

You won't see the funny side until much later.

This is amusing but unpersuasive. Poetry is not analogous to an announcement on a public address system. Its meaning extends beyond the whereabouts of luggage. Poetry that also happens to be difficult—Eliot's own poetry is a good example—*must* communicate before it is understood: Not, perhaps, most of its meaning, but enough to prompt the reader to reread, attend more closely, delve more deeply. Understanding, like the knowledge it attempts to acquire, is a matter of degrees. If the meaning of poetry could be communicated only *after* it was understood, our aesthetic experience should be radically impoverished. After all, not knowing a thing, finding it mystifying, is often as much a part of understanding as knowing a thing. We know that we do not know. But this is a quibble.

Raine is more frequently right than wrong. He is right to see that what the postmodernist academy finds most objectionable about Eliot is the “fundamental polarity” he proposes between “a theological view of the world, in which every action is significant and carries moral consequence, and a humanist view of the world, in which every action is drained of significance because there is neither salvation nor damnation, neither a heaven nor a hell, only moral opinion.”

Elsewhere he says, accurately enough: “I think Eliot writes acutely about sex—in all its variety. He does acute justice to the variety of its disappointments.” There is no more honest catalogue of the sorrows of sex than “The Waste Land.” In another passage, he says that “Eliot's religious writings demonstrate the angularity and awkwardness, the unbiddable intransigence of sincere belief.” This is true; there was nothing of the Vicar of Bray in Eliot. As his *Selected Essays* (1951) show, he enjoyed going against the grain.

In excavating the buried life of T.S. Eliot's art, Raine uncovers the unfamiliar compound ghost of genius. He has written a book that all Eliot fans and all Eliot foes will want to read. ♦



Red Alert

A Blue journalist misunderstands America.

BY GERARD ALEXANDER

Thomas Edsall admires conservatives the way some gourmets admire McDonald's: He respects how efficiently they do it even while hating what they do.

Edsall, a longtime *Washington Post* political reporter now at the *New Republic* and the Columbia Journalism School, has produced his latest in a series of books chronicling the rise of the modern conservative movement. As with any such lengthy engagement

with one subject, the book holds a mirror up to the artist as well, in this case to a political culture pervasive in contemporary liberalism. Edsall argues that the GOP has become America's predominant party in part by benefiting from key structural changes to our economy and society, but also by crafting a coalition that is internally cohesive, technically proficient, and able to keep political debate organized around issues that unite conservatives and divide liberals.

So even when Republicans lose, as they did last November, Edsall expects them to rebound. Not for nothing do other liberals consider Edsall a pessimist.

But animosity clouds his analysis. He comes to three striking conclusions that do not withstand scrutiny. He claims that conservatives have won partly because they are highly regimented, that today's Republican coalition is best understood as a bundle of prejudices, and that Republicans play

dirtier than Democrats. He also claims, more interestingly, that greater freedom for market forces has favored Republicans and that Democratic leaders are too culturally liberal to play in the heartland. But these are lost in what amount to gross misportrayals of left/right politics in America.

The notion that conservatism's resurgence resulted from a top-down, highly coordinated strategy has become pervasive among liberals, who have responded by trying to create a coordi-

nated political “infrastructure” of their own and to centralize the funding of progressive groups through organizations like the Democracy Alliance. Reflecting this thinking, Edsall says that conservatives have created a “highly coordinated network of individuals and organizations—with a shared stake in a strong, centralized political machine” and even a “system,” in the singular.

This suggests, for example, that conservatives efficiently divvied up America's different sectors or electorates—gun-owners, antiabortion activists, tax cutters, and so on—and created an organization to mobilize each one. This is an explanation of modern conservatism that only a New Dealer could love.

To be sure, coordination can add value in politics, especially at the tactical level. But the historical record suggests that conservatism hasn't even been a house of many rooms; it's been a village of squabbling neighbors. This wasn't because no one had a plan for building a robust conservative movement, but because too many people had divergent plans. The result was

Building Red America
The New Conservative Coalition and the Drive for Permanent Power
by Thomas B. Edsall
Basic Books, 320 pp., \$26

Gerard Alexander is associate professor of politics at the University of Virginia and a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.



Syama / Corbis / J.P. Laffont

'Explo 72,' Dallas, 1972

fractiousness and competition. Rival groups pursued distinct domestic and foreign policy agendas, disagreed over strategies, competed for donors, jealously guarded mailing lists, erupted in personality clashes, and found their voices in diverse and bickering center-right magazines and columnists.

Moreover, and despite Grover Norquist's celebrated claim that diverse conservative goals are mutually compatible, different groups' agendas have often proven directly competing and sometimes mutually exclusive. That's why conservative activists in even single-issue areas like abortion or national security formed dozens of competing organizations. Any tight division of labor that we might detect in retrospect is largely an illusion.

In fact, it's illusory even now, since competition is ongoing. Just ask James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Gary Bauer's American Values, the National Evangelical Association, the Eagle Forum, the Family Research Council, the National Right to Life Committee, Concerned Women for America, the American Family Association, and the Southern Baptist Convention—and that's just Christian conservative organizations at the national level. For just such reasons, David Brooks has argued that conservatism's house is divided but stronger for it. All this makes ironic Edsall's lament that the Democratic party "is really a bunch of competitive interests."

So what glue holds together the Republican coalition? Edsall draws on a long line of political commentary

and academic research to portray modern American conservatism as a bundle of prejudices and dislikes against minorities and the poor. Foremost, he argues that conservatism is in many ways the heir to George Wallace's electoral base and policy agenda. Conservatives are also reacting against women's liberation. The combination leads Edsall to say succinctly that conservatives aim at "unraveling or reversing the rights revolutions of the 1960s." The Republican party is also where the economically dominant reside, and Edsall notes conservatives' "contempt for the weak." So Republicans are the party of the social, economic, and racial haves, fending off and even exploiting diverse have-nots.

The problems with this interpretation are legion. Historically, Republicans became a competitive and then dominant party in presidential politics by winning "peripheral" southern states like Texas and Florida where racial politics loomed far smaller than in the Deep South. And they did so by attracting votes first, most, and most durably in the South among the more educated, affluent, and urban and suburban voters who formed the GOP's base elsewhere in the country.

That is not Wallaceism. Even less racist are major Republican initiatives to attract Hispanics, and overwhelming support among average Republican voters in 2006 for black candidates like Michael Steele, Kenneth Blackwell, and Lynn Swann. As for Edsall's claim that, even now, conservatives want to

reverse the civil rights movement, George Will says, "Please. Who favors rolling back guarantees of voting rights and equal access to public accommodations?" By the same standard, women hold leadership and staff positions throughout the conservative movement. In Edsall's accusations, we are in the realm of either fantasy or demagoguery.

But there's a deeper problem with his analysis. By portraying conservatives the way he does, Edsall is saying that members of the conservative coalition are motivated by narrow self-interest. Whites, males, straights, and the economically comfortable are simply out for themselves, often seeking gains at the expense of others. That's why conservatives oppose affirmative action and gay marriage, are tough on crime, and want to cut taxes and slash welfare. But it is important that Edsall barely discusses foreign policy, which he acknowledges he hasn't covered as a reporter.

Throughout the Cold War, and especially after Vietnam, strong anti-communism and interventionism were distinguishing conservative characteristics. Conservatives and liberals may have clashed on national security policies, but surely these were disagreements about what was in the public interest. This matters because, if we acknowledge the possibility that conservatives had public interests in mind when it came to foreign policy, we risk the parallel possibility that they also supported deregulation, tax cuts, welfare reform, and toughness on crime

for publicly interested reasons. It is astonishing and sobering to think that, after all these years, conservatives still need to make the case to people like Thomas Edsall that liberals do not have a monopoly on seeking the common good.

This makes it all the more striking that Edsall also explains conservative success in terms of Republicans' greater political ruthlessness. He describes Democrats as "less aggressive" and approvingly quotes a Democrat saying that "Liberals by their very nature don't get as angry as conservatives do." Apparently, Republicans were tougher than Democrats during the 2000 Florida recount, regularly "Swift boat" their opponents, and turn out their own base voters by carefully researching their "anger points" and then cynically polarizing national politics.

It takes a special kind of cocoon to believe that any party has a monopoly on power-seeking ends and shifty means. In this case, that cocoon involves not associating the Daily Kos's huge audience with pervasive anger on the left, never mentioning brutal Democratic electioneering tactics, and not recognizing that Democrats routinely mobilize base voters with scare tactics such as Al Gore's election-eve charge in 2000 that George Bush might appoint Supreme Court justices who see African Americans as three-fifths of a human being.

Edsall doesn't seem to realize that to say that only Republicans talk relentlessly from talking points is a relentlessly repeated Democratic talking point. To accuse conservatives of being distinctively motivated by anger and prejudice is, itself, an expression of anger and prejudice. This is one of those rare arguments that, in the course of being made, disproves itself. At most, Edsall concedes that Democrats have been forced to toughen up by Republican practices. Perhaps the implication is that Terry McAuliffe and Chuck Schumer were soft touches before Lee Atwater and Karl Rove smacked them around.

Once upon a time, it took reality to mug a liberal. Now all it takes is a few Republican campaign consultants. ♦



Evil's Autopsy

A philosopher looks back at the 20th-century utopias.

BY PAUL HOLLANDER

Leszek Kolakowski is probably best known outside his native Poland for his three-volume history of Marxism (*Main Currents of Marxism*), first published in 1978 in English and in a one-volume edition two years ago. He left Poland in 1968, following his expulsion from the Communist party and the banning of his publications. Subsequently, he taught at various distinguished American, British, and Canadian universities and was a senior research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, between 1970 and his retirement in 1995.

This carefully edited volume offers an excellent and representative sampling of Kolakowski's writings spanning his entire career. They address and illuminate virtually every major historical, philosophical, and political problem and polemic of the past century, as well as some of the endemic dilemmas of the human condition. It is dense with wisdom and insight, and although several of the essays touch on Communist systems—especially their theoretical inspiration and foundation—their demise (or transformation) does not diminish the relevance of these essays.

Kolakowski's subjects include evil in history and human nature, the perils of the pursuit of utopia, the (still poorly understood) nature of totalitarianism, the differences and similarities between Nazism and communism, the

relationship between Marxism and Communist (or state socialist) systems, genocide and its justifications, the problems of modernity and secularization, moral relativism and the religious roots of morality.

This volume will certainly help to settle the contentious issue of the relationship between Marxism and the political systems it had inspired and influenced, if not determined. Following the collapse of Soviet com-

munist, an increasing number of Western intellectuals claimed that Marxism could not be held responsible for the failings of the Soviet Union (and similar systems) since the rulers of Communist states made no attempt to implement Marxism but merely used it as a legitimating device, a smokescreen. Far fewer argued that it was the very attempt to realize the unrealizable ideals of Marxism that finally led to the moral, material, and political crisis and collapse of these systems.

There was, indeed, a close connection between Marxist theories and ideals and the nature of "actually existing" Communist systems, even if Karl Marx could not have anticipated what part his ideas would play in the creation of political-social arrangements and policies which probably would not have pleased him. We may debate the precise nature of this connection, but its existence can hardly be disputed. Kolakowski rightly believes that the attempts to implement the basic values of Marxism generated repressive political organizations—or more generally, that Marxist theory implied consequences that

My Correct Views on Everything

by Leszek Kolakowski
St. Augustine's, 284 pp., \$32

Paul Hollander is the author, most recently, of The End of Commitment: Intellectuals, Revolutionaries, and Political Morality in the Twentieth Century.