

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 8

WASHINGTON POST MAGAZINE  
17 March 1985

# Lefties for Reagan

THE AUTHORS were editors of  
*Ramparts*, a voice of the '60s left.

*We have seen the enemy  
and he is not us*

BY PETER COLLIER AND DAVID HOROWITZ



**W**hen we tell our old radical friends that we voted for Ronald Reagan last November, the response is usually one of annoyed incredulity. After making sure that we are not putting them on, our old friends make nervous jokes about Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly, about gods that have failed, about aging yuppies ascending to consumer heaven in their BMWs. We remind them of an old adage: "Anyone under 40 who isn't a social-

*Peter Collier and David Horowitz, who were editors of Ramparts magazine, are the authors of The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty and The Kennedys: An American Drama.*

ist has no heart; anyone over 40 who is a socialist has no brain."

Inevitably the talk becomes bitter. One old comrade, after a tirade in which she had denounced us as reactionaries and crypto-fascists, finally sputtered, "And the worst thing is that you've turned your back on the Sixties!" That was exactly right: casting our ballots for Ronald Reagan was indeed a way of finally saying good-bye to all that—to the self-aggrandizing romance with corrupt Third Worldism; to the casual indulgence of Soviet totalitarianism; to the hypocritical and self-dramatizing anti-Americanism which is the New Left's bequest to mainstream politics.

The instruments of popular culture

may perhaps be forgiven for continuing to portray the '60s as a time of infectious idealism, but those of us who were active then have no excuse for abetting this banality. If in some ways it was the best of times, it was also the worst of times, an era of blood-thirsty fantasies as well as spiritual ones. We ourselves experienced both aspects, starting as civil rights and antiwar activists and ending as co-editors of the New Left magazine Ramparts. The magazine post allowed us to write about the rough beast slouching through America and also to urge it on through noneditorial activities we thought of as clandestine until we later read about them in the FBI and CIA files we both accumulated.

Continued

Like other radicals in those days, we were against electoral politics, regarding voting as one of those charades used by the ruling class to legitimate its power. We were even more against Reagan, then governor of California, having been roughed up by his troopers during the People's Park demonstrations in Berkeley and tear-gassed by his National Guard helicopters during the University of California's Third World Liberation Front Strike. But neither elections nor elected officials seemed particularly important compared with the auguries of revolution the left saw everywhere by the end of the decade—in the way the nefarious Richard Nixon was widening the war in Indochina; in the unprovoked attacks by paramilitary police against the Black Panther Party; in the formation of the Weather Underground, a group willing to pick up the gun or the bomb. It was a time when the apocalypse struggling to be born seemed to need only the slightest assist from the radical midwife.

When we were in the voting booth this past November (in different precincts but of the same mind) we both thought back to the day in 1969 when Tom Hayden came by the office and, after getting a Ramparts donation to buy gas masks and other combat issue for Black Panther "guerrillas," announced portentously: "Fascism is here, and we're all going to be in jail by the end of the year." We agreed wholeheartedly with this apocalyptic vision and in fact had just written in an editorial: "The system cannot be revitalized. It must be overthrown. As humanly as possible, but by any means necessary."

**EVERY THOUGHT** and perception in those days was filtered through the dark and distorting glass

of the Vietnam war. The left was hooked on Vietnam. It was an addictive drug whose rush was a potent mix of melodrama, self-importance and moral rectitude. Vietnam was a universal solvent—the explanation for every evil we saw and the justification for every excess we committed. Trashing the windows of merchants on the main streets of America seemed warranted by the notion that these petty bourgeois shopkeepers were cogs in the system of capitalist exploitation that was obliterating Vietnam. Fantasizing the death of local cops seemed warranted by the role they played as an occupying army in America's black ghettos, those mini-Vietnams we yearned to see explode in domestic wars of liberation. Vietnam caused us to acquire a new appreciation for foreign tyrants like Kim Il Sung of North Korea. Vietnam also caused us to support the domestic extortionism and vio-

lence of groups like the Black Panthers, and to dismiss derisively Martin Luther King Jr. as an "Uncle Tom." (The left has conveniently forgotten this fact now that it finds it expedient to invoke King's name and reputation to further its domestic politics.)

How naive the New Left was can be debated, but by the end of the '60s we were not political novices. We knew that bad news from Southeast Asia—the reports of bogged-down campaigns and the weekly body counts announced by Walter Cronkite—was good for the radical agenda. The more repressive our government in dealing with dissent at home, the more recruits for our cause and the sooner the appearance of the revolutionary Armageddon.

Our assumption that Vietnam would be the political and moral fulcrum by which we would tip this country toward revolution foresaw every possibility except one: that the United States would pull out. Never had we thought that the United States, the archimperial power, would of its own volition withdraw from In-

dochina. This development violated a primary article of our hand-me-down Marxism: that political action through normal channels could not alter the course of the war. The system we had wanted to overthrow worked tardily and only at great cost, but it worked.

When American troops finally came home, some of us took the occasion to begin a long and painful reexamination of our political assumptions and beliefs. Others did not. For

the diehards, there was a post-Vietnam syndrome in its own way as debilitating as that suffered by people who had fought there—a sense of emptiness rather than exhilaration, a paradoxical desire to hold onto and breathe life back into the experience that had been their high for so many years.

As the post-Vietnam decade progressed, the diehards on the left ignored conclusions about the viability of democratic traditions that might have been drawn from America's exit from Vietnam and from the Watergate crisis that followed it, a time when the man whose ambitions they had feared most was removed from office by the Constitution rather than by a coup. The only "lessons" of Vietnam the left seemed interested in were those that emphasized the danger of American power abroad and the need to diminish it, a view that was injected into the Democratic Party with the triumph of the McGovernite wing. The problem with this use of Vietnam as a moral text for American policy, however, was that the pages following the fall of Saigon had been whited out.

No lesson, for instance, was seen in Hanoi's ruthless conquest of the South, the establishment of a police state in Saigon and the political oblivion of the National Liberation Front, whose struggle we on the left had so passionately supported. It was not that credible information was lacking. Jean Lacouture wrote in 1976: "Never before have we had such proof of so many detained after a war. Not in Moscow in 1917. Not in Madrid in

Continued

1939, not in Paris and Rome in 1944, nor in Havana in 1959 . . ." But this eminent French journalist, who had been regarded as something of an oracle when he was reporting America's derelictions during the war, was dismissed as a "sellout."

In 1977, when some former antiwar activists signed an Appeal to the Conscience of Vietnam because of the more than 200,000 prisoners languishing in "reeducation centers" and the new round of self-immolations by Buddhist monks, they were chastised by activist David Dellinger, Institute for Policy Studies fellow Richard Barnet and other keepers of the flame in a New York Times advertisement that said in part: "The present government of Vietnam should be hailed for its moderation and for its extraordinary effort to achieve reconciliation among all of its people."

When tens of thousands of unreconciled "boat people" began to flee the repression of their communist rulers, Joan Baez and others who spoke out in their behalf were attacked for breaking ranks with Hanoi.

Something might also have been learned from the fate of wretched Cambodia. But leftists seemed so addicted to finding an American cause at the root of every problem that they couldn't recognize indigenous evils. As the Khmer Rouge were about to take over, Noam Chomsky wrote that their advent heralded a Cambodian liberation, "a new era of economic development and social justice." The new era turned out to be the killing fields that took the lives of 2 million Cambodians.

Finally, Vietnam emerged as an imperialist power, taking control of Laos, invading Cambodia and threatening Thailand. But in a recent editorial, *The Nation* explains that the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia "to stop the killing and restore some semblance of civilized government to the devastated country." This bloody occupation is actually a "rescue mission," and what has happened should not "obscure the responsibility of the United States for the disasters in Indochina," disasters that are being caused by playing the "China card" and refusing to normalize relations with Vietnam. These acts on the part of the United States "make Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia unlikely"; only the White House can "remove the pressures on Vietnam from all sides [that] would bring peace to a ravaged land." Such reasoning recalls the wonderful line from the Costa-Gavras film "Z": "Always blame the Americans. Even when you're wrong, you're right."

ANOTHER unacknowledged lesson from Indochina involves the way in which Vietnam has become a satellite of the Soviet Union (paying for foreign aid by sending labor brigades to its benefactor). This development doesn't mesh well with the left's on-

going romantic vision of Hanoi. It also threatens the left's obstinate refusal to admit that during the mid-70s—a time when American democracy was trying to heal itself from the twin traumas of the war and Watergate—the U.S.S.R. was demonstrating that totalitarianism abhors a vacuum by moving into Africa, Central America, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Instead of evaluating the Soviets because of the change in what we used to call "the objective conditions," the left rationalizes Soviet aggression as the spasms of a petrified bureaucracy whose policies are annoying mainly because they distract attention from U.S. malfeasance around the world.

If they were capable of looking intently at the Soviet Union, leftists and liberals alike would have to concur with Susan Sontag's contention (which many of them jeered at when she announced it) that communism is simply left-wing fascism.

One of the reasons the left has been so cautious in its reassessments of the Soviets is the fiction that the U.S.S.R. is on the side of "history." This assumption is echoed in Fred Halliday's euphoric claim, in a recent issue of *New Left Review*, that Soviet support was crucial to 14 Third World revolutions during the era of "detente" (including such triumphs of human progress as Iran and South Yemen), and in Andrew Kopkind's fatuous ob-

Continued

ervation that "the Soviet Union has almost always sided with the revolutionists, the liberationists, the insurgents." In Ethiopia? Propped up by 20,000 Cuban legionnaires, the Marxist government of Mengistu Haile Mariam has as its main accomplishment a "Red Campaign of Terror" (its official designation) that killed thousands of people. Where were those who cheer the Soviets' work in behalf of the socialist zeitgeist when this episode took place? Or this past fall when the Marxist liberator squandered more than \$40 million on a party celebrating the 10th anniversary of his murderous rule while his people starved? Where were they to point out the moral when capitalist America rushed in 250 million metric tons of grain to help allay the Ethiopian starvation while the Soviets were managing to contribute only 10 million metric tons? Where are they now that Mengistu withholds emergency food supplies from the starving provinces of Eritrea and Tigre because the people there are in rebellion against his tyranny?

REAGAN is often upbraided for having described the Soviet Union as an evil empire. Those opposed to this term seem to be offended esthetically rather than politically. Just how wide of the mark is the president? Oppressing an array of nationalities whose populations far outnumber its own, Russia is the last of the old European empires, keeping in subjugation not only formerly inde-

pendent states such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Hitler's gift to Stalin), but also the nations of Eastern Europe. Every country "liberated" into the Soviet bloc has been transformed into a national prison, where the borders are guarded to keep the inmates in rather than the foreigners out.

The war in Afghanistan is much more a metaphor for the Soviets' view of the world than Vietnam ever was for America's. Of the approximately 16 million people living in Afghanistan at the time of the Soviet invasion, an estimated 1 million have already been killed and wounded. There are now about 4 million refugees, a figure that does not include "internal" refugees—the hundreds of thousands of villagers forced to leave their scorched earth for the Soviet-controlled big cities, the only places where food is available. Or the thousands of Afghan children who been taken to the Soviet Union to be "educated" and who will eventually be returned to their native land as spies and quislings.

Soviet strategy is based on a brutal rejoinder to Mao's poetic notion (which we old New Leftists used to enjoy citing) about guerrillas being like fish swimming in a sea of popular support. The Soviet solution is to boil the sea and ultimately drain it, leaving the fish exposed and gasping on barren land. The Russian presence is characterized by systematic destruction of crops and medical facilities, indiscriminate terror against the civilian population, carpet bombings and the deadly "yellow rain" that even the leftist Peoples' Tribunal in Paris (successor to the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal) has said is being used in Afghanistan.

During each December anniversary of the Soviet invasion, when liberal politicians rediscover the mujaheddin guerrillas in the hills, after 11 months of moral amnesia, there are blithe references to Afghanistan as "Russia's Vietnam." Those who invoke the analogy seem to think that simply by doing so they

have doomed the Russian storm troopers to defeat. But this analogy is based on a misunderstanding of what Vietnam was and what Afghanistan is. Unlike America's high-tech television war, Afghanistan is one of those old-fashioned encounters that take place in the dark. The Soviets make no attempt to win hearts and minds; the My Lais that are daily occurrences there cause no shock because they do not appear on Moscow TV; there are no scenes of the peasant children whose hands and faces have been destroyed by antipersonnel bombs in the shapes of toy trucks and butterflies a Los Angeles physician we know saw strewn over the Afghan countryside; there are no images of body bags being offloaded from Soviet transports. Because there is no media coverage, there can be no growing revulsion on the home front, no protests on Soviet campuses and in Soviet streets, no clamor to bring the boys home.

Afghanistan is not Russia's Vietnam not only because the nation committing the atrocities never sees them, but because the rest of the world is blacked out, too. At the height of the Vietnam war there was a noncombatant army of foreign journalists present to witness its conduct. In Afghanistan they are forbidden, as are the Red Cross and all other international relief agencies that were integral to what happened in Vietnam. And without these witnesses, Afghanistan is a matter of "out of sight, out of mind."

Continued

In Vietnam we waged a war against ourselves and lost. The Soviets will not let that happen to them. The truth of the Vietnam analogy is not that guerrillas must inevitably bog down and defeat a superior force of invaders, but that war against indigenous forces by a super-power can be won if it is waged against a backdrop of international ignorance and apathy. The proper analogy for Afghanistan is not Vietnam at all but rather Spain—not in the nature of the war, but in the symbolic value it

has for our time—or should—in terms of democracy's will to resist aggression. Aid to the mujaheddin should not be a dirty little secret of the CIA, but a matter of public policy and national honor as well.

PERHAPS the leading feature of the left today is the moral selectivity that French social critic Jean-Francois Revel has identified as "the syndrome of the cross-eyed left." Leftists can describe Vietnam's conquest and colonization of Cambodia as a "rescue mission," while reviling Ronald Reagan for applying the same term to the Grenada operation, although better than 90 percent of the island's population told independent pollsters they were grateful for the arrival of U.S. troops. Forgetting for a moment that Afghanistan is "Russia's Vietnam," leftists call Grenada "America's Afghanistan," although people in Afghanistan (as one member of the resistance there told us) would literally die for the elections held in Grenada.

The left's memory can be as selective as its morality. When it comes to past commitments that have failed, the leftist mentality is utterly unable to produce a coherent balance sheet, let alone a

profit-and-loss statement. The attitude toward Soviet penetration of the Americas is a good example. Current enthusiasm for the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua should recall to those of us old enough to remember a previous enthusiasm for Cuba 25 years ago. Many of

us began our New Leftism with the Fair Play for Cuba demonstrations. We raised our voices and chanted, "Cuba Si! Yanqui No!" We embraced Fidel Castro not only because of the flamboyant personal style of the barbudos of his 26th of July Movement but also because Castro assured the world that his revolution belonged to neither communists nor capitalists, that it was neither red nor black, but Cuban olive green.

We attributed Castro's expanding links with Moscow to the U.S.-sponsored invasion of the Bay of Pigs, and then to the "secret war" waged against Cuba by U.S. intelligence and paramilitary organizations. But while Castro's apologists in the United States may find it expedient to maintain these fictions, Carlos Franqui and other old Fidelistas now in exile have made it clear that Castro embraced the Soviets even before the U.S. hostility became decisive, and that he steered his country into an alliance with the Soviets with considerable enthusiasm. Before the Bay of Pigs he put a Soviet general in charge of Cuban forces. Before the Bay of Pigs he destroyed Cuba's democratic trade union movement, although its elected leadership was drawn from his own 26th of July Movement. He did so because he knew that the Stalinists of Cuba's Communist Party would be dependable cheerleaders and efficient policemen of his emerging dictatorship.

One symbolic event along the way that many of us

missed was Castro's imprisonment of his old comrade Huber Matos, liberator of Matanzas Province, and one of the four key military leaders of the revolution. Matos' crime: criticizing the growing influence of Cuban communists (thereby jeopardizing Castro's plans to use them as his palace guard). Matos' sentence: 20 years in a 4-by-11 concrete box. Given such a precedent, how can we fail to support Edén Pastora for taking up arms against early signs of similar totalitarianism in Nicaragua?

What has come of Cuba's revolution to break the chains of American imperialism? Soviets administer the still one-crop Cuban economy; Soviets train the Cuban army; and Soviet subsidies, fully one-quarter of Cuba's gross national product, prevent the Cuban treasury from going broke. Before the revolution, there were more than 35 independent newspapers and radio stations in Havana. Now, there is only the official voice of Granma, the Cuban Pravda, and a handful of other outlets spouting the same party line. Today Cuba is a more abject and deformed colony of the Soviet empire than it ever was of America. The archrebel of our youth, Fidel Castro, has become a party hack who cheerfully endorsed the rape of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and endorses the ongoing plunder of Afghanistan today, an aging pimp who sells his young men to the Russians for use in their military adventures in return for \$10 billion a year.

In leftist circles, of course, such arguments are anathema, and no historical precedent, however daunting, can prevent outbreaks of radical chic. Epidemics of radical chic cannot be prevented by referring to histori-

Continued

cal precedents. That perennial delinquent Abbie Hoffman will lead his Potemkin village tours of Managua. The Hollywood stars will dish up Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega as an exotic hors d'oeuvre on the Beverly Hills cocktail circuit. In the self-righteous moral glow accompanying such gatherings, it will be forgotten that, through the offices of the U.S. government, more economic and military aid was provided the Sandinistas in the first 18 months following their takeover than was given to Somoza in the previous 20 years, and that this aid was cut off primarily because of the clear signs that political pluralism in Nicaragua was being terminated.

Adherents of today's version of radical chic may never take seriously the words of Sandinista directorate member Bayardo Arce when he says that elections are a "hindrance" to the goal of "a dictatorship of the proletariat" and necessary only "as an expedient to deprive our enemies of an argument." They will ignore former Sandinista hero and now contra leader Eden Pastora who sees the junta as traitors who have sold out the revolutionary dream ("now that we are occupied by foreign forces from Cuba and Russia, now that we are governed by a dictatorial government of nine men, now more than ever the Sandinista struggle is justified"). They will ignore opposition leader Arturo Cruz, an early supporter of the Sandinista revolution and previously critical of the contras, when the worsening situation makes him change his mind and ask the Reagan administration to support them in a statement that should have the same weight as Andrei Sakharov's plea to the West to match the Soviet arms buildup.

American leftists propose solutions for the people of Central America that they wouldn't dare propose for themselves. These armchair revolutionaries project their

self-hatred and their contempt for the privileges of democracy—which allow them to live well and to think badly—onto people who would be only too grateful for the luxuries they disdain. Dismissing "bourgeois" rights as a decadent frill that the peoples of the Third World can't afford, leftists spreadeagle the Central Americans between the dictators of the right and the dictators of the left. The latter, of course, are their chosen instruments for bringing social justice and economic well-being, although no leftist revolution has yet provided impressive returns on either of these qualities and most have made the lives of their people considerably more wretched than they were before.

VOTING is symbolic behavior, a way of evaluating what one's country has been as well as what it might become. We do not accept Reagan's policies chapter and verse (especially in domestic policy, which we haven't discussed here), but we agree with his vision of the world as a place increasingly inhospitable to democracy and increasingly dangerous for America.

One of the few saving graces of age is a deeper perspective on the passions of youth. Looking back on the left's revolutionary enthusiasms of the last 25 years, we have painfully learned what should have been obvious all along: that we live in an imperfect world that is bettered only with great difficulty and easily made worse—much worse. This is a conservative assessment, but on the basis of half a lifetime's experience, it seems about right. ■