

CLVII – Whither the Remnant?

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By Butler Shaffer

You do not know and will never know who the Remnant are, or where they are, or how many of them there are, or what they are doing or will do. Two things you know, and no more: first, that they exist; second, that they will find you.

~ Albert Jay Nock

Decades ago, when I first read Nock's essay about the Remnant — an essay written in 1936 — I dismissed it as a form of millenarian thinking. But as Western civilization reveals its weakened foundations in the form of rapidly expanded state violence, his words have become more relevant. An obscure, unorganized, [and] inarticulate group of individuals, the Remnant, said Nock, need to be supported because when everything has gone completely to the dogs, they are the ones who will come back and build up a new society.

Our modern world is grounded in the illusion that social order can only be maintained through institutionally-structured, vertically-imposed regulatory systems. But the pyramidal hierarchies to which we have been trained to look for such management are in a state of decline. The vertical is collapsing into the horizontal, and the political establishment is fighting for its very existence by intensifying the use of the methodology that defines its nature: the use of violence.

Political systems do not like to resort to any more coercive practices than are necessary to sustain their power over people. Threats and the exercise of force are the resources upon which the state depends, and — like the wealth that private persons spend in conducting their peaceful, marketplace transactions — political authorities are not inclined to waste their usage. But when state power is no longer respected; when men and women engage in basic social practices outside the supervision of the state; and when all of politics comes to be seen as nothing more than an elaborate self-serving racket benefiting those who control the machinery of the state, the herd must be shepherded back to its appointed confinements.

If the public is to be kept obedient, it must be kept in a constant state of fear. Frightened people huddle together and look to those they regard as more capable than themselves for protection. This explains why, in the words of Randolph Bourne, war is the health of the state.

As we see in modern events, such thinking — and the practices it produces — has torn our world apart. America — in its traditional forms — is in its death throes, and no amount of institutional wizardry, halftime pep talks, or magic elixirs, will reverse the present course. As with the decline of prior civilizations, however, our future is not necessarily a bleak one. Humanity is now confronted with the choice of whether society is to continue being thought of in terms of institutionalized interests, or is to reflect the varied and spontaneous relationships that emerge from the interactions of free men and women?

The apparatchiks will continue to squeeze whatever short-term benefits they can from their system's collapse. The elected politicians — whose time frame extends no further than the next election, and whose sense of the general welfare is bounded by the interests of their corporate sponsors — will, as the Democratic sweep into power in 2006 demonstrates, avail nothing. In Nock's words, "the official class and their intelligentsia . . . will keep on in their own ways until they carry everything down to destruction."

Nor am I persuaded that there has been any fundamental transformation in the thinking of most Americans. The disaffection most have with the war, I suspect, has to do with the sense of embarrassment with how the war is being conducted, not with that it was undertaken in the first place. A colleague of mine opined, a couple months ago, that it "would be nice if the United States could get out of Iraq without too much egg on its face." To his shock, I replied that the United States needs to experience as much "egg on its face" as possible. Since those who orchestrated, directed, and cheered on this criminal act will never be held to account for their wrongdoing in any meaningful way, they ought to at least suffer public humiliation for their behavior. To fail to see the moral implications of what America has become; to regard the deaths of over one million innocent Iraqis — if one includes the half-million children who died from earlier U.S. embargoes on food and medicine — as nothing more than a failure of "intelligence" or "poor planning" or "mismanagement," is symptomatic of the moral and spiritual pathology of a once-great nation.

Neither am I impressed by those who try to balance their sense of political pride and moral propriety by placing bumper-stickers on their flag-adorned cars that read "peace is patriotic." Peace is not patriotic! Peace transcends patriotism. According to one dictionary, a "patriot" is "a person who loves his country and defends and promotes its interests." So considered, patriotism is inherently divisive, and division is the soil from which conflict arises. Against whom is a patriot to "defend and promote" the "interests" of "his country"? Is it not the patriots of other countries against whom he will take action? And who will determine the identity of these other countries and beat the drums for "defense"?

Peace is indivisible. One can no more live in peace with his neighbors on a selective basis than he can allocate degrees of love for his children. One either learns how to live without conflict and division, or is destined to the normally-neurotic life of constant contradiction. But to live in perpetual ambiguity proves costly to the human soul, which seeks integrity and wholeness.

Like my aforementioned colleague, many Americans have become embarrassed by the war in Iraq, but not out of any awakening as to its immoral nature. It is a highly personal matter, arising from identifying one's very sense of being with a nation-state that employs lies, forgeries, and other deceptive practices in the continuing slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people; which uses torture as a routine practice not so much to gain information as to gratify sadistic dispositions; and denies trials to persons held, for years, on what amounts to suspicion of being suspicious.

Such behavior runs counter to how most of us regard our individual character. We do not behave in such ways even with total strangers. The idea of subjecting our neighbor to torture because his dog made a mess in our yard; or bombing a restaurant because the Bernaise sauce was not to our liking; would strike us as madness. And yet, when the state with which we identify ourselves does similar things, we grab our flags and cheer.

While the mainstream media has performed its appointed function of rationalizing such contradictions, the Internet has been a constant revealer of the lies upon which the foundations of political structures rest. It becomes increasingly difficult for people to reconcile such contrarities but, instead of confronting them directly, most settle for new explanations, alternative policies, or new political leadership. Such is the explanation not only for the Democratic party victories last fall, but for Congress' current paralysis in dealing with the war against Iraq.

Many people tell me that there has been a major turn-around in thinking in this country. I am sorry, but I don't see it. I think most Americans have grown weary of the war, but not of the kind of thinking that produced it. Too many see the Iraq war not as a moral wrong, but as a waste of money that could be better spent on health care, global warming, or government schools. Such thinking assesses the war in a cost-benefit manner, with diminishing returns from the slaughter of innocents dictating a different allocation of state resources. Should another terrorist attack occur in America, however, the herd will once again become mobilized into the frenzy from which it now seeks momentary rest.

Nock's desire to protect the Remnant had nothing to do with extricating mass-minded people (H.L. Mencken's booboisie) from the adverse consequences of their unfocused living. He knew that the political parties would continue to keep the morons in a state of dependency — such is the nature of their symbiotic relationship. Nock was concerned, however, with protecting that minority of persons — the Remnant — whose efforts provide the creative culture and material prosperity of great civilizations.

Within the Remnant are to be found the entrepreneurs, artists, and others who insist upon staying outside the marauding herd that moves only in response to external stimuli; the independent and principled souls who, in any setting, distinguish fact from fashion; the kinds of self-directed, internally-centered, and loving persons Viktor Frankl noted as having a comparative advantage for survival in concentration camps. The Hank Reardens and Howard Roarks of Rand's novels, along with Sophie Scholl and her fellow members of The White Rose in Nazi Germany, also come to mind. So do the 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters along with the young man, Wang Wei Lin, who bravely confronted that row of tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

One who has recently gained attention for his efforts on behalf of the Remnant is Republican Congressman Ron Paul. He has proven himself to be that rare kind of politician who seeks to drain the life-suffocating stagnant pool that nourishes only the looters and scavengers who gather to feed upon the productive people who make a vibrant and decent society possible. It is no coincidence that Ron is a man whose professional career, as an obstetrician, involves delivering new life to the world. He is both a member of and advocate for the Remnant, expressing the integrated qualities that sustain life. It is no surprise that he is regarded as a threat to the continued existence of a political system that feeds on life.

Hopefully, the Remnant will include our children and grandchildren. What are the conditions under which they will be able to rebuild a society that our generation — which egoistically likes to refer to itself as the greatest generation — helped to destroy? One of my favorite quotations in this regard comes from a person whose identity I do not recall: A man has a moral duty to not allow his children to live under tyranny. These words provide a good starting point.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

