

ASHES AND DIAMONDS

by Alexander Cockburn



The Nutty Professor

Not the least curious aspect of Bork's appearance before the Judiciary Committee was the general acceptance by the senators and the press of Bork's view that it is fine for professors to tell lies. Whenever pressed on some of his more outrageous views Bork would explain that he had made these remarks in the academy far removed from the real time responsibility of the courtroom and the bench. In other words he was proposing the notion that it is entirely in order for a law professor to promote intellectual propositions which he actually regards as absurd.

The other striking element in the coverage of Bork is the manic zeal with which reporters have emphasized the dimensions both of his intellect and his wit. Phrases like "superlative intelligence," "immense brilliance" pepper the new reports and the profiles, even though the record discloses no trace of humor and a mind servile to political and corporate power. Bork was supposedly imbued with socialist ideas in his youth but then fell under the influence of Aaron Drictor, the famously reactionary economics professor at the University of Chicago, whose sister married Milton Friedman. The best single line about Bork comes from one of his colleagues at Yale who was asked what he thought of him and said simply, "Familiarity breeds contempt."

Poor Joe

It scarcely helped the anti-Bork forces that the chairman of the committee was being exposed as a plagiarist even as the hearings began. Joe Biden, it turned out, had been stealing bits of his appalling speeches from Hubert Humphrey and Robert Kennedy and even from Neil Kinnock, leader of the British Labor Party. William Schneider, one of the genre mustered in the Washington think-tanks known as "political analysts," brought back one of Kinnock's political commercials, made for the British election earlier this year. It was one—made by the director of *Chariots of Fire*—in which Kinnock asks rhetorically why he was the first Kinnock in 40 generations to have obtained the benefits of higher education. Answer: The humane social and economic policies of the British Labor Party. Schneider handed it around and Biden snatched it up and made it his own. Why was he the first Biden in 40 years, etc., etc.

I was in England when the Kinnock ads first ran. It was a huge hit with all the political correspondents and so-called "analysts" who declared that this kind of "American-style" personal message, so different from fuddy-duddy old-fashioned "doctrinaire" Labor politicking, showed that Kinnock was modern-minded and had a real chance of beating Thatcher. Exit polls taken as Thatcher trounced Kinnock showed clearly that though the political analysts may have been ecstatic about the commercial, the British electorate considered it windy rubbish and thought the less of Kinnock for bleating in this fashion about his family's past. The Labor Party's candidates who did best were those who were extremely doctrinaire and old-fashioned in saying exactly how they would like to install socialism, a project the oily Kinnock glossed over. Since his plagiarism has been a serious reverse for Biden, this must have been one of the more futile political commercials of all time.

The Blessings of a Free Press

"The cause of Allende's failure to complete his term—a collapse that

brought the entire democratic system down with him—is the subject of one of the longest-running controversies of recent history." —Mark Falcoff, *The New Republic*, September 7.

Translation: "Allende failed to complete his term because he was killed in a successful right-wing coup supported by the U.S." Falcoff is a visiting fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and director of its study group on Chile.

"Mozambique, a fertile, tropical land laced by broad, muddy rivers, and caressed by the sparkling Indian Ocean, is the kind of place that defies easy categories, even though a few things are certain. Among them is that since the country gained independence from Portugal 12 years ago, it has been far from a success. It is devastated by civil war. . . . By most standards, Mozambique is less well

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off than it was when Frelimo, full of idealism and ideology, got independence from Portugal." Richard Bernstein, "Weary of Marxism's Heroic Slogans," *New York Times*, September 3, 1987.

Translation: Of all the victims of colonialism, Mozambique was among the most savagely exploited. The Portuguese colonizers were brutish and cruel almost beyond imagination. Mozambique did not "gain its independence;" it won final victory after a desperate decade-long struggle, with the Portuguese fighting to the last inch and the last day. Nor today is Mozambique fighting a "civil war." It is enduring the assaults of RENAMO, a mercenary force recruited and paid for by South Africa with U.S. backing and the vociferous encouragement of such politicians as Senator Bob Dole, who recently urged support for RENAMO almost on the day that it carried out one of the most atrocious massacres of civilians in recent African history. For years Mozambique endured economic ostracism by the west, after independence had left it with a plundered economy, and a literacy rate at independence of five percent. In these straits it was fortunate to have the aid and support of the Soviet Union.

Mixed Joy

In Nicaragua the right-wing cardinal Obando Y Bravo has been made chairman of the reconciliation commission; La Prensa is scheduled to reopen and neither U.S. politicians nor U.S. press ask whether they are to be trusted.

The Reagan administration has become increasingly frantic at the diplomatic and political foxhole in which it finds itself, following the aforementioned peace plan and the political maneuvers of House Majority Leader Jim Wright. Most recently Education Secretary William Bennett went on a 24 hour visit to Nicaragua, addressed a public opposition meeting with ringing cries of support for the contras and then asked to go and see some mothers of jailed Somocista national guardsmen and contras, then proceed

to a prison visit. Bennett had permission for the visit but U.S. embassy officials cancelled it because they said Bennett would have to walk past a picket of wounded Nicaraguan war veterans, thus offering an unpalatable photo opportunity. Bennett denounced this savage infringement of his freedom and on return to the U.S. said Nicaragua was sunk in darkest totalitarian night. The U.S. has made an official protest at the picket.

But joy at the present travails of the Reagan administration in regard to its Central American policies should not obscure a harsher truth: The contra war has in large measure succeeded in a central (and traditional) objective nurtured in Washington: the near destruction of the Nicaraguan economy, the erosion of Sandinista economic and political credibility (and socialist morality) by an inflation rate of nearly 1000 percent, hence a huge underground economy, hence the diminution of prospects for the socialist project as a whole. The Reagan administration's room for maneuver may be constricted, but so is the Sandinistas', and while the appointment of Obando and the scheduled reopening of La Prensa may be sound tactics, applauded here also as evidence of democratic socialism in action, we must also recognize the price paid and the weakness caused by the war and its effects over the last six years.

Footnote: All this talk about Bennett and others about the founding fathers, obscures the fact that if Nicaragua were to introduce today a constitution such as that promulgated 200 years ago in the United States, it would be instantly accused of virtual Nazism, given the disenfranchisement and kindred injustices with which that sanctified document was saturated. The present Nicaraguan constitution is a much superior affair.

(Alexander Cockburn's column is partially underwritten by the Committee in Solidarity with the Central American People (CISCAP). For more information about CISCAP's work to bring peace with justice to the Central American region, call 485-1755 or visit the office at 372 W. 10th.)

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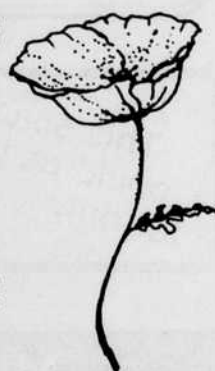
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