

Russell, Pacifism, Fascism etc

Mon, 13 Oct 1997 14:10:36

After a mere two days away from my computer, I come back to twenty-five (!) long and impassioned messages on the general topics of Russell, pacifism and fascism. I have a comment and a query.

IS THE US A FASCIST STATE?

I know that the peacemaker tends to get into trouble with both sides in disputes like this, but I would like to suggest a compromise position that G-M, N-N, R-M, L-G, M-B and even Oliver Kamm may be able to agree to.

If you define fascism in such a way that the US counts as a fascist state, you are forced to subdivide fascism into a number of different variants in order to distinguish between the Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the smiley-faced fascism that supposedly prevails in the Whitehouse and on Capitol Hill. You are also forced to say that fascism is compatible with a wide range of liberal freedoms, with institutions of representative democracy, with a free (if plutocratically controlled and conformist) press, with the existence of genuine opposition parties (even if the chief opposition party only differs from the government over just how inhumane the human face of capitalism ought to be) and with the existence of an elaborate system of checks and balances designed to prevent the dictatorship of an individual or a clique. You are forced to say that fascism is compatible with a system which has driven at least one Chief Executive from office because he violated the fundamental laws of the land. And you are forced to say that people like Russell who supported WWII (however reluctantly) because it was an anti-fascist struggle, were deluded since what was really being fought for was a more humane variant of fascism. (A particularly bizarre thing to say in Russell's case since he, of all, people had ample experience of the darker side of American 'democracy'.) In other words, you are forced to say a lot of wildly implausible things and to create a new vocabulary to express the distinctions that you obliterated by making 'fascism' into too much of a blanket term. For these reasons, I think it is a mistake to define fascism in

such a way the US comes out as a fascist state. So far then, I think R-M, L-G, J-D, M-B and Oliver Kamm are in the right.

But denying that the US is a fascist state is quite compatible with taking a very dim view of American Society and the US government. So strongly do I disapprove of American policies both foreign and domestic that I have never sought permanent employment [or indeed any employment] in the United States. I did not and do not wish to be part that particular national enterprise nor do I think I could be happy in a country where my prevailing mood would be one of political indignation. Specifically, I think that the USA is a corrupt democracy in which the forms of representative government disguise a de facto plutocracy. More to the point, I think:

- 1) That there is a fascistic strain in the political culture of the United States. Some leading public servants (eg. Oliver North) can fairly be described as fascists and the lenient treatment that Oliver North received once his criminal misdeeds became known indicates that large sections of the American public have no real understanding of or loyalty to liberal or democratic values.
- 2) That some domestic *policies* of the United States Government smack of fascism or at least of an illiberal and anti-democratic authoritarianism (eg. the FBI's COINTELPRO program under Hoover).
- 3) That in the international sphere, successive US governments have given aid and comfort to fascistic regimes and groups, indeed regimes and groups which make the original Italian Fascists look like pussycats by comparison. I would cite (among others) the Pinochet regime and the Argentinian Junta which fought the 'Dirty War'. I don't believe that Mussolini's henchmen tortured and raped their victims, stole the resulting children and then used the Air Force to dispose of the (sometimes still living) bodies by dropping them in the ocean. Galtieri's boys did just that.

Now claims 1), 2) and 3) are quite compatible with the thesis that the USA is NOT a fascist country, though taken together they do point to dangerous fascistic tendencies within American society and government. But I suspect that when N-N and G-M *call* the US a fascist country (smiley-faced or otherwise) this is a shorthand for claims 1), 2) and 3) (or at least for something like them). But if that is what they mean, I suspect that many, if not most of their opponents would agree with them. Thus the dispute is a dispute about words and not about facts. So my compromise solution is this: G-M and N-N give up their excessively inclusive definition of fascism and R-M, J-D et al admit that there might be something in claims 1), 2) and 3).

[Material on a distinct but related topic is omitted]

Russell, Pacifism, Fascism etc

Thu, 16 Oct 1997 12:50:37

Dear Oliver,

You take issue with my claim that 'the USA is a corrupt democracy in which the forms of representative government disguise a de facto plutocracy'. Your complaint as I understand it is that this is both false and unfalsifiable. I think that it is neither. Let us take the charge of corruption first. What I mean by this is that democratic institutions no longer serve to express the will of the people. Only about half of the population votes (presumably because they do not like the options on offer) and many eligible voters are not even registered. This means that a party can command a majority in Congress even though only 25% of the population actively supports its policies. A healthy democracy requires a higher level of popular participation than that. (This reminds me of the famous rap number on the Reagan Presidency which begins: "The first thing I want to say is "Mandate - my ass!") So show me a 75% turn-out at the next election and I will be strongly inclined to withdraw my claim. I say 'strongly inclined' to withdraw since there are other ways in which a democracy can become corrupt. For example, if it becomes the norm for political parties to break their election promises, then the voters never know what they are voting for and no party,

even if it commands a majority of votes, can be said to have a mandate. (In New Zealand we are approaching this condition since three successive ruling parties have broken their promises and implemented policies substantially at odds with those they argued for during the election.) Of course, a democracy could be corrupt in the kinds of ways I have in mind without necessarily being plutocratic. But the vast sums of money needed to conduct a successful campaign in the US mean that power is largely confined to those who have money themselves or to those who can persuade the people who *do* have money to give it to them - something it is not easy to do if you advocate a substantial redistribution of wealth. (Of course, a poor people's candidate could theoretically match the spending of the rich people's candidate if he could persuade enough widows to give their mites, but in practice this is difficult to organize.) If I am not mistaken, most members of Congress are rich, many of them millionaires (or at least asset-millionaires) and even the Democrats would regard policies that are commonplace in Western Europe and the Antipodes (such as a free National Health system financed out of general taxation) as hopelessly socialistic. Thus the processes of American democracy, the policies pursued and the personnel who man the institutions suggest that it is a *de facto* plutocracy. What would be required to falsify this claim? Well, I would have to be wrong about the processes, the policies or the personnel. If you could assure me that a candidate for Congress is not allowed to spend more than \$20,000 during the campaign - which is the case in New Zealand - then this would go a long way towards falsifying my conjecture. If you could demonstrate that the tendency of legislation over the last twenty years has been to shift resources from the rich to the poor, then this too would strongly suggest that I am wrong. If you could show me that 50% of Senators and Congressmen were, say, School-teachers, journalists, or (God Help us all) TRADE-UNIONISTS before they entered Congress or that their net personal worth was under \$300,000 or that their campaigns were largely financed by donations of under \$20, then again, this would count against my thesis. However, *changes* in processes, policies or personnel would not falsify my claim since the thesis is that America *is* a *de facto* plutocracy, not that it *has* to be. Whilst representative institutions and liberal freedoms endure, change is possible though perhaps not very likely.

The more general point is that capitalism (or any other economic system which licenses large inequalities of wealth) poses a continuing threat to democracy. Money is (so to speak) liquid power and if it is not to translate itself into overplus of political power for the rich, elaborate safeguards have to be set up. In America these are lacking.

Now as to Ollie. You seem to balk at my description of him as a leading public servant. There is no need to dispute about words. Call him what you like so long as you admit that he was a powerful official. Since he played an important role in running the clandestine foreign policy of the Reagan Presidency this can hardly be denied. My point is that SOME such officials can be reasonably described as fascists and that Oiver North was one of them. What I had in mind was his testimony before (I think) the Senate in which after admitting to some sleazy action or other, he claimed that he was acting on what he understood to be the President's orders and that 'this lieutenant-colonel' was not prepared to disobey the orders of his Commander-in-Chief. The context clearly suggested that he regarded this duty of obedience as unconditional. Now in a liberal society citizens (including lieutenant-colonels) are only obliged to obey the orders of the Commander-in-Chief (or of any other official) in so far as those orders are consistent with the law of the land. This is part of what is meant by the saying that in a free society we are governed by laws and not by men. If North was aware of this principle, he does not seem to have subscribed to it. His testimony expressed an attitude of lawless leader-worship which went well beyond the 'simple-minded and reactionary Christian moralism' that you ascribe to him. Moreover, in the time he could spare from drug-running and financing torturers this simple-minded Christian moralist apparently dreamt up a contingency plan to suspend the Constitution and impose martial law, one of the contingencies being mass opposition to an overseas military operation. You will be glad to know that the then Attorney General minuted his disapproval. But I am inclined to say that in a properly run administration imbued with liberal and democratic values, this contingency plan would not have been there to be disapproved of. The episode recalls the now infamous

Huston memo under the Nixon administration in which a young staffer briefly persuaded the President to authorize a massive program of illegal wiretaps etc to be coordinated by him. This hare-brained scheme was defeated by the combined efforts of John Mitchell and J. Edgar Hoover, probably because it trespassed on Hoover's turf. (Apparently Huston's proposals were so extreme that they made Hoover sound like a civil libertarian.)

I accept your point that North was acquitted because the prosecution bungled its case. But my recollection is that at the time a good many people approved of *him* and not merely the principle of reasonable doubt. And this does suggest a fascistic strain in American political culture, since it was precisely his lawless leader-worship that they seemed to like about him. Still the fact that later on he failed to get elected does suggest that there is hope for America yet. But then I never meant to deny this.

What about COINTELPRO? My claim was that the program was if not fascistic then authoritarian and illiberal. You rightly deplore Hoover's attempts to discredit and undermine Martin Luther King, but point out a) that the program was discontinued in 1971 and b) that it might actually have done some good in keeping tabs on the KKK. But you don't seem to realize that the dirty tricks that Hoover played on King were typical of the kind of thing that FBI agents got up to under COINTELPRO. They did not confine themselves to surveillance but actively tried to sow dissension and suspicion not only between Party members or members of political groups but sometimes between man and wife. (One report proudly notes the break-up of a civil rights activist's marriage as the result of a forged letter.) (See Fried NIGHTMARE IN RED, pp 189-91). As to a) the fact that the program was discontinued reflects some credit on American society, but then again I would admire it a whole lot more if there had never been such a program to be discontinued in the first place. As to b), I would need to see a long string off KKK convictions to be really impressed and anyway, the little good that it might have done does not counterbalance massive harms that it undoubtedly inflicted on many citizens who were merely exercising their

democratic rights. The true liberal should not stoop to the kinds of tactics that Hoover employed - but then it is clear that Hoover was hardly a liberal.

Yet successive governments both continued to employ him and sanctioned his tactics. Which was precisely my complaint.

You seem to suggest that it is unfair to criticize American society for its past (i.e pre-1971) misdeeds. but if so it is equally unfair to praise it for the good things it has done in the past, something that you have been inclined to do. You can't have it both ways.

There is more to say but I must stop now.

Regards

Charles

America - a Corrupt Democracy, a de facto Plutocracy with Pronounced Fascistic Strains?

Russell-I list Fall 1997.

The second person to whom I owe an extended reply is Oliver Kamm. I am not sure how much our recent exchanges have to do with Russell, but there is at least this excuse for continuing them on the list. If I am right, Russell's 'anti-Americanism' during the fifties and sixties may have been strident and exaggerated but it was not wholly misguided. But if Oliver is right, Russell completely misjudged both American society and the causes and effects of American foreign policy. My reply is quite long so I am posting it in several parts. If you think it boring or too far off-topic simply delete the rest of my messages with the heading: 'Reply to Kamm'

INTRODUCTION

Dear Oliver,

I made the following claim which I believe to be falsifiable but true: that the America is a corrupt democracy in which the forms of representative government disguise a de facto plutocracy. I also claimed that there is a

fascistic strain within American political culture which is represented in the dicta and behavior of 'leading public servants' a phrase I later modified to 'powerful officials' , because I wanted to disclaim any connotations of seniority. I cited as an example Oliver North. I also claimed that some *internal* policies of the US government were, if not fascistic, then authoritarian and illiberal, and cited the COINTELPRO program as a case in point. Finally I pointed out that over the years the US has supported some exceedingly nasty groups and governments that make the original Italian Fascists look like pussy-cats by comparison. I don't think that you have managed to discredit *any* of these claims.

A CORRUPT DEMOCRACY?

When I say that America is a corrupt democracy , what I mean is that representative institutions no longer function effectively to express the will of the people - a will that should ideally be formulated as a result of free and informed debate. Thus the thesis that America is a corrupt democracy is distinct from the thesis that it is a *de facto* plutocracy, since it is possible for a democracy to be corrupt without being plutocratic. You don't seem to realize this. Thus you ask 'why a 50% voter turnout is evidence of plutocracy, [and] why a 75% turnout would be evidence of democracy'. The answer is that a 50% voter turn-out is *not* in itself evidence of plutocracy nor did I suppose that it was. But it *is* evidence of corruption in the sense I have defined the term, whereas a 75% turn-out would be evidence (though not conclusive evidence) against it. The difference between a 50% and a 75% turn-out does not bear directly on the question of plutocracy except in the sense that democracy in which most people participate is less liable to degenerate into a plutocracy than a democracy in which half the populace cannot be bothered to assert their rights.

With this distinction in mind, we can proceed to the question of whether the American democracy is, in fact, corrupt. A democracy can become corrupt in various ways:

- 1) Participation rates can be so low that a party can dominate Congress or win

the Presidency with the active support of a mere 25% of the electorate.

2) Perfidy on the part of politicians can become so common that the electorate no longer has a clear idea of what it is voting for.

3) The media can restrict the range of options that are taken seriously so that voter choice is effectively constrained. Free speech persists but some of the free speakers don't get a proper hearing.

4) The system can be corrupt in the ordinary sense of the word - that is a large number of politicians may be in receipt of bribes or other subsidies so that they are effectively in the pay of special interests. A little bit of corruption here and there is not particularly dangerous to democracy - if a contract which is going to be awarded anyway goes to one tender rather than another this does not matter much - but it *does* matter if policy is largely determined by the financial loyalties of the legislators rather than the will of the people.

5) Restrictions on civil liberties or the harassment of dissent can effectively undermine freedom of speech and hence the freedom to choose.

My argument is that in the USA participation rates at elections are so low (around 50%) that a party can dominate the US government even though a mere 25% of the electorate actively supports its program. This you do not deny. Therefore the system is corrupt in my sense of the word. The moral connotations of the word 'corruption' are quite appropriate in this case since there seems to me something deeply wrong with the ethos of a democracy in which only half the population can be bothered to vote. It suggests a degree of alienation from the political process which should be a cause for concern to anyone who values democracy. If a democracy is even to approximate the ideal the voters need to be a bit more enthusiastic about it than this!

You focus on my comment that 'presumably' the low voter turn-out is due to the fact the voters (or rather, the non-voters) do not care for the candidates on offer. You write:

'The key word in your comment is "presumably"; there is surprisingly little evidence in the literature for the

proposition that low voter turnout indicates voter disaffection with the candidates on offer. To the contrary, one factor that *has* been shown to be negatively correlated with voter turnout in liberal democracies is strength of support for a particular candidate - witness the low turnout in the recent UK general election, at a time of historically unprecedented approval ratings for one of the main party leaders, Tony Blair. The explanation seems to be that a prime determinant of voter turnout is the extent to which the contest is "interesting", i.e. closely fought. Empirical evidence for this is that the 1992 US presidential election saw a significant increase in voter participation, against all the trends of 20 years, as the race between the main candidates was closing and was complicated by a high-profile third party candidature (see Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Politics of Disappointment: American Elections, 1976-94*, 1995)

Your argument here is not directly relevant to my main thesis - that if voter turn-out is low (as it is in America) the government does not express the will of the people. (Thus 'presumably' is emphatically *not* the key word here.) However, I am not sure that the evidence you provide tells against my 'presumably'.

Suppose you have two countries. In one the voter turn-out averages between 75 and 80% and in the other it averages between 45 and 50%. In both countries participation is higher when the election looks as if it is going to be a close call. Does this show that 'the close call factor' is the sole determinant of voter turn-out? Obviously not. What it shows is that the 'close-call factor' determines the behavior of a tiny fraction of both electorates - the 5% (or whatever it is) who vote at some elections but not others. It does not explain the behaviour of either the regular voters or the regular non-voters. *That* still needs to be explained as does the disparity between the two countries. Thus on the evidence you allege

it is quite possible - and I need say no more since this is not my main point - that in the US the regular non-voters don't vote either because they do not care for the candidates on offer or do not think there is much to choose between them.

I could rest my case. For I have argued on the basis of facts that you do not dispute that the American democracy is corrupt in the sense that I understand the term. But it is perhaps worth asking whether the American democracy is corrupt in any of the other ways that I have listed. I don't know enough about American politics to say whether the second kind of corruption (due to the political perfidy) is a serious factor. I do know that political perfidy is a major problem in my own country, New Zealand. In 1984 Labour campaigned as traditional social democratic party and then implemented a New Right agenda. In 1990, National campaigned as a traditional conservative party opposed to Labour's New Right program - and then implemented an even more radical New Right agenda of its own. In 1996, New Zealand First campaigned explicitly as an anti-New -Right party, getting 17% of the vote - and then went into coalition with National, the party whose New Right policies they had reviled. The concessions they were able to extract were large in terms of personnel - seats in Cabinet and the Party Leader as Deputy PM and Treasurer - but minimal in terms of policies. The New Right Revolution rumbles on. At the moment Labour is riding high as a party of born-again social democrats. But since their spending policies are vastly in excess of the revenue that they can expect to raise given their taxation policies, a fourth act of betrayal is merely a matter of time. I agree with you that a party faced with a financial crisis may sometimes be forced to renege on its promises, and like you I tend to admire the Callaghan government which was forced to do just that. But honest politicians can usually avoid this pit-fall by costing their promises in advance and planning on the basis of conservative estimates of growth, tax yields etc. Anyway, this excuse won't wash for the New Zealand parties, Labour, National and New Zealand First. Labour, it is true, pleaded dire necessity to justify its volte face, but there is all the difference in the world between a social democratic party which is forced to adopt an austerity program and a social

democratic party which decides to give up on social democracy. And neither National nor New Zealand First were faced with a financial crisis.

You say:

'I certainly think it's reprehensible that political parties have given such undertakings at elections and then broken them in government - not because they have failed to do what they said they would do, but because they should not have given undertakings that were impossible to fulfil. That's a point about the *competence* of parties and politicians, not about their veracity (which I take it is what you mean by your invocation of the term "corrupt"), and not about the quality and nature of the democracy.'

To begin with (in New Zealand at any rate) the failure on the part of political parties to live up to their undertakings is not a matter of mere incompetence. The problem is not that they don't do their sums but that they don't declare the policies they believe in. (Or - since they may change their minds in government - that they don't think it important either to stick to the policies they profess or to seek a new mandate on the basis of the policies that they *now* believe in.) There cannot be much doubt that Roger Douglas came to power with a secret agenda that was substantially at odds with the Labour party manifesto. So it's a point about veracity not just about competence. But it's a point about the quality and nature of the democracy too. For the dishonesty of politicians (if it is sufficiently widespread) tends to corrupt the democratic process. The way democracy is supposed to work is this. The various parties put their policies before the public and that party wins which attracts the most support. Thus the ruling party expresses the will of the people because a majority of the voters approves of its program. (If not in detail then at least in its broad outlines.) But if the program it implements is not the program they approved of then the ruling party does not express the will of the people. It has (as we say) no mandate. Now one of the advantages of democracy is that it is supposed to be a self-correcting system. A few years down the track the voters have the

opportunity to choose again, and if the ruling party betrays its official program, they have the opportunity to punish it by voting it out of office. But if perfidy becomes routine the voters are at a loss. What is the point of voting out one set of cheats to replace them with another? Moreover if manifestos are merely decorative devices or traps for the unwary, then the populace has no clear idea of what it is voting for and the representative institutions no longer serve to represent the will of (a majority of) the people. It doesn't even help much if there are a few honest politicians in the mix. For unless they have a record in government they are not *known* to be honest and the public still doesn't know what it is voting for. Thus misrepresentation on the part of politicians is the enemy of representative government. It means that it does not work as it is supposed to do. Indeed, it tends to bring about the first kind of corruption discussed above. Because people despise politicians they tend to despise politics and don't want to have anything to do with it. At the moment, New Zealanders still vote. But the level of participation as expressed by the membership of parties is in steep decline. The Labour party used to have tens of thousands of members. It is now down to about four.

Now I don't know how common political perfidy is in the United States. But if it is as common as it is in New Zealand then I would say you have a corrupt democracy.

What about the other species of political corruption? Let's go through them seriatim.

3) Do the media restrict the range of political options that are taken seriously thus effectively excluding dissenting voices? Well, Chomsky says that they do and his arguments seem quite convincing, but US subscribers will be in a better position than I to say whether this is so. What I *do* know from my own experience in New Zealand is that this sort of thing *can* happen. As an activist for the Alliance, I have been astonished by the way that economic policies of soporific Keynesian respectability are dismissed without debate as 'outmoded', 'looney' or even 'Stalinist'. More disturbing still is the way that the efforts and

speeches of left-wing politicians are simply passed over in silence. Thus the leaders of the Alliance can be knocking themselves out attending to their parliamentary duties in Wellington whilst their supporters believe they are living a life of idleness because their activities go unreported. (This incidentally calls into question your 'That's democracy for you' rhetoric when socialistic policies get voted down. Socialist and social-democratic parties face an uphill battle when dealing with a Tory Press. It may be a cliché but it is true.)

4) Are politicians effectively in the pay of special (by which I mean 'commercial') interests? Let's hear what Barry Goldwater (hardly a radical voice) has to say: 'It is no longer "we the people" but PACs and the special interests they represent who set the country's political agenda and control nearly every candidate's position on the important issues of the day.' In fact the pressures which bind legislators to the interests of the wealthy as a class bind them even more securely to the interests of their particular corporate backers. It takes a lot of money to get into Congress. So if you want to get into Congress you must defer to those with a lot of money. These are ... but I forbear to proceed.

5) What about the intimidation of dissent? Well this may not happen now but it certainly used to happen, and in the not-so-distant past too. I have a colleague at Otago, now a world authority on the IQ debate, who lost two successive jobs during the late fifties and early sixties because of his support for Civil Rights. My friend did not allow a little thing like the fear of dismissal to silence *him*. But then he is notable for his political courage. How many people preferred self-censorship and the quiet life? America has not always been a country in which every voice can speak freely (witness the fate of Russell during the 1940s). But freedom of speech is a precondition for a flourishing democracy.

At all events I have done enough to prove my point. America is a corrupt democracy; that is, a polity in which the representative institutions no longer serve to express the will of the majority where that will is formulated as a result

of free and informed debate.

A DE FACTO PLUTOCRACY?

Now for plutocracy. A country is a de facto plutocracy if power is exercised by and in the interests of the wealthy and if there are institutional barriers to the participation of those who are not. (The last clause is essential since the dominant party may both represent and be composed of rich people without the country being a plutocracy. Conservative MPs tend to be a well heeled lot and the British Conservatives governed in the interests of the rich, but this does not mean that Britain under Thatcher was a plutocracy. For it was quite easy for people of modest means to stand for Parliament with a reasonable chance of success and the laws governing campaign spending and political advertising were such as to cancel out some of the advantages that money brings with it. [Note for Ray Monk. I do NOT think, nor does anything I have said imply, that capitalism is incompatible with democracy. But care must be taken the design of institutions to *neutralize* the power that money confers.] Now you, Oliver, do not deny that US Congressmen and Senators are *in fact* unusually wealthy as legislators go. And you seem to agree that it is difficult for people who are *not* rich or who can't manage to charm the money out of rich people's pockets to become Congressmen or Senators. ('Congressmen tend to be richer than legislators in other countries, and ... the absence of campaign finance limits makes it highly likely that that position will continue.') Thus you concede two thirds of my thesis. (Power is exercised *by* the wealthy and there are institutional *barriers* to the participation of those with modest means.) You only baulk at the final third, namely that power is generally exercised in the interests of the rich. You also seem to think that the two thirds of my thesis that you *do* concede don't add up to anything interesting and that they somehow constitute an 'ad hominem' argument. Now the claim that a system is plutocratic is in part a claim about the people who run it and is thus, in that sense, an 'ad hominem' point. So this does not constitute an objection to my claim. Whether the two thirds of my thesis that you *do* concede add up to something 'interesting' depends on what your interests are. But it seems to me at least sociologically significant that a place in Congress is effectively debarred to the

ordinary wage or salary earner. This is not the case in either Britain, Australia or New Zealand. I'd say that (other things being equal) a society in which access to high political office is largely confined to the rich is less egalitarian and more class-bound than a society in which it is not. And if America is in this respect more class-bound than Britain, Australia or New Zealand this is surely a fact of some historical interest. It would certainly be of interest to any ordinary wage or salary earner who was contemplating a career in politics. Such a career, it seems, is not for the likes of them.

In your opinion 'what matters is surely not the personnel as such but the policies proposed.' You 'see little evidence that US legislators' personal wealth determines their political views.' I am inclined to reply that there are none so blind as them as don't want to see, but before I turn to the evidence I'd like to consider the question from a relatively a priori standpoint. What you are saying is that it does not matter that Congress is (and is pretty well bound to be) manned by the rich because the actions of the legislators won't be affected by their class interests. Doesn't this sound, even to you, just a teensy-bit naive? Suppose that Congress were largely composed of men and that it was difficult though not impossible for women to get elected. (There might be a height restriction which most women could not meet.) If you were to maintain before an audience of intelligent women that this did not matter because there was little evidence that the legislators' gender interests determined their political views, what do you suppose their reaction would be? Contempt and derision is what I would expect. Or suppose that due to some bizarre racial role reversal Congress were largely composed of blacks rather than whites and that it was difficult though not impossible for white people to get elected. (The ability to give an authentic rendition of Motown's Greatest Hits might be a precondition for public office.) If you were to maintain before an audience of intelligent whites that this did not matter because there was 'little evidence' that the members of Congress preferred interests of black people to whites, would you expect to be taken seriously? What you are asking us to believe is that the political opinions of Congressmen are in no way affected by the interests of the group to which they conspicuously belong - i.e. the rich. *They must be the most*

disinterested people on the face of the planet! Once upon a time parliamentarians did not receive a salary. The consequence was that parliaments were largely composed of gentlemen, i.e. the leisured rich. Democratic reformers objected that the leisured rich were not reliable custodians of the common weal and politics became a paid profession. You seem to be committed to the view that the democratic reformers were unduly cynical and that parliamentary salaries were not necessary after all.

But I don't need to resort to these relatively a priori considerations to prove my point. For about twenty years, American public policy (voted on by congress) has favored the rich at the expense of the poor. The Reagan era opened with massive tax-cuts accompanied by savage cuts to welfare spending. The rich gained and the poor lost. Of course it was claimed that this would benefit everybody since the rich would be spurred on to entrepreneurial endeavour by being allowed to keep a greater proportion of their gains whilst the poor would be encouraged to stand on their own feet rather than relying on the debilitating hand-outs of the welfare state. In other words the rich would respond to carrots whilst the poor would respond to sticks - a thesis which suggests a sort of psychological double-standard. I don't think it is a coincidence that the people who enacted these policies were much more likely to enjoy the carrots than endure the sticks. Moreover, we now know that the part about the rich was not true. There was no explosion of creative greed. There was greed, yes, even an explosion, but it was not particularly creative since it manifested itself in mergers, acquisitions and leveraged executive buy-outs. The boom of the Reagan years was largely due to military Keynesianism and deficit finance. It came to an end with the Cold War. Over the last twenty years, the American economy has lost its competitive edge.

Nor is this all. Nowadays, the fashionable method for controlling inflation is to raise interest rates. This has the side-effect (perhaps not even a side-effect) of increasing unemployment. Since those who lend money are (almost by definition) rich whilst those who experience unemployment are (almost by definition) poor this is a policy which favors the rich at the expense of the poor.

(It thus promotes the 'dependency' that the government is supposedly trying to discourage by cutting back on benefits, but that is another story.) Indeed, since the policy tends to create a compliant (even a deferential) workforce, it enhances the personal power of employers and managers and makes life that much sweeter for a segment of the rich.

You write:

"My main difference with your comments about policy is not that I necessarily disagree with your policy preferences, but that you seem to assume that the absence of them in the US is due to some disreputable reason inherent in the polity. It isn't; it just depends on whether a policy proposal is intelligently formulated and is crafted to win public support. So far as health care goes, there is a fair degree of consensus in American public and legislative opinion that the insurance system works well for 85% of the population but does not serve the other 15% at all well. The Clinton administration devoted much of its first two years to this issue and came up with a scheme that was so ill-informed and incompetent (depriving citizens of a choice of doctors, and guaranteeing a minimum standard of universal health care by decreasing the level of medical support) as to discredit the entire cause of health care reform. When Bevan set up the British National Health Service he didn't assume that just because he was on the side of the angels that that absolved him from the responsibility to use his political intelligence. Again, liberal democracy is a terribly cruel system: if legislators lack ability, they tend to be noticed for it."

To begin with, if there *is* a political consensus that the American Health Care works well for 85% of the population then this is a consensus of ignorance. The system is grossly expensive and does not deliver significantly better outcomes than those of comparable countries. Indeed, in many cases the outcomes are

conspicuously worse. For instance, America has a poor record in perinatal mortality rates. There are standing incentives to overservicing and defensive medicine, leading to such absurdities as a 35% Caesarian rate in some areas. Moreover I am not sure there *is* such a consensus on its (85%) excellence as you make out. Didn't Ross Perot claim that Americans pay top dollar for a bad service? And didn't he win a substantial share of the vote? As for Clinton's Health-care scheme, I am quite willing to believe that it was dog's breakfast. Indeed, from what I heard it was the sort of thing no genuine social democrat would take seriously. Thus I do not think (and did not mean to imply) that the rejection of *this* policy was evidence of plutocracy. But it is surely obvious that nothing along the lines of Nye Bevan's National Health Service has a snowball's chance in Hell of getting on the statute books in the US. And this I *do* regard as evidence of de facto plutocracy since Bevan's system is a much more cost-effective (and just) than the chaos that prevails in America. My guess is that the *reason* Clinton's scheme was such a dog's breakfast was that he had to tiptoe around so many vested interests. If America were not a plutocratic society the public would have had something more coherent to vote for.

Now we come to Mr McGovern. .

I claim (you say) that the policy options advocated in US politics exclude the redistributionist Left. You then ask:

'What about the programme of the Democrats' candidate for president in 1972? McGovern's single most famous campaign promise was to give every citizen a basic income of \$1,000 a year, to be financed by a sharply progressive income tax. McGovern's candidature, and this proposal in particular, did not win public support. In the absence of public support, a policy cannot be pursued or a candidate elected; that's democracy for you.'

So your argument is that the policy options advocated in the US do *not* exclude

the redistributionist left because Once Upon a Time (and the *once* is what I would like to stress here) a serious candidate put forward a redistributionist policy and lost. I would have said that this confirms rather than refutes my thesis. For of course, I am not arguing for *absolute* exclusion - merely that certain items *tend* not to appear on the political agenda. And you seem to be saying that no serious politician since McGovern has backed a radical proposal for redistributing money from the rich to the poor (though policies redistributing money from the poor to the rich have been all the rage.) Generally speaking the redistributionist Left does not win the first or even the second time around. Labour and social democratic parties have often taken *decades* to come to power. But what you seem to be saying is that after one defeat, radical redistribution simply dropped off the agenda in the USA.. This did not happen in Australia, Britain, New Zealand or Germany. Doesn't this suggest that there is something *different* about America - perhaps that those who stand to lose by redistribution exercise more control over the political process?

In my earlier email I wrote: 'the processes of American democracy, the policies pursued and the personnel who man the institutions suggest that it is a de facto plutocracy. What would be required to falsify this claim? Well, I would have to be wrong about the processes, the policies or the personnel.'

You reply: 'I cordially suggest that you are wrong on the first and the second, while the third has no bearing on the issue.'

But this reply is not available to you. You have *admitted* my point about process, since you agree that the laws on campaign financing make it difficult for those who are not rich themselves or who cannot curry favor with the rich to get into Congress. You have *admitted* the (third) claim about personnel since you agree that *as a matter of fact* Senators and Congressmen *are* rich - much richer than is the norm in other Parliaments. And this is certainly relevant to the thesis of plutocracy since 'plutocracy' *means* rule *by* (and in the interests of) the rich. Thus the only point between us is whether the voting habits of Congressmen reflect their class-interests.

Now I claim not only that the USA is a de facto plutocracy but that this claim is falsifiable. The first claim would be falsified if the net worth of congressmen were closer to the net worth of the average US citizen or if it were easy for ordinary wage or salary-earners to get into Congress. It would also be falsified if Congressmen conspicuously voted against their class-interests, e.g. for a steeply progressive income tax, increased welfare spending, and an extensive range of universal benefits. (Plutocracy doesn't just require that the rich rule but that they exercise power in their [perceived] class-interests.) That they *don't* do this does not show that my first claim is true. To do *that* I need to provide evidence (as I have provided evidence) that their voting patterns *do* reflect their class interests. But it does at least indicate what you need to do to prove me wrong. You have to show that over time the policies approved by Congress favor the poor at the expense of the rich, not just in isolated instances but as a consistent pattern. And I cordially suggest that you have completely failed in this endeavor.

You quote me as follows : If you could demonstrate that the tendency of legislation over the last twenty years has been to shift resources from the rich to the poor, then this too would strongly suggest that I am wrong.

You then go on to suggest that 'the issue is separate from [my] characterization of the US system of government.' Here I think you have lost your grip on the logic of the debate. My thesis (I repeat) is that the US is a de facto plutocracy. This means that the rich exercise power, that it is difficult for anyone else to get a look-in and that the rich exercise power in their own interests. Since you admit the first two thirds of this claim only the last third is in dispute. And you can hardly deny that legislation of the kind I have described *would* tend to falsify, and hence would be relevant to, my claim.

You then go on:

'And before you argue this, you would need to deal anyway with

the argument that the issue of income inequality is not susceptible to change through legislation. I can think of many criticisms I would make of it, but it's not a stupid or disreputable argument to say that, for example, income inequality is best dealt with by pursuing flexible labour markets so that income mobility tends to equalise distribution over a life cycle, rather than in any particular year. (See the various writings of the economists Murray Weidenbaum and Michael Boskin in the US, and of the political economist Lord Skidelsky, *‘Beyond the Welfare State’*, 1997, in the UK for this argument.)

I don't know what the argument that income inequality is not susceptible to change through legislation IS, but I don't have to deal with it since the conclusion is clearly false. Progressive taxation in conjunction with universal benefits reduces inequality. Tax cuts to the rich and the targeting of benefits tends to restore it. Both claims are born out by recent history. Post-war New Zealand was a notably egalitarian society, and this was largely due to the tax and welfare regime imposed by the First Labour Government. Since 1984 it has ceased to be so, largely because of the taxation and welfare regime initiated by the Fourth Labour Government. (In New Zealand at least, it is Labour that giveth and Labour that taketh away.) I think you can tell similar stories about many countries characterized by social-democratic policies in the post-war period and New Right governments over the last twenty years.

As for the contention that 'income inequality is best dealt with by pursuing flexible labour markets so that income mobility tends to equalize distribution over a life cycle, rather than in any particular year', it may not be stupid or disreputable but I, for one find it hard to take it seriously. I have seen the results of deregulated labour markets in New Zealand. There has been a decline in real wages (and working conditions) for most people whilst a small minority of the privileged earn astronomic salaries. Meanwhile the diseases of poverty, once thought to be abolished, are staging a come-back - rickets and tuberculosis are starting to reappear whilst diseases associated with the bad

diets of the poor (such as diabetes) are rampant. Nor is there anything to suggest that over a life-time the inequalities will tend to even up since those who start poor tend to stay poor (in some cases because they die young) and those who start off rich tend to remain so.

[Incidentally, if subscribers are interested in 'the New Zealand Experiment' and the reforms of Roger Douglas and Ruth Richardson, there are a couple of points to note.

1) The reforms have *not* produced a high rate of economic growth. On average New Zealand's rate of growth has lagged behind Australia's over the last twelve years.

2) Labour deregulation has *not* led to an increase in productivity (This came as a surprise even to those who opposed to deregulation. They thought it would be bad for the workers but good for business in that it would promote productivity. They were wrong. It's bad for the workers all right, but if it is good for business it is *not* because it promotes productivity.)]

You quote me as follows:

The more general point is that capitalism (or any other economic system which licenses large inequalities of wealth) poses a continuing threat to democracy. Money is (so to speak) liquid power and if it is not to translate itself into overplus of political power for the rich elaborate safeguards have to be set up. In America these are lacking.

You then comment.

'Elaborate safeguards are already in place, and certain of them merely damage the efficiency of US industry.

How about the Glass-Steagall Act mandating the separation of commercial from investment banking, and on the statute books for 60 years following the 1929 stock market crash? The rationale of

the separation was to protect the wage-earner from having rapacious capitalists plundering his savings and frittering them away on stock market speculation. In practice, the US banking industry is severely hampered by this piece of legislation, for which there is no equivalent in the UK, Germany or France, but the industry doesn't bother even to lobby against it because it knows it would lose. Legislators are not, as they see it, going to risk the livelihoods of the people in the interests of the profits of the rich.'

[Comment With Hindsight: The Glass-Steagall Act *was* repealed as a result of lobbying from the finance sector and the consequences have been catastrophic.]

But the Glass-Steagall Act is simply irrelevant. For my claim in the passage you quote is that there is no legislation preventing the rich from translating their wealth into an unfair share of *political* power, not that there is no legislation preventing capitalists from frittering away the savings of wage-earners. (Though I may add that given the savings-and-loans affair, the legislation is not all that effective.) You have already admitted that the laws on campaign financing *do* give the rich an unfair share of political power since they effectively exclude those who are *not* rich from high elective office. The most that the Glass-Steagle Act can do is to demonstrate that there are *some* items on the statute-books which are not in the interests of the wealthy as a class. But the existence of some such items is quite compatible with my claim that America is a de facto plutocracy.

A FASCISTIC STRAIN IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE?

Moving right along, we come to my claim that there is a fascistic strain in American political culture typified by certain powerful officials for example Oliver North. You begin with the extraordinary claim that North was *not* a powerful official.

I wrote:

Now as to Ollie. You seem to baulk at my description of him as a leading public servant. There is no need to dispute about words. Call him what you like so long as you admit that he was a powerful official. Since he played an important role in running the clandestine foreign policy of the Reagan Presidency this can hardly be denied.

You replied:

'I do deny it. He was powerful only in the sense that Mr Nick Leeson, now in gaol, was a powerful figure at Barings Bank, viz. insignificant but with an unanticipated capacity to do damage. The allegations you make are so serious that a modicum of accuracy is called for.'

A person counts as a powerful official 1) if he or she IS an official of some organization and 2) if he or she exercises (a lot of) power within or through that organization. North was an official of the United States Government, specifically the National Security Council, thus meeting the first condition. Was he a *powerful* official? Yes. For he played a substantial role in running the US policy towards Nicaragua, a policy which helped to determine the fate of an entire nation. People died - or to be more exact, people *killed* - because of what he did. You claim that he was only powerful in the sense that Nick Leeson of Barings Bank was powerful, i.e. that he had an unanticipated capacity to do damage. I'd say that a person who has the power to wreck an organization by virtue of his actions as an official has a lot of power within that organization. But in fact Leeson was powerful in another sense, that is, he had the power to do multi-million dollar deals on behalf of the Bank. Since the business of a bank is money, power over the financial resources of the bank is about the most important kind of power there is. If North had been as powerful within the US government as Leeson was in Barings he would have been a lot more powerful than he actually was. But though North was not such a big wheel in the US

government as Leeson was in Barings, in absolute terms he was much the more powerful of the two. After all, he played an important part in procuring the downfall of the Sandanistas. All Leeson did - all he was authorized to do - was play the market. It is true that both North and Leeson were (relatively) *junior* officers within their respective organizations, but power and rank do not necessarily go together. Perhaps I may remind you of Tolstoy's observations on this topic in *WAR AND PEACE*. I'm thinking of the passage where Prince Andre, a mere adjutant, keeps a purple-faced general waiting. (C.S. Lewis enlarges on this theme in his excellent sermon/essay 'The Inner Ring.')

So when you deny that an official who exercises a lot of power is a powerful official I am inclined to retort with your own words. These are serious matters and 'a modicum of accuracy is called for.'

Did North exhibit fascistic attitudes? (Not quite the same thing as assisting fascists which he could also be accused of doing.) This is admittedly a more debatable point. But I would still say that his testimony suggests that he did. He plainly felt that it was his duty to obey his Commander in Chief, even when the Commander's supposed orders were illegal. Thus he either did not understand or actively disagreed with the principle that in a free society we should be governed by laws not by men - a principle that entails that officials, including Presidents, are only to be obeyed in so far as their orders are consistent with the law of the land. I would say that the rejection of this principle and a tendency towards mindless leader-worship are characteristically fascist attitudes. North exhibited them both. But I don't have to rely on North's testimony to prove my point. To begin with, his conduct as an official was calculated to frustrate the purposes of the Constitution. It was clearly the intention of the Founding Fathers that the legislature should act as a check on the executive. But the Legislature cannot do this unless it knows what the Executive is doing. By conducting what was, in effect, a clandestine foreign policy, North was setting out to evade the checks and balances that are characteristic of a liberal society and thereby displaying the kind of authoritarianism that is typical of fascism. By assisting the Contras in the first place he showed that he was not averse to terrorism as a political technique,

another mark of fascism. But the clincher to my mind, is a point that you do not address directly. North prepared a contingency plan for the suspension of the constitution and the institution of martial law, one of the contingencies being mass opposition to an overseas military operation. This is a polite way of saying that he prepared contingency plans for a Presidential *coup d'état*. Now it may be that you require rather more in the way of contempt for democracy and authoritarianism for someone to qualify as a fascist (or a person with fascistic attitudes). All I can say is that North is quite fascistic enough for me. That such a man could be employed by the Whitehouse suggest that there is something deeply wrong with American political culture.

Your next point consists of a series of quotations from me with a commentary:

You will be glad to know that the then Attorney General minuted his disapproval.

One...

This hare-brained scheme was defeated by the combined efforts of John Mitchell and J. Edgar Hoover, probably because it trespassed on Hoover's turf. (Apparently Huston's proposals were so extreme that they made Hoover sound like a civil libertarian.)

Two...

Still the fact that later on he failed to get elected does suggest that there is hope for America yet. But then I never meant to deny this.

Three acknowledged instances of US checks and balances in action. So, with respect, what is it exactly that you're claiming about the relation of the US system of government and fascism?

Here again, if I may say so, you have lost your grip on the argument. My

original thesis was 1) that America does not qualify as a fascist state, in part because of the existence of constitutional checks and balances, but 2) that there is nevertheless a fascistic strain in American political culture. The fact that these policies were not implemented or did not long remain in place provides evidence for the checks. But the fact that they were there *to be* checked is evidence of the fascistic strain. If in New Zealand, Prime Ministerial staffers were planning coups and plotting to suspend civil liberties I think this would be a cause for concern even if their plans were not acted on.

One more point. Although the US constitution is an affair of checks and balances these do not always work. Specifically they do not always succeed in restraining the illegal use of Presidential power. A good example of this is the illegal bombing of Cambodia. This enterprise was carried out in the strictest secrecy with the obvious intention of evading congressional scrutiny and hence of frustrating the purposes of the Constitution. Yet there was hardly any protest on the part of the officers involved. This suggests authoritarian attitudes on the part of the military combined with a contempt for democracy. In this case at least, the attitudes were there but the checks failed to operate leading to disastrous consequences.

COINTELPRO.

My next claim was that some of the *internal* policies of successive US governments were, if not fascistic, then authoritarian and illiberal and cited the FBI's COINTELPRO program as a case in point. You reply with a detailed defence of COINTELPRO, which according to you was of considerable use in curbing the Klu Klux Klan. Before considering what you have to say in detail, there is a general point which you appear to miss. Suppose that COINTELPRO was, like the curate's egg, 'good in parts' (which is what you seem to be arguing for.) It was also, as you admit *bad* (i.e. authoritarian and illiberal) in parts. *Thus even if you are right, you have confirmed my main thesis, ie. that some of the internal policies of successive US governments were, if not fascistic, then authoritarian and illiberal.* For the bad bits of COINTELPRO constituted internal policies of successive US governments. The existence of the good bits

does not prove me wrong.

Now to the detail. I shall quote extensively.

I wrote:

What about COINTELPRO? My claim was that the program was if not fascistic then authoritarian and illiberal. You rightly deplore Hoover's attempts to discredit and undermine Martin Luther King, but point out a) that the program was discontinued in 1971 and b) that it might actually have done some good in keeping tabs on the KKK. But you don't seem to realize that the dirty tricks that Hoover played on King were typical of the kind of thing that FBI agents got up to under COINTELPRO. They did not confine themselves to surveillance but actively tried to sow dissension and suspicion not only between Party members or members of political groups but sometimes between man and wife. (One report proudly notes the break-up of a civil rights activist's marriage as the result of a forged letter.) (See Fried NIGHTMARE IN RED, pp 189-91).

You write:

Well, the word "typical" requires a detailed history in order to be refuted. All I would say in the absence of time and space necessary is that the book that is your source cites the FBI's worst excesses against the peace movement and a genuine hero, Martin Luther King, in order to discredit all that it had ever done to combat genuine subversion. That doesn't seem to me a warranted, still less a scholarly, conclusion. As I've argued in an earlier exchange, we now know as a matter of historical record, not of speculation, that there genuinely was a co-ordinated espionage attempt on the part of the Soviet Union, using radical groups and in particular the CPUSA, to

infiltrate organs of government and voluntary organizations. This is documented in files released from the Soviet archives and now held in the Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History. The relevant files relating to the CPUSA have been translated, collected and edited in *The Secret World of American Communism*, (1995), eds Klehr, Haynes and Firsov, and published in the Yale University Press series *Annals of Communism*.

I wrote:

As to b), I would need to see a long string off KKK convictions to be really impressed and anyway, the little good that it might have done does not counterbalance massive harms that it undoubtedly inflicted on many citizens who were merely exercising their democratic rights.

You write:

Philip Finch (*God, Guts and Guns: A Close Look at the Radical Right*, 1982) notes that beginning in 1964 the FBI proposed over 400 COINTELPRO actions against 17 Klan groups, of which 289 were approved. FBI actions were so vigorous that Klan membership fell from 55,000 in 1967 to 5,000 in 1973. As John George of the University of Oklahoma comments (*Nazis, Communists, Klansmen and others on the Fringe*, 1992): "What caused the rapid decline in Klan membership and influence in the late 1960s? The FBI is responsible, for the most part. FBI Counterintelligence programs against the Klan and other extreme right groups have received only a fraction of the attention as such actions against the extreme left."

Ok, let us start with Fried's book which you suggest is biased and unscholarly. I was rather surprised at this assertion since the cover quotes a number of reviewers who praise it for its even-handedness. Still these reviewers may

themselves have been biased, so I went to the trouble of rereading it. I am bound to say that I ended up agreeing with the reviewers. On all of the key issues Fried does his best to arrive at a balanced view. Though he is clearly no friend to McCarthyism, he does not deny the existence of a Communist Conspiracy. He thinks Hiss was probably a perjurer and that the Rosenbergs were guilty, and he points out that Lillian Hellman, who won some praise for casting out the motes in McCarthyist eyes, could reasonably be accused of having beams in her own which prevented her seeing the evils of Stalinism. More to the point, Fried makes it clear that COINTELPRO was used against the KKK, even though this is something of a side-issue given his principal theme.

Now Fried doesn't supply figures but he does supply facts. And the facts that disturb me concern the *methods* of COINTELPRO. If the FBI had confined themselves to surveillance, I would have had some qualms about their targets but I would not have considered the program as indicative of a deep malaise. The US government had a legitimate interest in knowing who had been a communist since some such individuals really were spies. There were therefore some jobs (not all that many, I think) from which communists or ex-communists might reasonably be excluded or which they should only have been allowed to take up if their employers had been made aware of their pasts. (I'm thinking particularly of jobs in the military, jobs in the CIA, [some] jobs in the FBI itself and jobs with military contractors or the Department of State.) If the FBI had confined themselves to gathering evidence with a view to preventing and prosecuting major crimes, then again, I would not have thought this wrong. (So long as the crimes were genuine crimes not activities deemed criminal as a result of unjust or oppressive laws.) But the COINTELPRO program went well beyond that. According to Fried, 'Though labelled a counterintelligence program, it [COINTELPRO] was in fact a series of actions (of which 1,338 have been documented) aimed at convulsing the CPSU and punishing its members.' The FBI went in for forgery, intimidation, tale-bearing and what can only be described as psychological warfare, much of it directed against people who were by no stretch of the imagination either potential criminals or threats to national security (e.g. harassment of a pair of ex-communists, one of them a

disabled WWII veteran, who were trying to start an insurance business - a case that happens to be known to me through their son). Indeed there are some cases where the FBI are alleged to have acted as agents provocateurs. In my view, these methods are not legitimate police tactics against *anyone*, not even the members of the KKK. (Many of them would result in criminal prosecutions or a civil suit if practiced by private individuals.)

So what did these COINTELPRO programs against the KKK amount to? Were they evidence-gathering operations mounted with a view to preventing or prosecuting crime? (Prevention consisting of such measures as arresting KKK members on charges of conspiracy as they were about to set out on some murderous expedition.) Or did they consist in forgery, intimidation and psychological warfare? I note that you do not meet my challenge by citing *convictions* of KKK members as a result of COINTELPRO but only insist on the drop in membership. This suggests to me that the measures taken were not, in the main, of the kind I approve. In my view even the members of the KKK have rights. Success against the KKK is only evidence of institutional virtue if those rights were respected.

But as I have remarked already, this is really beside the point. Even if parts of COINTELPRO were good, enough of it was bad to furnish evidence of authoritarian and illiberal policies. QED.

UGLY ASSOCIATES

My last point is that over the years successive US governments have given aid and comfort to governments and groups which make the original Italian fascists look like pussy-cats by comparison.

You write:

‘US policy and actions are more complex than you allow. As Ray says, the US has at times supported some nasty and anti-democratic regimes. That has neither been a consistent policy of successive

administrations nor has it been an indication of Fascist or authoritarian principles on the part of the US. Administration policy has veered quite wildly between a belief in pursuing global stability through democracy (the premise of the Truman Doctrine) towards one in pursuing global stability in order to establish democracy. Sometimes both views have co-existed within the same administration (specifically the Reagan administration, whose belief in democratic government as opposed to authoritarian allies was tested, and confirmed, during the Falklands War).

My own strong preference, for what it's worth, is for the pursuit of democracy in order to establish stability, rather than the other way round. That explains my disagreement with President Reagan's passionate advocacy of total nuclear disarmament, as well as my criticisms of the foreign policies of Henry Kissinger. But I say that with the benefit of some hindsight. The realist case argued by theorists such as Hans Morgenthau (*In Defence of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy*, 1952) has maintained that the formative stages of a democracy, especially in states where the military has traditionally taken a prominent role in government, are times of such weakness that the threat of external aggression (e.g. Afghanistan, 1979) or internal and anti-democratic revolution (e.g. Iran, 1979) might be such as to make a liberal democratic crusade counter-productive.

Let me stress, for fear of being misunderstood: I don't share the realist view, which I think in many respects has been refuted by the experience of eastern Europe, but I don't think it's a silly, ignoble, or neo-Fascist position. Indeed, because of it, Morgenthau argued forcefully against US involvement in Vietnam, and urged early recognition of Communist China. US foreign policy has faced some appalling dilemmas since the war, and sometimes it's got things very wrong indeed, strategically and morally. But it's not necessary to

support every aspect of US foreign policy over half a century to be glad that the world's only remaining superpower is the US, and not the USSR or Iraq.

So *my* compromise solution is that we drop the use of the word "fascism" altogether in connection with the US and adopt Ray's formulation instead. And then we can concentrate on his original point about Russell's views in the 1930s (and on which, though you don't specifically ask my opinion, I agree with you).'

The first point to make is that complexity is like the beautiful plumage of the Norwegian blue - it doesn't to enter in to it. Over the years, successive US governments *have* given aid and comfort to grisly and oppressive regimes, not once but over and over again. This is a fact and whatever the complexities behind it, it remains a hard but gruesome fact. And my original posting merely drew attention to this fact. But if you want to argue causes and complexities I think you have a hard row to hoe. If US governments have a record of cuddling up to compliant torturers it seems reasonable to conclude that they are not particularly averse to torture. If they have a record of snubbing (or even subverting) democratic governments that they happen to disagree with (India and New Zealand for the snubs, Allende's Chile for the subversion) whilst maintaining friendly relations with obedient tyrants, then it is reasonable to conclude that they prefer obedience to democracy. It may be that in individual cases you can explain the conduct of US governments as seeking democracy through stability or stability through democracy (though it is hard to see how either strategy could be used to justify US support for Pinochet's coup). But the kindest explanation and perhaps the simplest over time is this. Historically US governments have been committed to an anti-communist crusade; more or less aggressive depending on whether roll-back or containment was the preferred option. They were therefore willing to support anti-communist groups and governments (or groups and governments that could convincingly pose as such). Sometimes these groups and governments would be genuine democrats (social democrats or Christian democrats as the case might be, but at

any rate people with some pretensions to human decency). And sometimes these groups and governments were tyrants, oligarchs or factions whose depredations had provoked an opposition which included (or could be portrayed as including) communist elements. (I do not mean to exclude cases in which the opposition was mainly or solely communistic.) The result was that they ended up supporting some truly loathsome people, since one way to provoke an opposition (communist or otherwise) is to act with conspicuous brutality. It is for this reason that I regard your earlier claim that US policy has been characterized by 'liberal internationalism' as simply absurd. A *Liberal* (as opposed to an *anti-communist*) internationalism would have largely confined itself to active support for those regimes which made some sort of attempt to respect human rights. (I say 'largely' since one can imagine cases in which it might be right to aid an oppressive regime which was being attacked by an even more oppressive neighbor.) To put the point politely, US governments have not always confined their aid and comfort to such morally respectable regimes. I think this policy has been a disaster, not only because it promoted murder, tyranny and torture, but because it deprived US policy of its liberal and democratic credentials. Or to be more precise, because it deprived US anti-communism of its rationale. ('You are fighting the communists because they are foes to freedom and democracy? But so are some of the people you support!') This in turn, tended to confirm the anti-democratic rhetoric of the Leninists. A Third World radical with a burning sense of injustice might reasonably conclude that democratic institutions are simply an instrument of the US bourgeoisie, an instrument moreover that they are prepared to discard when the going gets tough. To put the point another way, the problem with supporting tyrants in the name of democracy is that it tends to give democracy a bad name.

Two final points.

1) You say that the Reagan administration's belief in democratic government as opposed to authoritarian allies was tested, and confirmed, during the Falklands War. Not so. For the Reagan administration had many reasons for preferring Britain to Argentina besides the fact that Britain was a democracy and

Argentina a dictatorship. For a start, there were closer ties between Britain and America (including a common language and a shared history as allies during two World Wars). Moreover, Britain was a nuclear power whereas Argentina was not and Britain was essential to NATO (and hence to Reagan's anti-communist strategy) whereas Argentina was not. More specifically, the Reagan administration was anxious to keep Britain on side in the crusade to introduce cruise missiles into Western Europe. If Thatcher's government had fallen as a result of a military defeat in which the USA connived with Britain's enemy, then a Labour government might have come to power committed to unilateralism and perhaps to withdrawal from NATO. *Maybe* Reagan and Haig were influenced by democratic sentiment (though I find this a little hard to believe in the case of Haig) but since they had plenty of other reasons for favouring Britain at the expense of Argentina, there is no proof of a principled preference for democracy.

But even if we set this aside, your argument is remarkably feeble. What you are saying is that despite the alliance with Galtieri's Argentina, the Reagan government cannot be accused of being soft on 'authoritarianism' (a euphemism which conceals the fact that the Galtieri regime was much worse than that of the original Italian fascists). Why not? Because, when forced to choose, they preferred democracy. I might as well argue that just because that one of my bosom buddies is a mass murderer, this does not mean does not mean that I condone mass murder. Why not? Because I have another bosom buddy who is a nice guy, and if I were forced to choose it is the nice guy that I would prefer. The answer to this is that if I REALLY disapproved of mass-murder, I would not have a choice to make.

2) You say that you are glad that the USA rather than the USSR or (bizarrely) Iraq is the one remaining superpower. So am I (though I might not be so positive on this point if I were an inhabitant of the Third rather than the First World). But when you think about it, this is a pretty damning specimen of faint praise. It is not much of a compliment to say that someone is a nicer fellow than Hitler, and it is not much more of a compliment to say that the US of A is

preferable as the sole surviving superpower to the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev (let alone Stalin). You can be better than *that* and still pretty bad. There are good things about US foreign policy over the last fifty years such as the Marshall Plan. But from a human rights perspective I have to say that the record is pretty poor. And now I must stop not only because I may be trying the patience of the members of this list but because geopolitics is not my field and I have other intellectual fish to fry.

Regards

Charles Pigden