

Nicholas Von Hoffman

Tired writer to take a month off

This column won't be appearing for about a month, but the writer hasn't been fired, exiled, furloughed or repressed. He's tired and needs rest.

Judging from the mail, the phone calls and casual inquiries on the street, a number of people think the column is under perpetual threat by a hostile management. Actually, life around the office isn't tense at all. On most days the editors don't have any strong opinion about what's been said, on others they show signs of agreeing and occasionally they not only disagree but write to refute the specious reasoning appearing in this space.

All of which is good for it shows this newspaper and quite a few others are coming around to the idea that one of their functions is to be a place where ideas can dispute with each other. This angers some readers, who prefer to filter out any contact with notions and thoughts which don't sit well with them. They call up and say they will no longer buy a newspaper which is insane enough to print the ravings of that mad baboon.

Others comfort themselves with the thought that the column appears on what they call the women's page, the unspoken assumption being that if the management had any respect for it they'd put it in a section that people define as for and about the male gender. Writing for women, even in some women's eyes, is regarded as a demotion, a second-rate assignment. Yet even though the readership of this column seems evenly divided between men and women, it's the women who are the better letter writers.

Men will sometimes write and cuss you out, call you a Communist, and sign off mumbling to themselves. Women rarely do. They think a very long time before they write. They think about a column for two or three months before they decide what their position is and write to tell you about it.

The mail is often sad and moving. There are letters from people who're dying, from people who're getting

divorced, or thrown out of school or into jail. Seldom do they write to tell you the good news in their lives. Often they send helpful information; a number of these columns derive originally from reader mail.

Sometimes when you read these letters you ask yourself why you're in this weird line of work. You know it has satisfactions but you can't say precisely what they are. Friends will say that you get a lot accomplished, but a wise man doesn't go into newspaper work in hopes of accomplishing anything.

The ambition to get things done, get people elected, get roads built or foreign policy changed has wrecked many good newspapers and good newspaper men. If a paper is instrumental in getting a mayor elected, it's stuck with him; he's their guy, and they've got to defend the idiot no matter what he does.

The same holds true for a program or a policy. A columnist would advocate it only in a spirit of pure pessimism, not in hopes it'll be adopted, but that it will be discussed. If it is adopted, he'd better crawl away from it quickly for ego investment in an idea is more subversive of independent thought than backing a candidate.

One of the traps of our business—newspapering in general and column-writing especially—is the tug toward playing surrogate. Surrogate Clarence Darrow to free the innocent, surrogate President to save the Republic, surrogate football coach to give us a winning season. They say newsmen eventually wind up looking like the people they cover, crime reporters like cops, diplomatic correspondents like ambassadors, and so forth, but it's bad for us when it happens because as much as possible we should be cantankerous, eccentric, misanthropic nobodies. As much as possible we should scrape off what other people accumulate in life, a sense of place and position in society. But it's hard because newspapering partakes of show biz and we all love to star.

We have power problems as well. We, too, have heard about the power of the press, the thunder of the fourth estate and that the pen is mightier than the sword. In an exquisitely inexact and unpredictable way there is power in a few of these words we write, but it's a fickle power resembling the priest's prayer for rain. Sometimes he gets it and sometimes he doesn't, but even when he does it may not come the way he wants it. He may get flooded out.

Perhaps the most influential newspaper writer in this millenium was Karl Marx. He did, indeed, have the power to call down the rain and the thunder and the lightning, but if he'd known he would be used as the excuse for the neo-czarism of the Russian socialist state he probably would have shot himself. Power is in the press only in an abstract way; it is not institutionally reliable like a judge's or a legislator's, not accurate like the sword it is said to be mightier than. When we newspaper people try to invoke this power and use it we become propagandists for somebody else's real power or foolish little guys running around screaming a lot of stuff that nobody can understand because it sounds like we have cotton in our mouths.

The satisfaction of writing such a column doesn't have to come from having discernible impact. It can come from play, the play of words, the play of ideas, the play of yelling and being yelled at, the play of trying to invent new ways of looking at things, of imagining new combinations to try to figure out what's going on, what they're doing to us. Such is the satisfaction of this somewhat one-sided conversation that we have three times a week.

Play is a word that connotes fun, and fun, for no good reason, we consign to the frivolous and insincere. But play can be sincere as any musician or football player will tell you. So also with the play of this column which, in retrospect, is sometimes wrong but always and assuredly fun.

On the right. . . William F. Buckley Jr.

Moynihan is nice to almost anyone

Really, people ought to take turns hiring Daniel Patrick Moynihan if only for the pleasure of his leave-takings. His apopemptic graces are exquisitely developed, and what he said about Nixon and his administration was overdue to be said by someone with high standing in the academic community, particularly someone whose own preferences in politics are Liberal, and who grew up in the gardens of Camelot, first as equerry for Averell Harriman, and later as servant to the king himself. The question now is whether the Liberal community will listen to what he said because it was their old, accredited pal Moynihan who said it. Or whether they will simply say that Moynihan has gone daft, and go back to treating Nixon and Nixon's ideas with the discrimination of Herblock.

Memorable words

To the end that his words shall not be quickly forgotten, I repeat one or two of them. Remember, here is Moynihan in the East Room of the White House, speaking to several hundred members of Mr. Nixon's administration. He comes now to his final words, or exhortations, as he calls them.

"The first is too be of good cheer and good conscience. Depressing, even frightening things are being said about the Administration. They are not true." These words, incredibly, are of revolutionary, or if you prefer counter-revolutionary, moment. Because it is quite literally true that the nation's academies are crowded with people who teach that Nixon and the men who surround him are evil. That they are mass murderers, who do it for fun and profit. That they care not about human suffering, or indeed about anything more wholesome than their own rancid self-interest. It may seem odd that it should be necessary to speak these words of denial.

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"They are not true"—an elegant meiotic simplicity that lends special eloquence to the sentence, which is normally rendered with verbal extravagance, of which an example might be, "People who say that kind of thing about the Administration are sowing seeds of division and hatred," etc., etc., etc.

Startling insight

And then Mr. Moynihan said something else which is substantively arresting. "Time and again, the President has said things of startling insight, taking positions of great political courage and intellectual daring, only to be greeted with silence or incomprehension. The prime consequence of all this is that the people in the nation who take these matters seriously have never been required to take us seriously."

A brilliant perception. Now those who are wise in the ways of the world know that undoubtedly Mr. Moynihan had in mind some of the words and concepts which he, Moynihan, had sold to the President, or written in for him in some of his speeches. Poor Patrick, he did not understand. Any Conservative who has ever been scratched in action understands perfectly. Most Liberals, who are moralists, are taught to believe that an idea is to be appreciated or rejected depending on its provenance. If it happened that Adlai Stevenson and Everett Dirksen made the identical proposal on the same day, Stevenson's idea would have been celebrated, Dirksen's ignored.

Ideas by the truckload

Good ideas have come out of Conservative hatcheries by the truckload during the last ten years or so and they are simply ignored. That this should be the

case even when the ideas come out of the mouth of the President of the United States, who is charged by the Constitution with proposing laws to Congress, is not merely intellectually scandalous, it is politically stultifying.

It is, finally, remarkable that Mr. Nixon succeeded in touching so deeply a man as sensitive as Moynihan, as worldly-wise and as obstinately Liberal. Remember, this is the Nixon that Joe McGinniss made a fortune out of by mocking, and that Garry Wills (in his fascinating book) scarifies as a human being. Moynihan said: "(I) have seen him

late into the night and through the night and into the morning, struggling with the most awful complexities, the most demanding and irresolvable conflicts, doing so because he cared, trying to comprehend what is right, and trying to make others see it, above all caring, working, hoping for this country that he has made greater already and which he will make greater still."

Dr. Johnson said that epitaphs are not where to look for lapidary judgments on a man's behavior in this world. But Nixon is very much alive, and Moynihan will have to live with these words. I wish him luck.

