

THE *ALTERNATIVE*

Vol. 5 No. 8 May 1972 25¢

Jeffrey M. Nelson

Notes on Social Declension... page 5



COYNE and McCARTER: Plumbing that Nixon Idealism

BRODIN and BROWNFELD: Travels with Richard

TYRRELL: Alas, the Endangered Species

to Taiwan. The drowned bodies of young men and women, floating ashore on the Hong Kong coast, give mute, but eloquent, testimony, to the risks people will take to achieve freedom. In the one month of November, 1970, no fewer than fifty-eight such bodies were found.

Typical of many is the story of one refugee, a twenty-two year old student, who started out from the Communist coast with two companions. One was shot as he entered the water, and one was captured. Only the student lived to tell the story. Three days later, four more young people swam to freedom, including one whose feet were almost entirely eaten by sharks. In spite of all the hazards, they continue to come, estimated at 6,500 in the first half of

1971, and at another 6,000 in the three months thereafter.

Among six girls who swam to Hong Kong in July was a former member of the Red Guard, who voiced what surely must be the credo of so many Freedom Swimmers. "Freedom means everything," she said. "I am determined to work harder than anyone else to get the things I need, just as I have sought freedom."

As President Nixon moves about the world, from one summit to the next, it is too bad that he does not pause in Hong Kong, or in Taiwan, there to walk amid the millions of refugees, there to hear of heroic struggles for liberty. It would have a sobering effect upon any euphoric dream of grand detentes with barbaric Communism. □

The Uses of History

Nixon and/or Mussolini?

George McCarter

IN THE 1930s Ezra Pound came out with a short book on the virtues of fascism in Italy, and he gave it the catchy title of *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, the reason being that he hoped the book would suggest certain parallels between the two men which Mussolini's American critics had so far not acknowledged. Mysteriously Pound's thesis never really caught on in America, but if he were now inclined to make a second effort he could assemble a convincing case that the incumbent President has, albeit unwittingly, demonstrated more similarities to the Italian dictator than ever was the case with the Sage of Monticello.

If Ezra Pound still follows American politics, he is no doubt delighted to observe that the President's economic measures resemble nothing so much as they do the "corporate (or corporate) state" of Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy. Now I do not mean to be provocative or insolent, for this comparison has already been suggested by Ralph Nader among others. Unfortunately the argument has failed to make an impression, because, to most Americans, the term "fascist" no longer has any connotation. But a serious case can indeed be made that the New Economic Policy and Mussolini's Corporate State have enough traits in common to exceed the bounds of mere coincidence.

Both systems were largely improvised, without any substantial philosophical background or ideals. The "flexibility" of both leaders was a common characteristic; as David Broder has observed of Nixon's "pragmatism" so the late Dr. Antonio Salazar, the conservative dictator of Portugal who was himself often labeled fascist, observed Mussolini's philosophical shallowness. Mussolini, he wrote, "... is a marvelous opportunist when it comes to action; he leans first

to the right and then to the left."

Mussolini began his political life as a socialist but earned his greatest renown as a vehement hater of bolshevism and socialism. While Nixon's *volte-face* has perhaps been not quite so dramatic or barbaric, the President has demonstrated a similar scorn for consistent faith in a set of abstract ideals. The New Economic Policy suggests its lack of a firm grounding in political or economic theory by the simple fact that all its architects (save recently Paul McCracken) insist that it is temporary; indeed they profess abhorrence for any society in which Pay Boards and Price Commissions would be permanent fixtures. Messrs. Nixon, Connally and Rumsfeld rationalize their support for these institutions which they profess to mistrust by invoking the "national interest," thereby hoping to stigmatize all criticism. Likewise from the very beginning Mussolini and his Black Shirts believed that the fatherland was the highest good and that individuals should subordinate their selfish interests to it.

It is this super-nationalism which contemporary writers refer to when they brand regimes such as those in Spain and Greece as "fascist," and at first perhaps that was all Mussolini had in mind. But a less simplistic definition of Mussolini's system is necessary if one is seriously to examine the charge that Richard Nixon is duplicating many of its features. Certainly the following were among the foremost tenets of Mussolini's ersatz philosophy:

a) While social and economic class distinctions continue, an emphasis is placed upon interclass cooperation for patriotic reasons.

b) Political power is delegated from above rather than elected from below.

c) The average citizen is encouraged to believe that modern society is "too

complex" for the old logical solutions to retain any relevance, and that it is the duty of a gifted leader to take extraordinary measures.

d) The individual must accept discipline as a greater good than liberty.

e) Private ownership, while permitted to exist, is separate from control over owned assets.

Each of these, to some extent, is visible in Phase II of the New Economic Policy. The structure of the Pay Board, with its representatives from labor, management and the public, is an obvious illustration of the first tenet, and the near unanimous condemnation of George Meany when he appeared uncooperative further indicates that the present political climate places a premium on cooperation between competing segments of society in pursuit of an elusive national interest.

The second fascist characteristic, delegation from above, is today evidenced by the fact that of all the Pay and Price Board members, only the Chairmen need be confirmed by the Senate, and President Nixon allowed that concession only to guarantee that Congress would extend his extraordinary powers for another year.

Throughout the two and one half years of Mr. Nixon's quasimonetarist "game plan" the President had to endure constant appeals from leading Democrats to "do something" about inflation and unemployment. Since the game plan more closely resembled libertarian economics than it did the more chic activism, its lack of instant success persuaded many that the old varieties had lost their relevance in today's complex society. Like Mussolini, who said "We were the first to assert that the more complicated the forms of civilisation, the more restricted the freedom of the individual must become," (*The Road to Serfdom*) too many Americans in the summer of 1971 had an almost mystical faith that the President's "bold action" in controlling wages and prices would succeed where free market forces had apparently failed. This pessimistic view of society necessarily leads to the fourth fascist tenet listed above. Particularly in the area of prices, discipline has been stressed to the extent that labor officials, not to mention the general public, have been encouraged by the President to turn in their fellow citizens for violations of the price guidelines. And of course, the simple fact that the government is playing a major role in determining wages and prices indicates that "Nixonomics" has separated ownership end control of private property in America.

If much of what I have said regarding the characteristics of fascism seems just as typical of dictatorship in general that is because absolute states either of the right or of the left are equally opposed to republican government and liberal free market economics. The major distinction between fascism and communism is that the former is in part a reaction by the governing

class while the latter is conceived as a revolution from below although both may end up with strikingly similar results. In Italy many members of the wealthy classes went along with Mussolini's rantings because they were convinced that fascism could be a bulwark against socialism, and even Winston Churchill applauded the Duce for that reason. Today American businessmen are apparently accepting Phase II also out of a fear of something worse. In Italy business interests stopped cheering when they found that the government's curbs on union power were trivial compared with the high taxes and compulsory loans appropriated from industry to prop up Mussolini's shaky regime. American industry today trusts Richard Nixon not to abandon the good will toward business which he has maintained throughout a quarter century of public life, but perhaps they should consult with Chiang Kai-shek concerning Richard Nixon's constancy.

Soon after he became Prime Minister, Mussolini put into effect a conservative regimen of reduced expenditures and a balanced budget, but like Nixon with his ill-fated game plan, the Duce got cold feet. Mussolini's declaration that *Laissez faire* is out of date compares ominously with President Nixon's admission a year ago that he is now a Keynesian (*Italy, A Modern History*). Another striking parallel is the fact that Mussolini took the first step toward controlling the Italian economy by slapping heavy duties on imports. Once the population was prepared for full-scale government intervention Mussolini began to enact the measures contained in the *ad hoc* "philosophy" of fascism. The Corporate State was several years in gestation, but it finally emerged in 1934 as a system dividing economic life into twenty-two major groups known as corporations. These corporations consisted of members from labor, management and "the public," the latter a euphemism for toadies from the Duce's own administration.

President Nixon has not gone so far as to create twenty-two tripartite councils, but in addition to the Pay Board and the public Price Commission, we must also reckon with the autonomous Construction Industry Stabilization Committee, and the advisory but scarcely toothless Rent Board, as well as the Committees on the Health Services Industry, on State and Local Government cooperation, and on Interest and Dividends. Finally at the top of the heap stand Mr. Rumsfeld and the Cost of Living Council.

Once the corporations had begun determining economic policy for the nation, Mussolini decided that the Italian Chamber of Deputies had become something of an anachronism. By 1939 he had liquidated the Chamber and replaced it with a Chamber of Fasces and Corporations. Mussolini concluded that government by parties and majorities had become obsolete. In an advanced state, he contended, economic interests were exclusively

entitled to representation in the national legislature.

It took Mussolini seventeen years in office to abolish the Chamber of Deputies, but its powers had been thoroughly eroded long before its formal demise. No one expects Richard Nixon to remain in office for seventeen years, and even if that were possible, it is unlikely that he has any desire to supersede the Congress with the Cost of Living Council. Even so, advocates of the free market are rightly alarmed by the autonomous nature of the Phase II commissions. That autonomy exists to the extent that the labor and management representatives on the Pay Board are exempt from federal conflict-of-interest statutes. From this, one may infer that the President believes economic interests rather than popularly elected (and therefore accountable) legislators should have broad policy making powers in this country.

In the realm of economics, fascism is not a sophisticated doctrine, for Mussolini believed far more in personal power than in any abstraction such as the corporate state. Likewise conservative commentators, Kevin Phillips in particular, have noted President Nixon's inability to project his dedication to any ideal more lofty than political success. Like Mussolini who astounded his anticlerical supporters by reaching a cordial accommodation with the Catholic Church, Mr. Nixon has committed conservative heresy with his blithe desertion of the Republic of China (which he now refers to as Taiwan). Even liberals, who have

much to applaud in Nixon's policies, frequently criticize the President's apparent lack of conviction or what Nicholas von Hoffman calls "... the dispassionate, mechanistic way he's joined our side." (Mussolini and Italian Fascism)

To be fair to Mr. Nixon, one must grant that even if he firmly believes in very little, he is nonetheless a decent man and hardly the reckless and ruthless egomaniac that Mussolini was. Unlike *Il Duce*, he has not attempted to declare strikes and lockouts categorically illegal, and one cannot imagine him boasting, as did Mussolini, that his Administration has "curtailed useless or harmful liberties..." But the President should consider the precedent he is establishing. We would be less confident of any degree of restraint if George Wallace or another man of his "populist" pretensions were to become Chief Executive. Businessmen especially should contemplate the long range ramifications of Phase II far more seriously than its ephemeral short-run advantages, and should inform the President of their concern.

Richard Nixon is not the first President to try to graft a form of the corporate state upon the American economic system. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal legislation, particularly the National Industrial Recovery Act, had what might be considered "fascist" overtones. But the Supreme Court, in *Schechter v. United States*, 295 U.S. 495, invalidated the National Recovery Administration and its numerous codes outlining labor conditions and defining the nature of unfair



The Space Program: Unfinished Monument of the 1960s

competition within particular industries. In that case Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes observed for a unanimous Court: "Extraordinary conditions do not create or enlarge constitutional power ... Congress cannot delegate legislative power to the President to exercise an unfettered discretion to

make whatever laws he thinks may be needed or advisable for the rehabilitation and expansion of trade or industry." It may be too much to hope that Mr. Nixon's own "strict constructionist" Supreme Court will administer unto Phase II a similarly well-deserved death blow. ☐