
THE ABSENT LEFT

The belief in prosperity forces the radical impulse into distorted forms

by Jeff Greenfield

DOES AMERICA have a political Left? Does it matter?

Of course we can distinguish a "left wing" in the Democratic party; after all, any political party has extremes. And we certainly have a government which spends a great deal of money (about 30 percent of the gross national product) and taxes a substantial percentage of our incomes. We transfer more than \$150 billion in tax revenues a year through government programs. We have a regulatory web covering virtually every industry in the country. And our dominant political party, now in effective control of the Legislative and Executive Branches of the federal government, is at least nominally committed to such "socialistic" enterprises as national health insurance, government-created full employment, and stronger measures to combat corporate concentration in the economy.

These programs, however, do not demonstrate that there is a political Left in America, at least as that term would be understood in just about any other nation in the world. In fact, judged by their effects, rather than by what their supporters and foes hoped or feared they would accomplish, these government interventions prove not the presence of an American Left, but its absence. Most of the money the U.S. government spends on transfer payments—Social Security and government pension payments—does not represent a redistribution of wealth or income. Instead, these programs in general take money from middle-income workers so that middle-income retirees may preserve their standard of living (the same can be said of Medicare). Across the range of social programs—urban renewal, aid to education, day care, Medicaid—tax money has been "redistributed" to such oppressed societal victims as real-estate speculators, consulting firms, teachers and school administrators, landlords, pharmacists, physicians, and nursing-home owners.

At times, even the idea of real redistribution of wealth, from the very rich

to the average citizen, strikes a chord of resistance, even among the presumed beneficiaries of this redistribution. Gordon Weil, one of George McGovern's top 1972 campaign aides, testifies to this resistance in a story he tells about McGovern's idea to tax away all inheritances above \$500,000.

"I remember sitting one day in the Lafayette Club in Nashua [New Hampshire] with a group of workmen who opposed the idea," Weil writes in *The Long Shot*. "Although none of them stood to be penalized by it, they argued that it was unfair to take away all that a man had received. McGovern was receiving similar reactions in the plants he had visited, and believed all men nourished the hope of receiving a large inheritance or of winning a lottery."

This opposition to government redistribution of the resources of the very wealthy runs deep in our society. It helps to explain why the liberal, reformist schemes for social justice are ardently *opposed* to the concept of total public control. Medicare is run not by a public-health service but by an elaborate insurance scheme involving private physicians; and the state-operated Medicaid programs have spawned new private industries of laboratories and medical-care suppliers. Our poverty programs are in large measure contract operations between government and private entrepreneurs. And in the midst of an energy shortage which put America's oil companies marginally higher than pornographers in public esteem, the one public policy alternative never to gain serious political support was public control of our scarce fuel resources. Taxes on windfall profits, antitrust action to break up major oil companies, exorbitations before Senate committees—all of these followed from the 1973-74 shortage. But there is no political reference point in American politics from which to consider public control. (There was one proposal by Sen. Adlai Stevenson III to establish a public energy com-

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pany that would act as a "yardstick" on private performance in the manner of the TVA.) Whether public control would be wise or foolish is not at issue here; what is informative is the lack of such pressure in our system. If a "leftist" idea could gain so little currency in the face of enormous political provocation, it suggests how unwilling Americans are to look to radical remedies as the source of a redress of grievances.

THIS IS WHY the absence of a real Left in America does matter. There are deep cultural and social currents in American life that have made it impossible to argue openly for the kind of government, the kind of economy, the kind of diffusion of power that can fairly be called radical. And because this kind of radicalism has become in our country the love that dare not speak its name, it has forced the radical impulse into distorted forms—into comfortable-sounding, familiar demands for more regulations and prohibitions, into public-private "wars" on injustice which are doomed to failure, and whose proponents offer them out of conditioned reflex rather than from conviction. We are in a time now when the diversions of war and cultural conflict have moved off the political stage, and when questions of economic and political power have returned. If we do not understand how the absence of an American Left has distorted the political agenda, we will continue to ignore one set of possibilities when we make political decisions.

Historians have suggested a welter of reasons for the fact that socialism has been a failure in America: the mainstream of American labor saw radicalism as a threat, not an ally; the large Catholic bloc in America's immigrant working class regarded radicalism as a breach of religious faith; the government made periodic repressive moves against radicals—the strikebreaking troops in 1877, the Palmer raids of

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1919, the jailing of Communists after World War II, the harassing of radicals with Congressional investigations. There are simpler explanations as well: the endless sectarian battles on the Left, the repellent subservience of too many radicals to the Soviet Union, the adaptability of the two-party system in America, the high standard of living available to most Americans.

These explanations do not answer the question. There has been far more repression in Europe, where radicalism is strong; Catholics form far more of the working class in France and Italy, where the Communist party thrives; Scandinavian nations with high living standards have Social Democratic parties in power or as the major opposition parties. What accounts for the difference is what America has unto itself, a dominant self-image of sheer abundance. From the promise of an endless frontier, to treasures of gold and silver, to boundless industrial might, the image of America—and the reality for many—is a land where affluence is there for the taking. However much this obscures the darker side of our

history, it has remained a central organizing principle in everything from the portions in our restaurants to the “rich-is-godly” theology of Dwight Moody and Billy Graham. A nation believing itself limitlessly rich has no need of collective or communal enterprise, much less government nurturing of scarce resources.

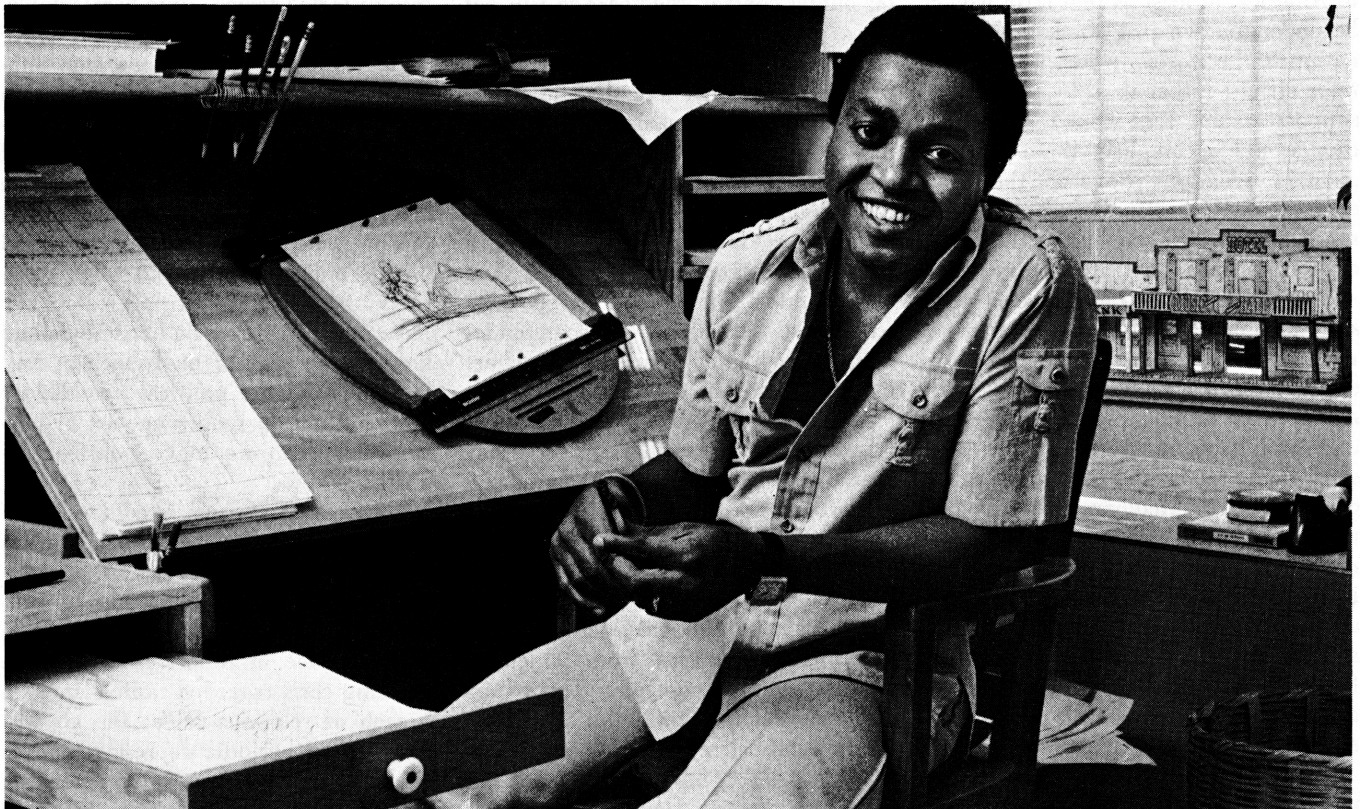
“Here in America,” Carl Schurz wrote a century ago, “you can see every day how little a people needs to be governed. . . . Here you witness the *productiveness of freedom*.” Where socialism saw the state as the tool to eradicate scarcity and provide abundance, America was *itself* abundant.

If the American presumption of abundance and private sources of satisfaction have undermined the existence of a real political Left, what *do* we have in America? With one significant exception, the Left is a random collection of attitudes which can be harnessed to the cause of different political movements. There are in America substantial numbers of people ready—one might almost say eager—to enlist against injustice on an ad hoc basis.

Without a coherent political base this “tendency” takes on what can appear as a “cause of the month” quality, now organizing to protest segregation at Woolworth’s, now fighting to ban nuclear testing, now boycotting grapes. (At demonstrations, one often hears speakers explaining that “the cause is one.” The Vietnamese being bombed to death are the same as blacks denied decent jobs, who are the same as women denied equal credit, who are the same as gays subject to public scorn. This is a testament to wishful thinking, not political analysis.) Many self-described leftists search almost desperately for signs of some emerging radical force. And because so many in this group tend to be well educated and well off (at the McGovern convention in 1972, the percentage of delegates with graduate degrees was roughly ten times that of the general population), this has produced the easily ridiculed habit of enlisting in other people’s causes. Perhaps the Negroes are the new proletariat, or perhaps it is the migrant workers, or the disaffected young. Perhaps it will be represented

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by the occasional labor leader who can sound like a radical, someone like the steelworkers' Ed Sadlowski. Perhaps it will arise from the peace movement, the women's movement, the gay-rights movement. Perhaps it will be created by a politically eccentric governor of California who puts public-interested lawyers in his administration.

IT IS TOO EASY, really, to scorn this "radical chic" approach to politics. It is hard to see why it should be more offensive for the rich to provide bail money and lawyers for dissident political figures than to buy a new wardrobe or a seven-foot-high television set. Funds from the affluent fuel important political enterprises, from civil-rights protests to antiwar campaigns to the farmworkers' organizing efforts. The sight of a mariachi band on the estate of an East Hampton arriviste is not that high a price to pay to help very poor farm workers organize for higher wages.

It is also true, however, that no one who has sat in the dining room of a

Park Avenue duplex, listening to the host bemoan George McGovern's insufficient radicalism as the butler pours wine from the host's French vineyard, can see in this kind of politics a source of emerging radicalism. One can only remember that such personal quirkiness is not an American phenomenon. George Orwell wrote forty years ago, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, that "the worst advertisement for Socialism is its adherents. . . . One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw toward them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist and feminist in England."

A more important political element in America is the free-floating anti-elitism which is called populism. With its origins in rural America's late-nineteenth-century anger at the depredations of Eastern banks and railroads, populism is a term that has been applied to any movement aimed at centers of money, political power, or social status. It can describe Huey Long's Louisiana poli-

tics—a blend of public works, attacks on the utilities, and astonishing political thuggery; it is applied to George Wallace's assaults on foundations, bureaucrats, and the liberal press; and it applies to Fred Harris's efforts to break up big corporations. The persistence of the populist strain in America suggests an unfocused suspicion of great power, whether in the hands of private entrepreneur or public official. We see this sensibility in the films we like: in the movies of Frank Capra, the hero is invariably an ordinary Joe trying to get a fair shake from a corporate or political power bloc. In the remake of *King Kong*, the explorer was changed from a courageous filmmaker to a greedy oil-company executive out to rape the environment. We see it in the kind of investigative reporting done by Drew Pearson and his heir, Jack Anderson, with their focus on the imperial privileges of the powerful. (When Anderson, in *Washington Exposé*, described the gifts corporate executives made to President Eisenhower, he lingered lovingly over the details of those gifts: "A huge, walk-in freezer . . . a

JIM SIMON

HOME: North Hollywood, California

AGE: 30

PROFESSION: Film animation producer, director and designer

HOBBIES: Music, painting, handball.

MOST MEMORABLE BOOK: "The Hobbit" by J.R.R. Tolkien

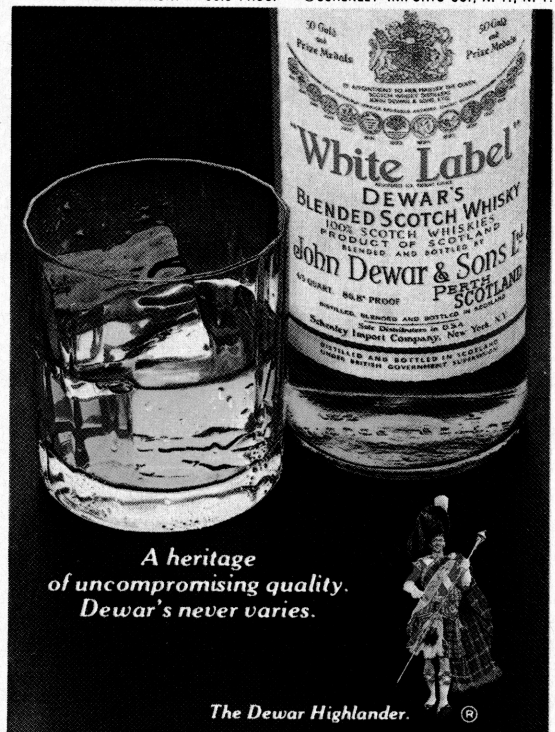
LATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT: Winning the U.S.A. Film Festival Award for "The Strike," a five-minute animated film produced for the Black Psychiatrists of America.

QUOTE: "Animation is a great deal more than funny characters. Because of its unique ability to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality, its potential is, in many ways, almost limitless."

PROFILE: Outgoing and genuinely friendly. Has an infectious enthusiasm for being alive, which he injects into the outrageous characters he creates.

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\$4,000 Black Hawk tractor which... was equipped with push-buttons, a cigarette lighter, and power steering.")

And we can see it in the appeal of a Ralph Nader, whose movement took fire when a small lawyer, attacking the biggest automobile company in the world, found himself the fortuitous victim of an attempt by General Motors to probe his private life. As a movement, the Nader philosophy is a mixture of liberal proposals to limit corporate power, shareholder campaigns to check the policies of companies, improved federal regulation by yet another attempt to repair the shabby performance of independent agencies, aggressive antitrust efforts to break up oligopolies, and an effort to get the concept of "citizenship" to mean more than voting. Beyond the agenda—and more important than any element of it—Nader's following shows that the absence of an American Left has not eliminated a strong, deeply ingrained suspicion of privilege. The question is where this suspicion leads.

One effect of this vague movement has been apparent for some time with the emergence of a kind of "guerrilla" Left, an Establishment-trained underground of high-ranking, politically active law-school graduates who quickly enter politics through staff positions with candidates, officeholders, and Congressional committees, with a stopover at a high federal court for a clerkship. (With the election of Jimmy Carter, many of these men and women now hold policy-making jobs in the Executive Branch. It will be interesting to see if their proposals run up against the self-proclaimed fiscal conservatism of Budget Director Bert Lance—and Mr. Carter himself.) With no firm radical political current to follow, a Congress without a single self-identified socialist, and perhaps only two or three members who would not sue at being labeled radical, these staff members are forced into a bizarre pattern of behavior. As a former political worker, I can remember frequent discussions with colleagues who alternately exulted and despaired at how far they could prod their principals into adopting relatively radical postures. In 1972, a young staff member on Edmund Muskie's Presidential campaign excitedly sent me a speech Muskie had delivered that raised questions about corporate power. I had a similar experience with

a worker for former Sen. Charles Goodell, who told me how far Goodell had been prodded into expressing sympathy with black militants. A similar kind of game is often played by Congressional-committee and Presidential-commission staffs, to see how "radical" they can make staff and, ultimately, committee reports.

This is, to put it mildly, not a source of radicalism, but a substitute for it. Lacking any coherent tradition, or movement, or party, save the tradition of balancing private power with countervailing government power, these documents—as with the social policies of our most left-leaning mainstream politicians—fuse an often trenchant attack on past programmatic failures with what is essentially more of the same. Insightful attacks on the performance of regulatory agencies bring about calls for more regulation. Disclosures of Medicaid scandals and failures lead to proposals for national health insurance. Exposés of the muddled mistakes of government bureaucracies that attempt to provide full employment are followed by a demand for the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, whose planning section sounds like an Ayn Rand parody of bureaucracy. And, at times, proposals to help the consumer in the marketplace can reach absurd lengths—such as Nader's proposal for government-paid helpers to guide consumers through the aisles of supermarkets.

THIS IS ONE possible future for what passes for the American Left: a series of attitudes and postures reflecting a dissatisfaction with excessive power and wealth in private hands, connected to no remedial program worthy of the term *radical*. In another possible future, the chord touched by Nader, the inherent suspicion of corporate power, may prove to be the most important element in the emergence of an American Left. I have argued that strong cultural influences have produced a belief in America that we do not need the kind of collective power represented by government in order to gain social justice or material comfort. Where Europeans saw collective control over production and distribution as the tool for turning scarcity into abundance, America stood the premise of socialism on its head;

abundance was already here. There was *already* enough to go around.

Now the question is, as W. H. Auden said, whether the United States will have to experience the requirement of living together, the requirement imposed by relative scarcity. If in fact we are approaching the end of unlimited material abundance, if resources are going to grow scarcer, or at least far more expensive, then some kind of allocation will be necessary. What the Nader movement has shown is that the American people, however little they trust government, put no more trust in the marketplace, or in the beneficence of the corporate and governmental epicenters of power. We do not accept the assurances of "countervailing power" or "pluralist" forces that the end-of-ideology theorists used to celebrate the lack of radical alternatives.

Should we begin to confront a real shortage of resources—most immediately energy, but possibly extending to some raw materials and foodstuffs—we are going to have to alter or abandon the last vestige of the frontier vision of America as a limitless source of plenty. Confronted by past threats, Americans have often put aside their traditional distrust of government, if for no other reason than that we distrust each other more when there does not appear to be enough to go around. The farmer who attacks big government has long demanded price supports and low-interest (government-subsidized) loans. The construction worker wants public-works projects; the Chamber of Commerce conservative wants import quotas. And our most serious flirtation with public control came when we faced the most widespread depression in our history.

Should we face a new version of the belief that there is not enough to go around, the Nader version of American radicalism—a variety of sometimes contradictory remedies rooted in a basic distrust of private power—may prove to be the source of a reluctant beckoning of private power to allocate resources fairly, even to the extent of controlling them. To a society so anchored in a vision of plenty, so at odds with a vision of justice imposed by scarcity, it may require nothing less than a clearly perceived danger to that plenty to spread a vision inspired by never having enough. ■■■

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