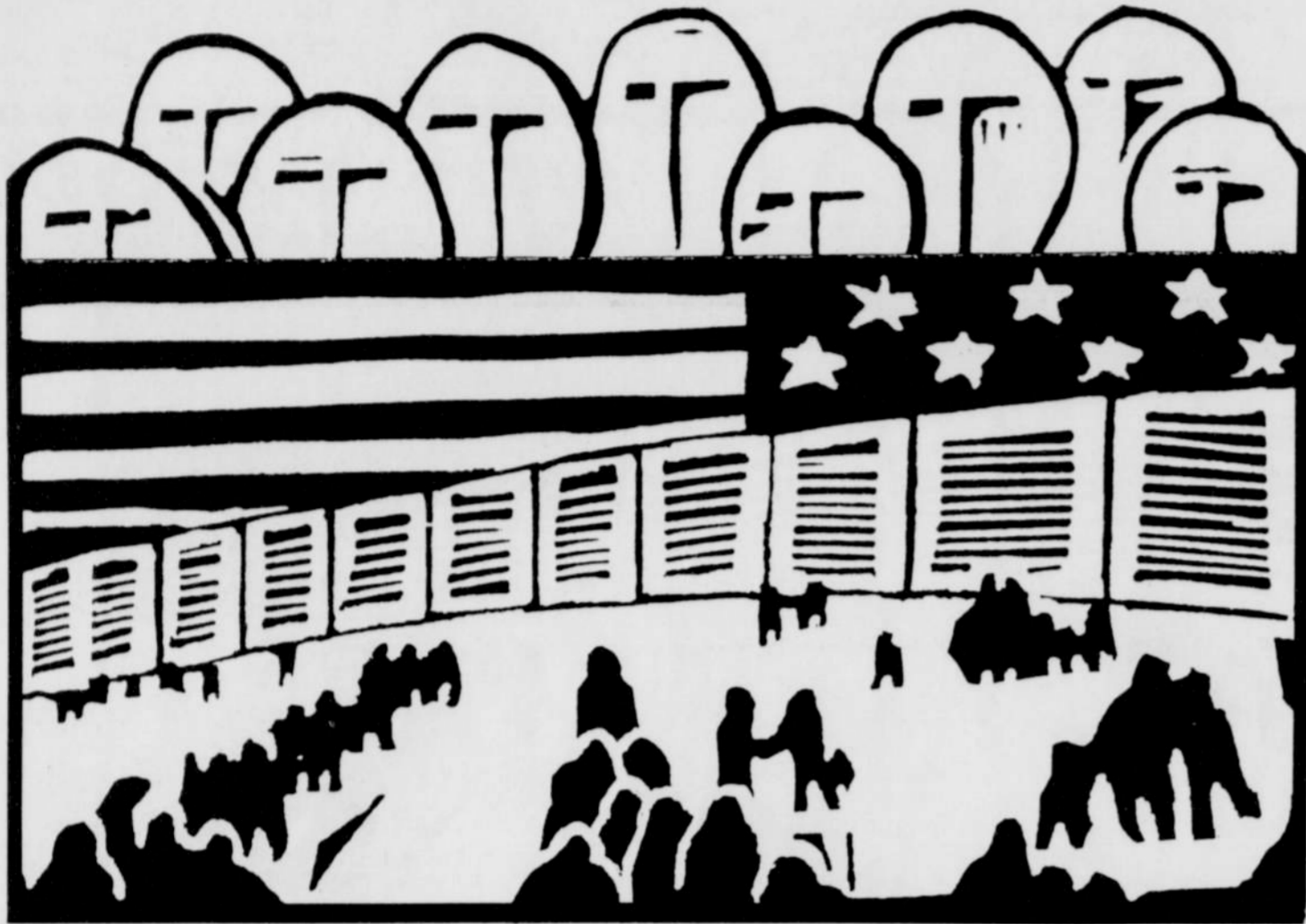


THE POLITICAL CLASS &



ANDY NELSON

BY DAVID A. HOROWITZ

Politics and governmental affairs were "of limited salience" to many Americans, wrote political scientist Stephen C. Craig in 1993, because the public believed it no longer could control or direct the system. Craig's pessimism was echoed by Clinton pollster Stanley Greenberg, who described a "dispirited, alienated, and fragmented" citizenry in an environment in which "nobody seems to be in charge, nobody can be trusted to do what they say, and nobody is in position to see the country through." By the last decade of the 20th century, social critics and social commentators like Christopher Lasch and Kevin Phillips were suggesting that the dysfunctional political system reflected the division of American society into two distinct and antagonistic factions. Beyond the reach of ordinary citizens and removed from the physical demands of the productive economy, a subculture of administrators, social service professionals, and academic consultants set public discourse and advised government leaders. Comprising a key element of a nationwide "guardian class," knowledge specialists and interest group advocates thrived upon an enhanced public sector. A progressive, rights-oriented philosophy and emancipatory cultural ideals further distanced the group from the majority of Americans. Lasch believed that conflict between the two groups amounted to "a form of class warfare" in national life.

"The heart of every complaint I hear about our government today," amateur politician Jesse Ventura observed in 1999, was the conviction that the political system was controlled by "comfortably ensconced people who are many levels removed from the working people of this country." Convinced that the political class devoted too much energy to "keeping itself in business," Ventura won an independent race for Minnesota's governorship in 1998 on the Reform Party ticket. Two years later, Republican senator John McCain of Arizona attracted the support of independents in an unsuccessful but widely publicized run for his party's Presidential nomination that called for sweeping campaign finance reform and attacked special political interests. Meanwhile, fellow Republican George W. Bush, son of the former President, squeezed out a bitterly contested Electoral College victory over Democrat Al Gore by insisting on less government and more trustworthy leaders. Once Islamic terrorists mounted deadly suicide attacks on New York City and the Pentagon in 2001, Bush dedicated his Presidency to the protection of citizens through increased homeland security and the deployment of U.S. military force in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Ventura, McCain and Bush each played upon suspicion of the guardians who comprised the nation's governing elites, social policy consultants and opinion molders. The sentiments expressed by these political figures had an extended history. Hostility to the socially committed knowledge and professional sector first had erupted in Wisconsin, the laboratory of Progressive reform and the state where university specialists initially assisted in the formation of public policy. During the 1920s, contention over the societal role of intellectuals helped to engender bitter debates between modern secularists and moral traditionalists. Both the Leopold-Loeb case and the Scopes Monkey trial provided ample grounds for discussing the place of scientific and cultural experts in defining society's mores. Discomfort over rapid social change and the perceived influence of intellectual elites helped to shape the impassioned rhetoric of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, whose leaders ostracized liberal opinion leaders as strangers to the American Way.

Impacted by enormous demands of the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt turned to a brains trust of academic and legal advisers after 1932. Yet by appearing to bypass the cumbersome legislative process and by concentrating policymaking in the White House, Roosevelt left his administration vulnerable to charges of undemocratic procedures. Criticism was particularly strong from representatives of small agriculture and independent business who sensed that the President's experts were ignorant of their problems, apathetic about their interests, and hostile to their needs. Anxiety over the role of executive branch consultants led to overstated charges of White House complicity in anticapitalist conspiracies or other attempts to redesign and restructure the political system. Nevertheless, suspicions about the use of applied intelligence continued to complicate the Roosevelt's administration's attempts to induce economic recovery and stabilize the country's institutions.

Once Roosevelt won reelection in a 1936 campaign in which the brains trust was a major issue, concerns over executive branch advisers and bureaucratic administrators contributed to a series of political crises that seriously marred the President's second term. Congress resisted White House reorganization, criticized the consumerist bias of Roosevelt economists, objected to the dominance of antibusiness attorneys affiliated with the National Labor Relations Board, demanded limits on the arbitrary power of executive agencies, worked to reduce the number of professional staffers in government bureaus, and sought to limit social experimentation in recovery programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps. Some critics of the New Deal went so far as to depict Washington's emerging political class as a haven for radical Jews.

The coming of World War 2 and the menace of foreign totalitarianism intensified concerns over the evolution of a permanent bureaucracy in Washington. Threatened by the executive branch's growing power, Congress mounted highly publicized investigations into the influence of academic and professional experts on domestic federal spending, social programs in the civil defense agencies, stateside propaganda activities, government price-fixing, and long-range economic and social welfare planning. Concern over the preservation of traditional economic virtues, democratic principles and their own political power led congressional leaders like Martin Dies, Jr. to undertake inquiries into the alleged radicalism of a number of academics employed by the Roosevelt administration. By 1945 a majority in Congress had rejected the New Deal's flirtation with collectivist social experiment and high-minded reform.

With the onset of the Cold War, the philosophy and behavior of government managers, policy experts and academic consultants came under increasing suspicion. Critics associated the intelligentsia with a communist movement that supposedly functioned as a strategic interest group for power-hungry knowledge elites impatient with democratic procedure. The postwar controversy over political intellectuals emerged full blown with questions concerning the character of New Deal manager David E. Lilienthal. A series of congressional inquiries into the alleged threat of Communist subversion intensified the growing chasm between New Class insiders and traditional power brokers in local politics and business. Distrust of cosmopolitan elites also shaped the House Un-American Activities Committee's investigations into the past conduct of the Hollywood Ten and Alger Hiss. Accusing President Harry Truman's State Department officials, high-ranking military officers, and foreign policy advisors of insufficient awareness of the Cold War's moral implications, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy mounted a populist attack on the administration's alleged toleration of domestic Communists. McCarthy's portrait of arrogant, privileged and unaccountable political academics received support when lengthy hearings by the McCarran committee led it to denounce the scholarly Owen D. Lattimore as a conscious instrument of the Communist conspiracy.

The debate over the security clearance of physicist and nuclear weapons consultant J. Robert Oppenheimer reintroduced doubts concerning the loyalty of intellectual elites to core national values during the Eisenhower era. Yet Republican occupation of the White House led to the demise of Joe McCarthy when the Wisconsin senator turned against the military establishment in the televised Army-McCarthy hearings. Meanwhile, congressional Republicans led an investigation into the alleged role of tax-exempt foundations and social science researchers in formulating collectivist government policies and influencing public education and social attitudes. In a period in which anticommunism appeared to incorporate deeply held anxieties over the intrusion of remote elites into daily existence, a series of grassroots campaigns focused on the unseen dangers of flouridated municipal water supplies.

The Cold War emphasized the extent to which the American public entertained profound suspicions concerning the cultural ideology of sociopolitical professionals and policymakers. The civil rights revolution of the 1960s shifted the grounds of such concern. By involving white professionals, intellectuals and social activists as strategic allies, the crusade for racial justice intensified anxieties over the role of federal administrators and regulators in using state coercion to erase human distinctions. Threats of depersonalization and powerlessness became a major focus of George C. Wallace's Presidential primary campaign of 1964. In the general election, Republican Barry Goldwater charged that forgotten and silent Americans had been eclipsed by powerful social interest groups aligned to Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. Johnson's War on Poverty elicited fears among local politicians that administrators were building their own power bases in local communities by colonizing the poor and selecting favored clients for lucrative patronage awards. Accusing the Great Society of double standards of racial justice, governors Ronald Reagan and George Wallace tied a culturally permissive liberal elite to the social disruptions, crime and street violence of the 1960s underclass. Such themes became the focal point for Richard M. Nixon's campaign for the Presidency in 1968.

Despite Nixon's coolness to social programs, the new administration endorsed a controversial affirmative action plan in the construction industry bitterly opposed by organized labor. Yet the Republican President also courted working class support for the Vietnam War and opposition to would-be members of the professional classes in the student New Left and peace movement. Expropriating themes from Goldwater, Reagan and Wallace, the Nixon White House denounced campus dissidents as a radical elite whose cultural values defied basic decency and common sense. Nixon's hatred for perceived allies of the antiwar movement contributed to his fatal involvement in Watergate-related attacks on the Liberal Establishment. When Jimmy Carter rode a reform tide to the Presidency in 1976, opponents effectively fused condemnations of special interests and opposition to progressive social values into a creed of populist conservatism that helped bring the Carter administration to its political knees.

During the 1980s Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush built powerful electoral coalitions on the demonization of big government and on public impatience with the nation's New Class guardians and political interventionists. Once Bill Clinton won the White House, he and his wife Hillary became the target of critics who saw post-World War 2 baby-boomers as politically unreliable and tainted by cultural deviance. Although Clinton's affirmative action policies and interventionist health care proposals strengthened such sentiment, America's controversy with the guardian class appeared to peak at century's end with the culturally infused debate over the White House sex scandal and the subsequent impeachment of the President.

Originating in a variety of ideological perspectives across the 20th century, the response to America's political class and social guardians has contained enormous contradictions. During the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan and other social conservatives charged that academic intellectuals were exerting an excessively liberal influence over the nation's cultural agenda and social morality. Yet Republican populists from rural states simultaneously denounced scholarly specialists who used their expertise to deliver pro-Wall Street testimony before congressional committees. When the Great Depression led to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the Democratic White House relied on market-oriented economic advisers who sought to



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