

WAKE UP & SMELL THE BOOT POLISH

BY JOE URIS

Everyone knows what Old Time Fascism looks like: high-strutting, chin-jutting IL DUCE; flash, flags and order; Nazis at Nuremberg; sudden night raids — friends, neighbors, loved ones disappeared forever. Old Time Fascism: a rightwing totalitarian social order that exalts the state, takes over individual rights, and, together with the military/industrial complex, forms a one-party government that creates a mythic past and present designed to justify a vicious program of state terror and national expansion.

But consider New Age Fascism: modern, friendly, high-tech. Gone is the paraphernalia of Nazism. Unlabeled, Friendly New Age Fascism, full of nostalgia for a mythic small town America, is accepted, even loved, by an apathetic, confused and disillusioned public.

Unlike Old Time Fascism, today there is little resistance and no alternative — no Social Democrats, no Communists to block it. Friendly Fascism is almost in place, certainly on the way. It rarely shows its violent heart or oppressive nature. It does not need to seize power for we already have a political, economic and social system that offers two parties, but no choices.

Instead, we are served helpings of sensation instead of thought: a human interest story, perhaps of a child in pain, a tale of an evil Arab leader somewhere far away, a story of a gang killing just around the block, and a fast flash of some wide-eyed radical crazies killed by Glock competent cops.

New Age Friendly Fascism will use the domination and control of ideas, images and behavior that corporate wealth have had in place for years — advertising; the sound bite; news unreported or interpreted rather than presented; the fine-tuned reinterpretations of spin doctors; the growing confusion surrounding the ever more common practices of docudrama, infotainment and infomercials. These have already created both distrust of all information sources, and paradoxically, a belief in almost anything that is movingly presented. Patriotic nonsense and patently false information goes unchallenged by the press and most people.

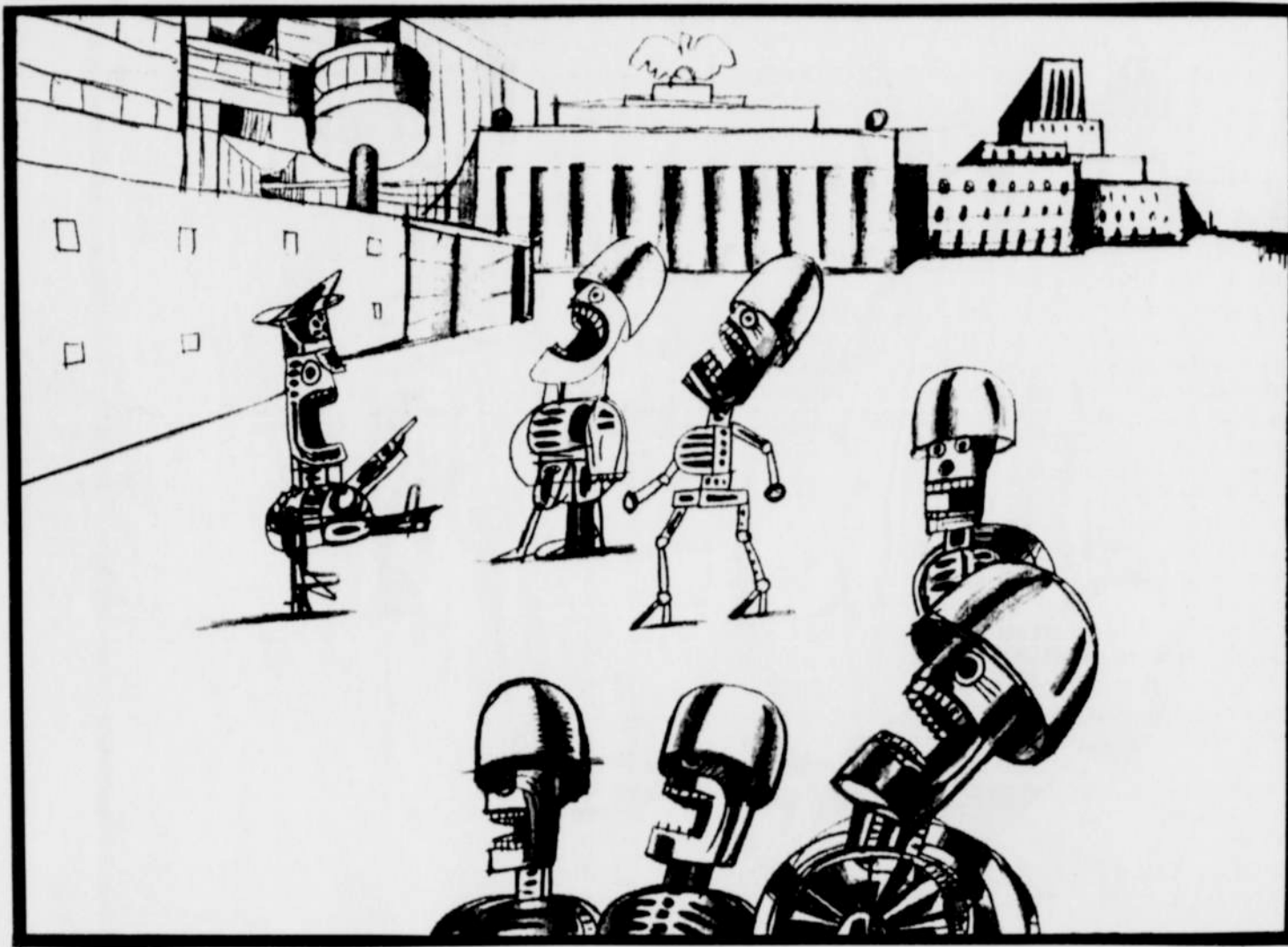
With the collapse of the totalitarian Soviet system, conservative ideology survives as the only legitimate belief. And what passes for the center today not so long ago was regarded as the right! Meanwhile the citizen is more important for her or his function as consumer and worker than as participant and creator. In a consumer-based system, the possibility of modern consensual fascism delivered through sensual imagery and the MTV moment seems quite reasonable.

And always, just in sight, but safely outside of most people's experience, the iron fist awaits. Even in the Nazi era, most Germans never had to feel the weight of government oppression.

Today, government response to resistance both on the Right and Left serve both as warnings and examples of the iron power of the state. Police spying, an old habit of government nationally and locally, continues. Police intelligence files turn up in the hands of private groups like the Anti-Defamation League and others. A local band of would-be anarchists only gets roughed up, busted and harassed rather than killed. But the greater the challenge, the greater the state response.

More direct provocations result in state sanctioned murder, not trial and punishment through protected due process.

Meanwhile the system grows rigid, closed and self-serving. Through time the state has encouraged ruling elites to gather wealth and power, handing it down to a favored few. This is as true under Capitalism as it was under Soviet statism. The domination of government and the economically powerful grows. And a consumer-based society, addicted to toys and pleasures, can be controlled just by withholding or increasing the toys, reducing or allowing more pleasures, raising or lowering the prices.



SAUL STEINBERG

In the past, the American Dream depended on military-industrial spending and an unending patriotic cold war against communism. With the collapse of the mythic enemy a crisis of purpose looms. To what source will the national ideology turn? And without a cold war, from where will the big buck jobs come?

Today, industry, seeking higher profits in third world markets, flees America for lower cost locations all over the world. The North American Trade Agreements (and the World Trade Organization) destroy still more industry.

Well-paying jobs grow scarce; the rich grow richer and more and more Americans are poorer. The government, because of staggering national debt and continuing conservative ideology cannot, or will not, create new and needed well-paying services such as high-speed rail, national health insurance and a better education system. The result is reduced competitiveness, lower standards or living, and growing ignorance.

Meanwhile resources dwindle, prices rise and environmental chaos threatens. As problems mount and no national consensus or improvement materializes, Americans become more cynical, either fighting each other over ever more scarce resources or demanding simple solutions.

Like Germany in the years between the wars, America will increasingly turn to the sort of scapegoating, victim blaming and nationalist neo-religious ideology that, in its most extreme form characterizes the beliefs of people like Timothy McVey and Lon Mabon.

How is the New World Order of post-Cold War America different than that of the world orders of past Fascisms except for the persistence of nominal notions of freedom and dissent? Nominal, that is, in name only, because no meaningful choices ever gain public attention unless they are at the same time discredited. Naive totalitarianism is sure to flourish when there is no informed discussion of ideas.

As the Right/Center consensus dominates public discourse in everything from advertising and politics to social policy and civil rights, the Liberal and Left communities grow more confused.

In the world of personal politics, for example, concern about the objectification of women and children as sex objects intensifies. But as good jobs disappear, as alienation grows, and anger reaches the flash point, real world violence grows as well.

The combination of violent images in the media and real violence at home and in the streets captures the attention of politicians and social critics. The New Puritans of the Christian Right and Dworkinist Left respond with rage. And here the government can respond. It is easy and costs nothing to wage war against the ugly images that free speech allows.

In the arts, both commercial and fine, the exaggerations that fear engenders increase pressure for a safe, meaningless middle path that cannot threaten or cause questioning. Guilt and repression feed hopelessness and desire for a quick cheap fix. And that fast fix waits in the wings, singing the siren song of control and order.

As in the time of Hitler, each of us hears a different message with similar themes: state control and personal guilt coupled with the comfort of certainty, and the armor of righteousness. When the center does not hold, fascism offers simple solutions. And fascism comes to us needing no change of government, no real change in the economy, only the calm acceptance of an ignorant and ever more anxious nation.

Were a Constitutional Convention held today the Bill of Rights would be revoked. So scared are most Americans that many would give up civil liberties hoping to defeat fear.

A SHORTFALL OF CANDOR

Long before she committed suicide Jean Seberg claimed the FBI had destroyed her film career by spreading false and malicious rumors about her because she supported the Black Panthers. The FBI denied it. Finally, a week after the actress overdosed on barbiturates, the FBI was forced to change its story and release documents that proved she told the truth all along.

The FBI decided to discredit her in 1970 because of her public support of the Panthers. Agents spread the rumor among Hollywood columnists that a Panther had made Seberg pregnant. By many accounts she never had much of a career (her major role was as *Saint Joan* in a film adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's play), but the planted rumor could not have helped. Hollywood had never recovered from the McCarthy era when it blacklisted its best writers and performers. And what the FBI did to Seberg it did to thousands of others.

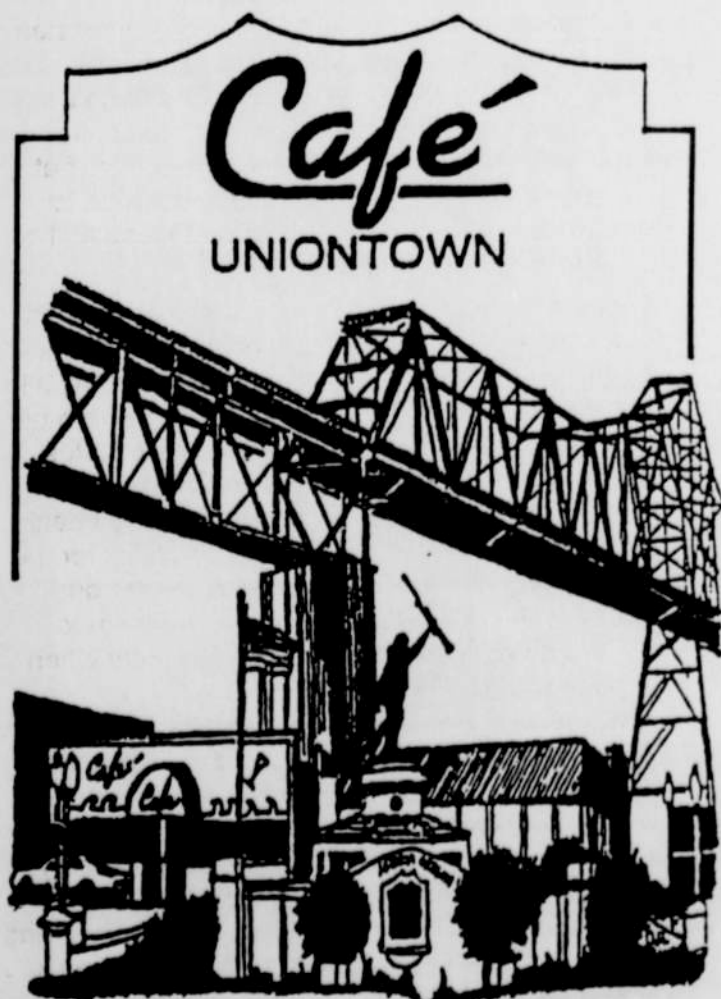
The FBI constantly broke the law in its mission to destroy any organization or any individual who practiced beliefs different than the standard beliefs. Its agents lied, slandered, broke into private homes, stole from, assaulted and even murdered American citizens.

After conceding that it had committed high crimes against Jean Seberg, the FBI insisted that the country take its word nothing of the sort will happen again.

Of course we will believe the FBI that it will reform itself, like we have countless times before. We have not yet been abused that one time too many, it seems. We will raise holy hell that our freedoms are being taken away when a city council wants to keep cars off the beach, but when it comes to opposing the powerful forces destroying our most vital rights and freedoms, we bow and scrape and allow them to deceive us again, to kick us again.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
(NCTE 9/14/1979)

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