

ranch ninety miles east of El Paso. It did so by hiring a former water commissioner as a lobbyist, offering Texas Tech University a \$1.5 million grant to study the beneficial use of biosolids and threatening to sue individually any member of the County Commissioners Court who voted to oppose the project. "Sierra Blancans," *The New York Times* reported, "hardly knew what hit them."

On the witness stand Moore—best known for his quixotic and comic pursuit of General Motors C.E.O. Roger Smith in the documentary *Roger and Me*—explained that the program's intent was to use humor as a medium to explore important issues. He reminded the court that *TV Nation's* idea of good programming also included parking a dozen cars in front of the home of the president of a car alarm company, then setting the alarms off at 6 A.M. while filming the reaction.

Defendants guessed what was coming when none of the jurors cracked a smile while viewing clips of man-on-the-street interviews in which a tourist from England and federal judge Robert Bork were questioned about their bowel habits. After deliberating four hours, jurors held both TriStar and Kaufman responsible for one dollar each in actual damages. The real hit was the punitive damages, which require proof of malice: \$4.5 million for TriStar and \$500,000 for Kaufman.

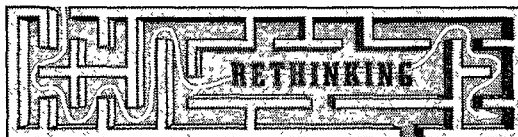
"There was no malice here," Moore said. "We didn't even know Merco existed until we looked [it up] for the story.... This trial was about shutting the people in that town up." And what of the criminal investigation Kaufman alleges was driving the lawsuit? The U.S. Attorney's office wouldn't comment—but the judge signed an order allowing Kaufman to release his litigation files to a federal grand jury in Austin. ■

POWERLESSNESS IS NOT AN UNINTENDED BUT A CALCULATED CONSEQUENCE OF THE SYSTEM.

Democracy & Counterrevolution

SHELDON WOLIN

Last winter's government shutdown, contrary to media reports, was not about innocent bystanders—government workers, recipients of benefits or tourists—however genuine



their hardships. It was about the broad scheme of power in the nation. Under what was dismissed as posturing, serious political changes were being tested. If we ask, "What kind of authority could justify disrupting and holding an allegedly democratic system hostage in the name of 'a balanced budget in seven years' and then attempt to dictate the precise kind and amount of government services that are to be permitted to resume?" the answer is not: "The authority of officials elected to run the government." Deliberately paralyzing an elected government is far different from the ordinary partisanship that attends appropriations.

The shutdown was, instead, a direct challenge to the principle that in a democracy the government belongs to the people. It is theirs either to reconstitute by prescribed means, such as the amending process, or to halt by resistance or disobedience if it governs tyrannically. For the President or Congress to undertake to stop or reconstitute government in order to extract sweeping policy concessions amounts to an attempted coup d'état by what *The Federalist* (normally the political bible of Gingrich and other self-styled conservatives) would have condemned as a "temporary majority."

Media observers suggested hopefully that the confrontation between Democratic President and Republican Congress might usefully be carried forward to November when "the people" could decide whether they wanted an interventionist or a greatly reduced government. That very formulation implied yet an-

other potentially dangerous conception: that national elections should not be primarily about choosing leaders or expressing party preferences but should serve to focus a Great Issue and force a

crucial turning point. The correct name for that conception is "plebiscitary democracy," and it represents an outlook that is profoundly anti-democratic. Consider what social and economic forces would frame the terms of the plebiscite, or the level of debate that would take place, or the inflated mandate that the victors would claim or the implications of such an event for reinforcing the idea of the citizen as a spectator ready to salivate at the mention of tax cuts. Unfortunately, plebiscitary democracy is not a farfetched notion but a short, highly cost-effective step from the "democracy" quadrennially produced by those who organize, finance and orchestrate elections. Given what elections have become, the effect of national plebiscites on the fundamental shape of government should give pause to anyone who cares about the prospects of democracy.

A vote on the role of government appears in an ominous light if we recall that when the Congressional Republicans announced their determination to "shut down Washington" and democracy's government was nearly paralyzed, there was no mass protest, no million-citizen march on Washington, no demand to reclaim what is guaranteed by the Constitution. At a meeting of freshman Republican Representatives, someone reportedly asked, "Anybody got problems back home with the fact that the government's shut down?" Not a hand was raised.

The lack of response testifies to the truly terrifying pace at which depoliticization is being promoted and the depths of the alienation separating citizens from their government. Each national election serves to deepen the contempt of voters for a sys-

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tem that they know is corrupt, and they doubt it can be remedied by requiring lobbyists to register. Despair is rooted in powerlessness, and powerlessness is not an unintended but a calculated consequence of the system, of which cash bribes to encourage poor African-Americans of New Jersey not to vote—a Republican campaign strategy in 1993 boasted about by Christine Todd Whitman's campaign manager, Ed Rollins—supplied a crude instance. "Balancing the budget" is not simply about forcing government to live within its means "like the rest of us." The projected cuts in education, social services and health care strike at the political power of ordinary Americans as well as their standard of living.

Newt Gingrich could not have stated more bluntly the counter-revolutionary aims of his party and its real target when he said that the budget debate was the most important domestic debate since the New Deal.

Although his remark was meant to take credit for the watershed that would be established if the Republicans were to succeed in seriously weakening a tradition of social programs going back to the 1930s, it is equally significant that the G.O.P. budget would gravely weaken the idea first put into practice, however imperfectly, by the New Deal: that government can be the instrument for creating programs that actually increase the political power of poor people, workers and the real middle class. Social programs provide modest power resources for those who are effectively disfranchised by a political system shaped by the influence money can buy. One need only compare the momentum that gathered behind the move to "end welfare as we know it" with the fizzled effort to "end corporate welfare" to conclude that The System is so totally corrupt as to be unsalvageable.

But the conservative tradition is not the sole property of conservatives. "The era of big government is over," President Clinton announced in his State of the Union Message. When that pronouncement is coupled with what the Administration has conceded or proposed regarding reductions in Medicare, Medicaid, protection of public lands and forests, environmental standards, food stamps and aid to poor children, then it is clear that the President is presiding over the centrist version of the counterrevolution. He represents liberalism volunteering its own epitaph. And although the Wattenbergs and Fukuyamas he consults can help with the precise wording, the awful truth is that the "center" is a myth. It represents the illusion of a non-ideological position from which a leader can negotiate; in fact, it is merely an elaborate way of reassuring the powerful while confusing historical allies.

The combined consequence of the Republican counterrevolution, the collapse of liberalism into centrism and the general onslaught against government, Washington and public officials is nothing less than the discrediting of the fundamental principle of a democratic society: that political power and office are meant to serve the needs of the vast majority.

This changing and threatening landscape means that strategies that look to third parties or proportional representation to provide the momentum for regaining control over the federal government are hopelessly inadequate. The power of wealth is too

highly organized and the morale of the citizenry too low to enable reformers to compete for control of the centers of power. For the foreseeable future, that particular game is over.

The G.O.P. has already dictated where the next game is to be played. Confident that the party has the ideological momentum to match its financial resources, the Republicans are now "federalizing" the counterrevolution in the form of mandates to the state. Since power-holders rarely surrender power voluntarily, Republican strategists are perfectly willing to decentralize power, knowing from experience that state legislators and governors are even more susceptible to the influence of money than their national counterparts.

What might the counterrevolution signal for the future of democracy? The most serious possibility is not that the experiment in democracy has failed but rather that the experiment in which democracy accepts centralized representative govern-

ment as its surrogate has been defeated. Corporate power has managed to tailor representative government to its needs, from the media that construct spectator politics

and the well-heeled lobbies and lawyers who shape the legislation and grease the legislators, to the parties that are multimillion-dollar operations for winning elections and, not least, to the politicians, whose calling has become so wholly assimilated to the business culture it is impossible to tell whether corporate experience is a prerequisite for government or vice versa.

The Republican plan for "returning power to the states and to governments that are closer to the people" provides, unintentionally, a democratic opening. Localism suddenly changes, from being derided as a hopeless vision of "pastoral democracy" to the site where the right plans to complete the counterrevolution. This may also be an opportunity for democracy to make a stand on terrain that, historically, favors it. But for that to happen, for there to be a democratic rejoinder to the counter-revolutionary rollback, the alienated and politically disenchanted will have to learn how to become citizens rather than remain angry voters (or nonvoters), and for that they will need to be reacquainted with democracy and, especially, reminded of what it demands. As voters, Americans have become accustomed to

The fundamental principle of a democratic society is being discredited: that political office is meant to serve the needs of the vast majority.

★ ATTENTION ★

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choosing between candidates and trying to determine what "they" and the parties stand for. For most who bothered, voting was an act whose effects seemed remote and of little personal consequence. To participate in make-believe involved no risks, no choice of a form of living with others, no cost, no fault: democracy as the redistribution of hypocrisy.

Democracy in the age of counterrevolution has become more demanding than ever before in U.S. history. One has to choose it as a way of life rather than a party affiliation. And in choosing one may well have to make some sacrifice in other things, such as opportunities to make a lot of money, exercise a lot of power and enjoy an enviably high status. It may even involve commitment to a place. The hopeful sign is that in every part of the country it is already being practiced.

The experience of democracy is not ultimately about winning but about deliberating and acting together. Clearly, democracy cannot be experienced directly at the remote political reaches represented by state and national institutions. But the possibili-

ty of the states becoming more independent of federal control could mean that they would come to reflect the culture of local democracy, provided people are willing to do the work of nurturing that culture. Democracy is not about ideological purity, nor is it simply the recognition of differences of race, gender and ethnicity. It is about how we equalize politically in acting together for shared purposes. ■

NATION NOTES

Los Angeles-area readers will have the opportunity to meet Victor Navasky, Robert Scheer, Marc Cooper and other *Nation* writers and editors at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, April 20-21 at Dickson Plaza, U.C.L.A. For information, call 1-(800) LATIMES, extension 76503.

LETTERS

C O N T I N U E D

(Continued From Page 2)

day revive Hamilton-like assaults on social injustice. When that happens we will thank Gloria Steinem, Marian Wright Edelman, Hillary Rodham Clinton and other feminists who nurtured our sense of social injustice by calling attention to class as well as gender inequities. By seeing class and gender perspectives as mutually exclusive, Cockburn misses a major conjuncture in campaigns for social justice. If he understood more about Hamilton's tradition he would have a greater appreciation of the gender-based activism he scorns. KATHRYN KISH SKLAR

Roanoke, Va.

■ Alexander Cockburn is certainly among the most talented political writers on your staff. He is, however, wrong about Christopher Lasch. Lasch's texts on family and culture offer us important insights into psychosocial dynamics, but they are also flawed—theoretically, historically and logically. Lasch speciously reasons that since the state—aligned as it is with late twentieth-century capitalism—is corrupt and destructive, all social involvement with family life must be so as well. A.F.D.C., WIC, Child Protection Services and Head Start may not be anywhere near the best we can offer children. But to imagine that we can get along without some form of social care for children as well as some means of protecting them from their families is not only conservative and naïve; it is dangerous. Social service agencies, the courts and therapeutic institutions are, as presently structured, deeply problematic—but so are families. What we need today is a radical re-creation of both. PETER S. FOSL

New Paltz, N.Y.

■ Thanks to Alexander Cockburn for demystifying the hidden agenda of Hillary Clinton's purported passion for the children of America, as

her book claims. Particularly insightful and welcome was Cockburn's recapitulation of the important critiques the late historian Christopher Lasch made of the institution of the family in late capitalism. Lasch excoriated liberal "do-gooders" in the "helping professions" for their covert authoritarianism and efforts to engineer into being the "therapeutic state." Hillary's book is simply the latest in a long and dreary tradition of pseudo-scholarship.

The left, including major sectors of the feminist movement, unjustly accused Lasch of everything from sexism to social conservatism. More accurately, Lasch espoused a consistent left-populism that had more in common with philosophical anarchism. Cockburn, to his credit, sees the genius of this man and the significant, seldom-acknowledged contribution he made to the articulation of a radical democratic politics. Cockburn's locating himself in Lasch's footsteps is both appropriate and—given the frequent myopia and hypocrisy on the left—courageous.

BARBARA ANN SCOTT

COCKBURN REPLIES

Petrolia, Calif.

■ I would never, under any circumstances, use so crude a word as "girth" to describe the consequence of the very understandable breaches in Tipper's dietary discipline prompted by misery at being shackled to an insensitive, uncaring brute like Al. She has leasehold on the very special portion of my heart once occupied by Jeane Kirkpatrick, though I adored the latter as a mistress of correction, whereas Tipper is that bouncy Betjeman girl of my youth whose hands were suddenly clasped over my eyes while a voice trilled, "Guess who?"

I'm sorry about the loss of my mast and moral compass. I've been hunting high and low for weeks. Silly me! I just know I put them down

somewhere. Kathryn Sklar: I don't see any persuasive effort on the part of Steinem, Edelman or H.R.C. to combine issues of gender and class. Hamilton was a brave crusader for working people. H.R.C. presided over the destruction of an opportunity to reform health care because she retained the values and priorities of the thoroughly, nasty corporate law firm in which she was a partner for years. I expect a *Mother Jones* veteran like Deirdre English to be incapable of taking a detached look at H.R.C., but I would have hoped for better from Binghamton. I certainly don't know what Peter Fosl has in mind when he calls for "a radical re-creation" of the family, but let me tell him what a friend of mine remembers from a time, many years ago, when his revolutionary group was debating the "bourgeois family" and all its failings. A worker listened incredulously, then leaned forward to say, "Hey man, the family is all we got." ALEXANDER COCKBURN

RE REDESIGN

Ann Arbor, Mich.

■ Why do all the redesigns resemble one another? *The New Yorker* becomes less and less distinguishable from *Vanity Fair*; now *The Nation* comes off like a smaller, low-rent *Rolling Stone*.

I think I'll miss the consecutive numbering most, for dropping that would have made Old Grannis's task harder. If you remember, in Frank Norris's novel *McTeague*, the old man spent his evenings binding his *Nations* together with stout twine and an upholsterer's needle while his secret love, Miss Baker, on the other side of the boardinghouse wall, made tea: "It was their tête-à-tête. Instinctively they felt each other's presence, felt each other's thought coming to them through the thin partition. It was charming; they were perfectly happy."

WILLIAM BOLCOM

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