal Renewal", The Washington Monthly, Volume 13, No. 12, February, 1982*)

"Warfare has become totally different because the destructive power is greater than the totality of the things you can destroy. That has never happened before. The destruction can happen in an hour or two, instead of in five years. If it happens over five years, you can recover in part, again and again, you can adjust to it, you can bring help to the city which has been hit. If in two hours all our cities are destroyed, no help can be brought. That is not a difference in size, but a difference in kind. Against missiles there is no defense. This is a subject on which I worked quite carefully and industriously for many years before '68, looking at many ways how to tell decoys from missiles, and so on. Whatever you did, the offense could always fool the defense and could do it better. So anti-ballistic missiles for city defense are technically nonsense.

— Hans A. Bethe, Nobel Laureate

(From an interview with Robert Scheer, published in the Los Angeles Times April 11, 1982)

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April 18, 1983

FAS ANSWER TO SOVIET SCIENTISTS

Academician A.D. Alexandrov
President, Academy of Sciences
USSR

Dear President Alexandrov:

We have received the April 9th appeal of Soviet scientists concerning the dangers which anti-ballistic missile systems can cause to world peace and how they can stir up the arms race.

As you may know, American scientists began discussions with Soviet scientists on this subject more than 20 years ago. We well remember the difficulties which had to be overcome, on both sides of the planet, over a period of more than a decade, until both sides could agree on the ABM Treaty of 1972 limiting such systems severely.

We have the honor to confirm that our Federation of American Scientists (FAS)—founded by atomic scientists in 1945 as the Federation of Atomic Scientists (FAS)—still holds completely to the same views that underlay the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. We do *not* support the notion that peace can be founded on technological solutions to nuclear war. We want the ABM Treaty strengthened rather than weakened. And we consider this Treaty to be the fulcrum on which new limitations on offensive weapons can, and must be, based. Without this Treaty, the arms race would soon speed up, and become still more dangerous than it is even today.

In our opinion, most American scientists, in and out of our organization, agree with us on this issue. And most citizens also.

We well recognize that both the United States and the Soviet Union are continuing research into anti-ballistic missile systems. Here—as perhaps in your own country—there are a few scientists with the illusion that important breakthroughs might someday be possible to change the situation. Here, as in your country, it is an important continuing task of scientists to educate their colleagues and the public about the limits of technology—as you are doing with your letter.

Please convey our views to all of your members and our thanks for your initiative in expressing your views. As participants in those early debates, we well remember the early support in this struggle of such members of your Academy as the late Academician Artsimovitch, of Academician Andrei Sakharov, and later of the late Academician M. D. Millionshikov. It is a real pleasure and relief to realize from the well-endorsed letter which you have sent—and from our own assessment of the views of American scientists—that the scientists of both our Nations are still in firm agreement on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Jeremy J. Stone
Director

Frank von Hippel
Chairman

COMMONWEAL May 20, 1983

THE TENNYSON CURVE

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING . . .

DAVID R. CARLIN, JR.

POOR ARTHUR Laffer! Everyone laughs at him nowadays, as the curve of his reputation, having passed through its zenith, plunges toward the lower depths. It's unfair, of course, to place the blame for the theoretical side of Reaganomics on a single man, but Laffer and his celebrated curve (not to mention the restaurant napkin it was first drawn on) are such inviting targets that it's difficult to resist the temptation.

A few months ago, for instance, NBC News did an end-of-the-year special titled "Reagan at Mid-Term," in which a cheerful Laffer, amid vignettes of encircling economic gloom, told us how optimistic he is about the state of the American economy. ("Just look at this smiling nitwit," NBC was suggesting.) On the same program Jude Wanniski, who tirelessly promoted Laffer and supply-side economics on the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, was permitted to appear in the dignified role of conservative critic of Reaganomics. Yet Wanniski is, if anything, more to blame for the Reaganomics fiasco than Laffer. But the *Journal* editor, though he may have thrown us a few curves, never drew one, never had one named after him. So Laffer has to take the heat. That's the way the world works.

But I'm not concerned here with the Laffer Curve for its own sake. What interests me is the fact that it's a sub-class of a more general curve long ago discovered by Alfred Lord Tennyson. We are still suffering the ill effects of the indiscriminate reaction against Victorianism that took place early in our century, when legions of healthy babies were thrown out amidst great quantities of sentimental bathwater. In erasing "Tears, idle tears" from their memory, our fathers and grandfathers forgot that Tennyson was one of the great social theorists of the nineteenth century, ranking only a few steps below Hegel, Marx, and Mill. So complete has the obliteration been that I haven't found a single contemporary reference to the Tennyson Curve, which once made such a stir in the world.

The principle was enunciated in the lines spoken by Arthur (nor Arthur Laffer but Arthur the King) just before his death:

God fulfills Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

The idea here is that if you take any good practice (or "custom") and push it too far, you'll spoil it. For instance—and this is the Laffer sub-class of the Tennyson Curve—if you raise tax rates too high you'll undermine your tax base and ultimately diminish your tax returns. Unquestionably this has often happened in the course of human history—in the empires of the ancient world, for instance. But whether the point of over-taxation has already been reached in American society, as Laffer and friends assumed, is another question.

The Tennyson Curve has a hundred-and-one subclasses, all of them true. But the trick is to find the precise point at which they become true, the moment at which the downward phase of the curve begins. If corrective action is taken either too soon or too late, disaster ensues.

1. *The Newman Curve* (named after Cardinal Newman, author of *The Idea of a University*). Clever but not candid educators in need of funds have long palmed this pleasant fiction off on the public: that education is essentially a practical affair, that the fundamental aim of education is to make us all rich, both individually and collectively. The public, always enthusiastic for the practical, has responded by spending vast sums of money for colleges and universities. For a long time this strategy of deceit (a modern instance of Plato's "noble lie") worked, and schooling with a practical orientation actually succeeded in raising the world's educational level. But in America at least, we've entered the downward phase of the curve. So convinced is everyone that education ought to be practical and nothing but practical that it's nearly impossible nowadays to find an undergraduate foolish enough to study voluntarily anything so impractical as, say, history, literature, or philosophy. Hence the plan recently approved by the National Governors Conference as part of their high technology program: remove the few remaining academic humanists from America's colleges and universities and put them on a reservation—a kind of humanistic zoo—while their old campuses are turned over to computer-literate engineers and MBAs who spend their weekends self-actualizing, preferably on ski slopes.

2. *The World Council of Churches Curve*. (In the nineteenth century it was known as the *Unitarian Curve*. In its Catholic variant it's the *Aggiornamento Curve*.) In order to make religion more attractive to the modern, secular consciousness, you drop its archaic trappings and redesign it in a rational, up-to-date fashion. Few curves, it seems, enter their downward phase so quickly as this one. The rule appears to be that the more nearly a church resembles the American Civil Liberties Union, the more likely it is to be empty.

3. *The Mumford Curve* (named for Lewis Mumford, who spent much of his career lamenting the suburbanization of America). Time was when the suburbs were lovely places, quiet villages nestled in the countryside, far but not too far from the madding crowd of city life. But the whole charm of the thing depended on the sparseness of suburban population. Once the crowds rushed in searching for that charm, it quite naturally vanished. Yogi Berra's famous remark about a certain St. Louis restaurant applies perfectly to the suburbs: "Nobody goes there anymore—it's too crowded."

4. *The Hugh Hefner Curve*. You start a magazine proclaiming that sex, so far from being dirty, isn't even serious; it's just good, clean fun. A few decades later you have massive abortions, vast numbers of illegitimate children born to teenagers from the poorest strata of society, and a delightful organization named the North American Man-Boy Love Association going on national TV to explain that your basic pedophile, contrary to the opinion of still-puritanical America, is not a pervert and child molester but rather a lonely boy's best friend, his protector and educator—a sort of latter-day equivalent of Father Flanagan. ("Oh, he's not heavy, darling, he's my Ganymede.")

5. *The Kaiser Wilhelm Curve*. Declaring your belief in peace through strength, you build up your armaments until you precipitate your own (and the world's) destruction. In some circles this is now called the *Ronald Reagan Curve*.

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