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Editor's Comment

Scott P. Richert



Dan Quayle and the 'Cultural Elite'

A firestorm was ignited by Vice President Quayle (or, more correctly, by the media) when he gave his "Murphy Brown" speech this past May. In a prime example of single-mindedness, the media focused on one sentence in a speech of several pages. The main focus of Quayle's remarks—*i.e.*, the Los Angeles riots and the steps that need to be taken to prevent such events from recurring—was mentioned only by a few people, and many of them advanced the disingenuous claim that "Dan Quayle is trying to blame the riots on 'Murphy Brown.'"

In this speech, and in another delivered a few weeks later, the Vice President launched a frontal assault on the "cultural elite" who hold the power in "Hollywood and elsewhere." These are the people who influence popular sentiment through the entertainment that they produce; through their control of the news media; and through their monopolization of respectable public opinion, in universities and intellectual journals. Against the cultural elite, with their (at best) relativistic or (at worst) nihilistic mindset, the Vice President places the vast majority of Middle Americans with their "traditional values." "It is," he says, "such a great divide that it sometimes seems we have two cultures—the cultural elite, and the rest of us." What he prescribes is nothing less than a cultural war. "It is time we Americans stand up for values, stand up for America, and say that America is great because of our people and our values."

To many, the Vice President's message must seem like a welcome relief from politics as usual. Most of his criticisms of the "cultural elite" are on target. The dominant elite in our culture today is liberal—in the sense that "liberal" has come to be used in recent years. This elite, through its control of the news and entertainment media, has had a great impact on the imagination of the average American. The "Reagan Revolution" notwithstanding, popular attitudes, although lagging behind the attitudes of the elite, have clearly moved in a more liberal direction in recent decades. The general popular acceptance (or at least toleration) of abortion

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NHI Notes . . .

Institute Chairman **Claes G. Ryn** has appeared on several radio and television talk shows to discuss his book *The New Jacobinism*. His most recent appearances were on Radio America and on the Washington, D.C., station WAVA. Dr. Ryn also participated in a conference in Chicago sponsored by the Rockford Institute. His paper was entitled "Cultural Diversity and Moral Order." An article by Ryn entitled "Political Philosophy and the Unwritten Constitution," which originated as a paper delivered at a Los Angeles meeting of the Philadelphia Society, appears in the summer issue of *Modern Age*.

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Inside . . .

For 'Book Notes' and an important reminder about the new, expanded *Humanitas* coming this Fall, please turn to page 4.

Institute Has New Program Director

Scott P. Richert, a doctoral student in political theory at The Catholic University of America, has recently been named to the staff of the National Humanities Institute. Mr. Richert will serve as program director for the Institute, Editor of the *NATIONAL HUMANITIES BULLETIN*, and Associate Editor of the Institute's academic journal, *Humanitas*.

Mr. Richert received his bachelor's degree in political science from Michigan State. He holds a master's degree in political theory from The Catholic University of America. He is currently completing

coursework for the Ph.D. His doctoral dissertation will focus on the historian John Lukacs and historical consciousness.

Mr. Richert's academic honors include membership in Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi. He is a recipient of the Jacob Javits Fellowship, sponsored by the United States Department of Education.

His publications include "Rousseau: Conservative or Totalitarian Democrat?" in *Humanitas* (Vol. V, no. 3, Summer 1991) and "On the Nature of Conservatism" in *This World* (No. 27, Winter 1992).

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Dr. Ryn was selected by the Graduate Students Association at The Catholic University of America as a recipient of the annual university-wide award for excellence in teaching and contributions to the advancement of graduate education.

Institute Treasurer and Academic Board chairman **Russell Kirk** has two new books coming out in September. *Redeeming the Time: The Politics of Prudence* will be published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, while *America's British Culture* will be brought out by Transaction Publishers. His memoirs, with the working title of *The Sword of Imagination*, will be published in early 1993 by the University of Missouri Press. Dr. Kirk is currently delivering a series of lectures at the Heritage Foundation on the topic, "Can Our Culture be Saved?" His next lecture will discuss "The Degradation of Democratic Dogma."

Modern Age, edited by NHI Academic Board member Dr. **George A. Panichas**, is celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary. Dr. Panichas, Professor of English at the University of Maryland, has recently released the third volume of his trilogy of critical writings, *The Critic as Conservator: Essays in Literature, Society, and Culture*, on The Catholic University of America Press.

Dr. **James M. Miclot**, former David A. Scott Scholar in Political Theory at the Institute, delivered a lecture in the Social Philosophy series at the University of Virginia, entitled "The Administration of Wisdom: Imperial Breakdowns and Poetical Breakthroughs in the Ancient Near East." As part of the College of William and Mary Faculty Discussion Series, Dr. Miclot delivered a paper on "Abstractionism as Power Play." He also delivered a commencement address, "What I Learned on Wall Street: Good Advice from Ricky the Rocket," to the Politics Honor Society at William and Mary.

The Institute's new program director, **Scott P. Richert**, recently participated in a Liberty Fund colloquium in Big Sky, Montana. The colloquium, which brought together sixteen scholars from around the United States and Canada, addressed the question: "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Defender of Liberty or Statist?"

The Institute once again sponsored a panel at the American Political Science Association Convention, which occurred this year in Chicago over Labor Day weekend. Entitled "The Politics of Escape," the panel featured papers by Dr. **James M. Miclot** on "Not Taking a Fall: Fixing Reality in Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon*," Dr. **Greg Butler** of New Mexico State University on "Christianity's Response to Technology: Ellul and Grant," and **Scott P. Richert** on "The Bureaucratization of the American Mind: John Lukacs and the Politics of Escape." Dr. **Claes G. Ryn** was the moderator; the papers were discussed by Dr. **Michael Federici**, of Concord College in West Virginia, and Dr. **Jeff Polet**.

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and the militant homosexual agenda are but two examples of this phenomenon.

At the same time, there are a few disturbing elements in the Vice President's criticisms of the "cultural elite." Implicit in his criticism seems to be the belief that it is possible to have a society without elites. This form of populism, which has a long history in American politics, is, at best, naive. Even the most casual student of history knows that the presence of an elite has been a constant in all societies. There is always some group which, for good or ill, has greater than average influence on society and its direction. The German sociologist Robert Michels has termed this truth "The Iron Law of Oligarchy." Yet the Vice President seems to imply that elites are neither necessary nor desirable. His opposition to the cultural attitudes of the current elite is translated, knowingly or unknowingly, into an opposition to all elites.

A more realistic stance would be to work toward the replacement of the current elite with an elite whose character has been steeped in the best that Western civilization has to offer, or alternatively, to influence the character of the current elite. This idea guides the work of the National Humanities Institute. Instead of advancing a populist agenda, we work towards the advancement of true leadership in all areas of human endeavor. This stance also recognizes another fundamental truth: that elites of different characters are likely to bring about different types of institutions, and ultimately, a different quality of society. Changes in the consciousness of a people

are primarily the cause of institutional changes rather than the effect. Institutional changes reflect prior changes in consciousness and may help to solidify such changes, but it is unlikely, if not impossible, that, by themselves, they can bring about significant changes in consciousness.

A good illustration is the discussion of "family values." Political discourse on this subject is dominated by two groups: those, like Vice President Quayle, who believe that the family is the foundation of society, and those, like the "cultural elite," who view the family as a dispensable, or merely practically convenient, institution. The first group believes, as does the Vice President, that "society is only as strong as the families who live and grow within it." This notion is fundamentally ahistorical; it does not recognize that the majority of history's advanced civilizations rose and fell before the idea that we call the "traditional family" (the nuclear family consisting of father, mother, and minor children) was formulated. The "traditional family" is a beneficial modern ideal that people came to value only after it had become a firmly established institution. That institution was the result, rather than the cause, of a whole series of changes, including a new respect for personal identity, in the consciousness of Western man—changes put into motion by the Renaissance and the Reformation. If the institution of the family appears to be crumbling today, it is not so much because we do not value the family in the way that people did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, Vice President Quayle's nostalgia for the family, which is shared by the vast majority of Americans, shows the great value that we

still place on this institution. The disintegration of the family must be traced to another factor altogether, namely, a devolution of the older American and Western consciousness that not only made the traditional family desirable but possible.

The historian John Lukacs has called that mentality the "bourgeois consciousness." Lukacs' use of the adjective "bourgeois" bears no resemblance to the Marxist use of the word, nor to its common use as synonymous with "middle class." As he explained in his important work *Outgrowing Democracy*, "the notion of the bourgeois . . . had little to do with capital or with income, while it had much to do with the city. *Bourgeois* . . . meant city dweller The essence of the meaning was that of a free man, possessing full municipal rights This kind of freedom became a matter of spirit, and not merely of status; of aspirations and standards rather than of wealth or income. It embodied notions of urbanity and culture." Although the bourgeois consciousness was a modern development, to be bourgeois did not mean cutting oneself off from the past. Indeed, the "aspirations and standards" of the bourgeoisie, their "notions of urbanity and culture," were firmly rooted in an historical consciousness.

In place of the bourgeois mentality, modern Americans have, slowly but steadily, adopted a bureaucratic consciousness. Again, Lukacs provides us with a concise description. In tracing the legacy of the New England Puritans, he notes these essential characteristics of the bureaucratic mindset: "The cult of progress, the belief in See *CULTURAL ELITE*, page 4

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the possibility of a perfect (or at least perfectible) society, the categorization of human actions, including intellectual beliefs, and the consequent tendency to regulate morality through legislation” This bureaucratic mentality, present in germinal form since the early days of America, has dominated the American mindset since the 1950s. It has created a number of

changes in the institutional structure of American life, and it is now eating away at the foundations of the family. The liberal bureaucrats, whom Vice President Quayle includes in the “cultural elite,” are, in one sense, intellectually more consistent than their “conservative” bureaucratic counterparts. In redefining the family as a merely pragmatic institution, the liberal bureaucrats are “bureaucratizing” it. They are making the structure of the family conform to the power structures that have arisen out of the bureaucratic mentality. The “conservative” bureaucrats, sometimes called “big-government conservatives,” on the other hand, are subject to what Lukacs calls “split-mindedness,” holding incompatible ideals without recognizing the opposition between them. Their bureaucratic mentality is diametrically opposed to the bourgeois mentality of self-reliance and personal and group responsibility that is the necessary prerequisite for the continued existence of the traditional family. Their espousal of bureaucratic statism “in behalf of traditional values” helps, ironically, to solidify the bureaucratic consciousness of the society at large, and destroys the conditions which made the traditional family possible in the first place.

The continued existence of the traditional family, then, does not hinge on repeated pronouncements of “family values.” Those values are becoming increasingly abstract and hollow. The consciousness which gave them value has been replaced by an outlook and attitude that is making the traditional family neither desirable nor, eventually, even possible. As long as the bureaucratic way of thinking and acting remains, bureaucratic struc-

tures will remain. The first real and effective steps towards the restoration of the family will occur only when the nostalgia for the family and other bourgeois institutions becomes more than merely nostalgia. Only when the consciousness of Americans begins to undergo a *re-embourgeoisement*, as their imaginations are informed and shaped by a new cultural elite, can the dismantling of the bureaucratic state—and the reassertion of such humane and indispensable institutions as the family—begin.

Important Reminder

Humanitas, which has appeared as a newsletter during its first six years of publication, henceforth will be expanded and published in the format of an academic journal. For NHI, this change represents a significant step forward. It will make it possible to publish more articles, generate more interest in our ideas among men and women of letters, and—through these means—help revitalize the humanities and elevate our culture.

The journal will initially appear twice yearly in the fall and spring. Subscription rates will be \$12 per year for individuals and \$25 for institutions. As in the past, contributors of at least \$30 per year (all but \$5 tax deductible) will receive complimentary subscriptions. However, owing to the additional costs of production, NHI can no longer distribute *Humanitas* to those whose contributions are not current. So please renew your support as soon as possible.

Friends of the Institute are requested to ask librarians to add *Humanitas* to their collections.

Book Notes

The following books have been released recently by Transaction Publishers (New Brunswick, NJ 08903):

On Divorce, by Louis de Bonald (\$24.95 cloth), is more important today than at the time that it was written. Bonald makes a compelling argument for viewing the family as the fundamental unit of society. This volume is translated and edited by Nicholas Davidson and features a foreword by Robert Nisbet.

The Social Crisis of Our Time, by Wilhelm Roepke (\$24.95 paper), is an attack on the collectivist state in all its forms—Nazi, Communist, and Social Welfare. This edition has a foreword by Russell Kirk and an introductory essay by William Campbell.

A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson, by his daughter, Christina Scott (\$34.95 cloth), offers insight into the life of the great Catholic historian. This edition features an introduction by Russell Kirk and a fascinating postscript by Dawson himself.

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