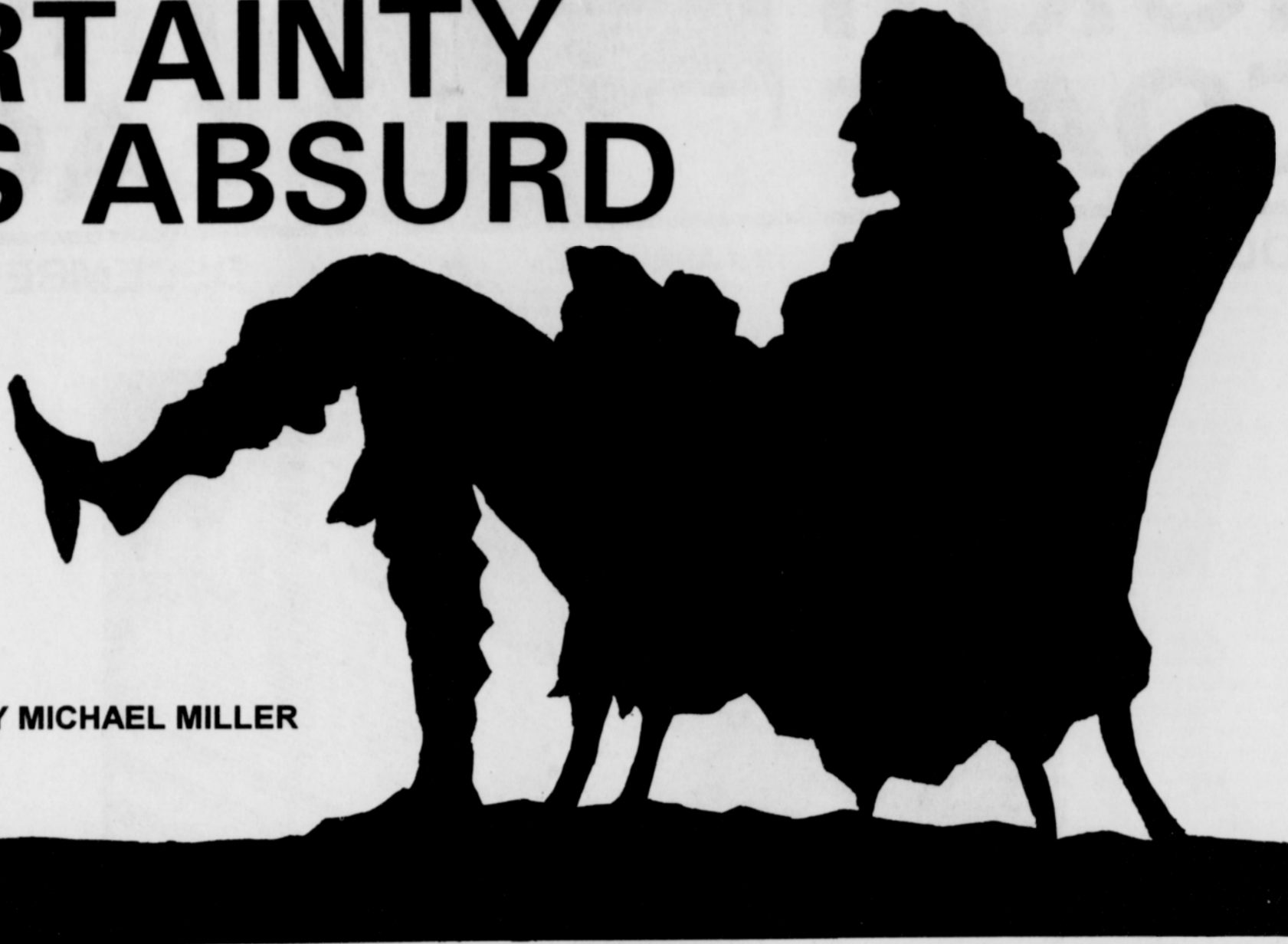


# CERTAINTY IS ABSURD

BY MICHAEL MILLER



SILHOUETTE OF VOLTAIRE BY JEAN HUBER

Voltaire is the pen name of Francois Marie Arouet (1694-1778). Both the man and his pen name became the embodiment of the ideals and spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. These ideals and spirit are not foreign to our nation's history, for they were the ideals and spirit our nation was founded upon, and her fathers are not only Jefferson, Franklin, Paine and Washington but also Rousseau, Locke, Voltaire and the many other Europeans who helped cultivate the Enlightenment. It was an age when people like Voltaire made war on injustice, tyranny, ignorance, fear, intolerance and superstition with the abstract weapons of reason and the written word. Our forebears would cast off a government, thus risking and some sacrificing their lives to see a nation founded upon the ideals of the Enlightenment. Voltaire's 300th birthday is upon us this year, November 21, 1994 (see Voltaire article). His birthday marks in my heart the celebration of all who have labored and sacrificed for liberty, justice, tolerance, equality, and the many other virtues of greater freedom. It is not with pious praise that I celebrate his birthday but with the truest note of sincere admiration, emulation. I can give no greater tribute to Voltaire and the many others like him than to continue their tradition and attack hypocrisy. It is my hope that my writing will reflect the ideals and spirit of Voltaire, but with the sincerity of my voice in our time.

Never has hypocrisy so pervaded society than in our time. The distortions of truth throughout early history may be largely credited to a lack of empirical knowledge to verify or discredit any line of thought. Our past has not been without sin, but the mass manufacturing of falsehoods today is breeding the potential for a devastation unprecedented. When truth threatens to reveal any of our hypocrisies it is buried under larger distortions. The people continue to accept these placebos instead of

taking on the responsibility of self-government. Instead of accepting that they are being lied to and taking up the challenge to discover the facts, they increasingly engage in escapes from reality. The line between reality and fantasy is diminishing for many if not most Americans. The confusion and fear rampant within our society only leaves people clinging to their erroneous perceptions. These perceptions are reinforced by those who use the media to manipulate the people. Our fragile realities no longer have to endure the pounding of contradicting points of view or facts, for the people can readily change the TV channel to someone who really knows the truth. "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd," Voltaire wrote.

We live in a time in which we could feed, clothe, house and provide the other needs of life to everyone and this all accomplished within the balance of nature. The ancient term of Utopia is not impossible, our leaders (Voltaire's use of mockery applies here) are just unwilling to give up the system of exploitation that is working so well for them. Our economic system is the key tool to exploiting the people. We have not heeded the warnings of Karl Marx, Jefferson or Tolstoy on the dangers of an industrial society. We are industrial serfs, chained to our desks, computers, schedules, appointments, debts, and other obligations of class and social dogma. Industry further enslaves the people by creating artificial needs and manufacturing products designed to become quickly obsolete. Obsession for the new is incessantly promoted and we fill vast landfills with products only a few years old. The complaints are many, but the problem stems not from welfare mothers, drug users, communists, hippies, leftists, or the other common complaints of politicians. The problem is an economics of greed instead of need. The solutions to our problems are never easy but seeking easy

answers has been one of the most disempowering qualities of society. We must inform the people of even the most complex problems, then open to their creativity, knowledge and intelligence we will find effective solutions. The absurd idea that only a few are capable or qualified to originate the ideas of change and direction of a nation is nothing but another fallacy propagated by the elite of our society. The generative capacity of the collective whole overwhelms the efforts of the few elite like a star to a candle, but for this capacity to peak it is necessary that all forms of oppression are removed. The government of the people, for the people and by the people seems unwilling to do this. "Yes we will do anything for the poor man," Tolstoy wrote, "anything but get off his back." And Voltaire: "The poor man is never free. He serves in every country."

Hypocrisy is pervasive within government. Elected officials, representatives of the people, serve the needs of industry and special interest but rarely the people. The two major political parties do little but try and mandate their narrow morality platforms over an incredibly polyglot nation. Their self-righteous agendas are not, however, rooted in moral beliefs but in avaricious ambitions for wealth and power. In the time of Voltaire the greatest threat to just government was the Church. Separation of church and state was recognized as an absolute necessity because their differing goals become perverted when combined. Today, though religion continues to be a serious threat to just government, a greater threat is business. Our government is not the servant of the people but the whore of business and the people are the suckers who pay. Centralization of government, media and industry within the past century has created a Goliath that wields its power unchecked. We have been and continue to be exploited by the military/industrial complex. Our pocket books are legally picked to franchise Congress' uncontrollable spending habits. (40% of our taxes go to pay interest on the national debt alone.) The extent of government's abuse of its powers is vast; could it be otherwise?

A consumer is protected from excessive prices and faulty products by a natural desire to receive his/her money's worth and by the right to take legal action if a product is misrepresented or defective. Politicians, however, are consumers spending the money of others and if they negligently misspend our money they secure benefits and favors from those who profit from their negligence. It's become a simple equation: The more money politicians spend the more money they make. However, it is not only government contracts that secure immense profits for the extremely wealthy. Laws that favor business and industry serve the same purpose.

Our laws, the sacred exercise of the voice of the people, are commonly written by lobbyists for the sole purpose of profiting their clients. These laws are pitched to the public as being necessary and vital for protecting the lives, rights and welfare of the people but are most often contradictory to these aims. There is no longer a balance of power because the vast wealth control-

## VOLTAIRE IS 300

Francois Marie Arouet, known to the world by his pen name Voltaire, is one of the greatest French authors and is held in worldwide repute as a courageous crusader against tyranny, bigotry and cruelty. He embodies the characteristics of the French mind — a critical capacity, wit, and satire. He also represents the values and spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. Through thousands of poems, histories, satires, works of fiction, articles, essays and reviews he vigorously propagates an ideal of progress to which people of all nations have remained responsive. This enormous output and capacity influence the Enlightenment and European culture on many levels, but one particular contribution stands out; his devotion to the principles of tolerance and freedom of thought. To his steadfast devotion we all owe a note of gratitude.

According to his birth certificate he was born in Paris on November 21, 1694, but the hypothesis that his birth was kept secret cannot be dismissed, for he stated on several occasions that in fact it took place on February 20, 1694. (Either date yet makes 1994 the 300th anniversary of his birth.) He believed that he was the son of an officer named Rochebure, who was also a song writer. His mother died when he was 7 and having no love for his putative father or elder brother, he attached himself to his godfather, the Abbe deChateauneuf, a freethinker and epicurean who presented the boy to the famous courtesan Nion deLenclos. But it is doubtless that he owed his positive outlook and sense of reality to his bourgeois origins.

He attended the Jesuit college Louis-le-Grand in Paris, where he learned to love literature, the theater and social life, but religious instruction served only to arouse his skepticism and mockery. Deeply etched in his mind during this time was the distress and military disasters of 1709 and the horrors of religious persecution.

After leaving college he devoted himself wholly to literature and frequented the Temple, then the center of free-thinking society. He became the wit of Parisian society, but when he mocked the Duc d'Orleans he was banished from Paris and then imprisoned in the Bastille for nearly a year (1717). He would be beaten and imprisoned in the Bastille again over a quarrel with Chevalier deRohan in May 1726. His life would be lived out always under the threat of being arrested or banished,

and both occurred several times in his long life. At the end of 1758 he bought Fomey, a property on the Swiss border, which together with his property Tournay in France allowed him to safeguard himself against police incursion from either country.

The *Letters Philosophiques* (1734), a brilliant fruition of his philosophical ideas that boldly spoke out against the political and religious establishment was one incident that resulted in an arrest warrant. Taking refuge in the chateau of Mme.deChatelet at Cirey, he would begin his liaison with this young, remarkably intelligent woman. The life of the two was both luxurious and studious. Her passion for science and metaphysics would influence his work in that direction. Mme.deChatelet's love affair with the poet Saint-Lambert would bring their relationship to a tragic end. She died in childbirth in 1749. She was his guide and counselor for 15 years and in despair he returned to the house in Paris where they had lived together. He rose at night and wandered in the darkness calling her name.

Though few of Voltaire's writings are read today, the immense popularity of his works during his life made him one of the first authors who not only survived but prospered through his pen. It was after he published his first work, *Oedipe*, a tragedy, that he adopted his famed pen name Voltaire. His writings would take on many forms and styles, from his early attempts to be a French Virgil to the final discovery of a literary form that ideally suited his lively and disillusioned temper, *contes* (stories).

His greatest contribution to literature is *Candide*. In this philosophical fantasy, the youth Candide, disciple of Doctor Pangloss (himself a disciple of the philosophical optimism of Leibnez), saw and suffered such misfortune that he was unable to believe that this was "the best of all such possible worlds." Having retired with his companions he discovers the secret of happiness is "to cultivate the garden."

Voltaire cultivated many gardens, literature, theater, philosophy, in brief, humanity. He bequeathed a lesson to humanity that has lost nothing of its value. He taught people to think clearly; his mind at once precise and generous. He has left a great inheritance that I have only most briefly touched on. Will we claim it?

—ALEXANDER PATTIANI

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