

# The end of the rugged individualists?

London's Sunday Times is hardly a pipsqueak newspaper. Yet on May 29, as President Clinton was about to depart for the Normandy beaches in hopes of restoring his shabby military reputation, the paper ran the headline: "DEAD HERO'S FATHER TEARS INTO CLINTON."

For the president had chosen that moment to award America's first post-Vietnam Congressional Medals of Honor to the families of two Americans who died bravely rescuing a downed helicopter pilot in Somalia: Sergeants Gordon and Shughart. After a moment of "quiet reflection" with the two families in the Oval Office, wrote James Adams, Mr. Clinton approached Herbert Shughart, father of one of the two soldiers, and offered his hand. It was declined.

"You are not fit to be president of the United States," said Mr. Shughart. "The blame for my son's death rests with the White House and with you. You are not fit to command."

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At what was described as a "highly charged emotional moment," the president, never at a loss for words, launched into an attempt to convince the Shughart family that Sergeant Shughart's death and the calamitous end of the Somalia venture were not his fault. The Shugharts were not convinced.



**Richard Grenier**

Now the curious part of this story is not that a hero's father "tore into" a U.S. president, nor that he told him he wasn't fit to command, but that the story appeared absolutely nowhere in the United States. It wasn't even filed by America's London correspondents, a whopping share of whose dispatches — as with all foreign correspondents — is devoted to mere America-connected stories.

I must stress that a conspiratorial meeting is not likely to have taken place of the directors of America's major news organiza-

tions in some secret Manhattan basement. On the other hand, I find it impossible to believe the story didn't reach at least some of them. Why didn't they run it? With the constant drum roll of stories about Mr. Clinton's relations with the military, and about his capacities as commander in chief, editors could hardly claim their readers or viewers wouldn't be interested. The answer can only be that they felt such a story wouldn't be "fitting" on the eve of such a solemn, patriotic occasion. And the most remarkable thing of all was that, thinking independently, of course, they all came to the same conclusion.

Britain's Lord Beloff, an independent Liberal and eminent professor of government at Oxford (one of the many such Oxford professors from whom Bill Clinton appears to have learned nothing), wrote recently that an astonishing thing about America's intellectual class has been its extraordinary conformism — quite without equivalent in any European country. "The tendency toward a uniformity of attitudes long observed in American society," wrote Lord Beloff, "remains particularly true of its intellectual class." When a notion takes hold in Ameri-

ca, virtually every person considering himself an independent thinker suddenly agrees with it as if afraid of being left out — a style of behavior quite at odds with the image of America as the land of freedom and individualism.

In the June issue of *Commentary*, another distinguished professor, Peter Berger, raises this question to ominous proportions, writing that Americans have always been prone not only to conformism but to "hysterical campaigns of moral mobilization." He ties the latest wave of conformism, the current prodigiously successful campaign against smoking, to the decisive coming to power of the "New Class," now called by many the "knowledge class." Conventional analytic babble has it that "baby boomers" have now captured the presidency. But those in power today are only one specific segment of the baby-boomer generation.

And even with this New Class in the White House, why are the sometimes more numerous losers cowering? Why don't they fight back? Why do smokers, expelled from an office building, huddle ashamedly outside amid the sneers of passers-by? Why do white males meekly

accept denials of employment and promotion as members of an unjustly privileged class? Why do men stumble awkwardly through feminist syntax to demonstrate their penitent renunciation of male chauvinism? Why do parents listen respectfully to the gibberish of modish but ignorant teachers who

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are miseducating their children?

When all these campaigns started out, there were confident predictions of a great backlash. Surely people would not put up with this. But they do. Flurries of resistance occur here and there, but those bent on reconstructing America in the image of the new virtue, and who've established the norms for respectability and the new conformity, have been moving steadily

ahead — endorsed by the intellectual elite, the courts, and increasingly by government at all levels. And propagated by the schools and, of course, the media.

One explanation — and this is not new — is that the "individualism" of the American national character has been overblown and mythologized from the very start and has often been accompanied by a strong conformism, frequently by an urge to seek shelter in groups. In the 1920s, Americans were castigated for being "joiners": Elks, Kiwanis, Masons, Shriners. And multiculturalism, and even the printing one sees today on T shirts announcing the wearer's affiliation to some cause, school, place, or football team, seem a replication of this same phenomenon.

Professor Berger takes a somber view: "timid joiners, petulant victims, self-denigrating conformists. Can these people be Americans?" The answer, he says, is that such people, alas, provide "a frighteningly accurate picture of what this country has already become, and an even more frightening harbinger of its future."

This is surely one of the most pessimistic predictions for the American future I've ever encountered. If it comes to pass, the omission of a few interesting stories from newspapers will seem very minor indeed.