

Nothing to Declare

One nation is more favored than others.

By William von Raab

I REMEMBER BACK in the '80s when Daniel Oliver, an old friend who is now chairman of *National Review*, and I had dinner with a group of Reagan-administration "conservatives." At one point, the question was passed around the table: "When did you become a conservative?" Daniel and I were stunned. Neither of us had ever known anything else. The others, however, including many of today's neocon central committee, made Oprah-style confessions about their conversions just months or years before. So there we were, a pair of traditional conservatives amid a crowd of converted lefties who had turned Right on their way from Democratic senators' offices to President Reagan's White House.

But we all had a common and real enemy out there: the Soviet Union. Their war was our war. Finish off the Communists. Cripple their economy by depriving them of any access to critical technology. But the soon to be *soi-disant* neocons also had a bigger goal, one we did not see at the time: make the United States protector of the western world, plus some. This is a tale of just how well and quickly their strategic plan and power were moving.

In addition to helping lead the misnamed "War on Drugs," a major responsibility of my job as Commissioner of Customs was to enforce our laws against the smuggling of critical technology out of the country. Although most of this was headed to the eastern bloc, some was headed to other forbidden places.

The government's program to block this smuggling and break the Soviet Union was called, ironically as this story will tell, "Operation Exodus."

The project was basically run by a committee of three: Richard Perle of the Defense Department, someone from the State Department whose name I forget (an indication of how useful he was), and me. I was the Enforcer. Take no prisoners. Or so I thought.

One day, sitting in my grand office, I received a request to see my boss, Treasury Secretary James Baker. Although Baker and I were good friends, we were not exactly philosophical kin fellows. A request that I drop over was therefore not a great beginning to the day.

"You've got a serious problem, Willy," Baker said. "George Schultz spoke to me this morning at breakfast about one of your operations. He has been led to believe that you and your agents are harassing Israelis. Do you know what he is talking about?"

Luckily, I did have some idea what he was talking about. The previous week, Customs agents in California had arrested a handful of Israeli citizens who had been caught red-handed with the complete ingredients for cluster bombs. These bombs were not just lethal and nasty anti-personnel weapons but were also at the time highly classified. Lethality is a concern. Top Secret is a crisis. What our agents did not know, however, was that these men were Israeli agents. For that matter, the boys at Langley did not know either.

Israeli sympathizers with good connections inside the Beltway and George Schultz's dining room decided that Operation Exodus had wandered too far south of the Fulda Gap. They packaged these arrests with a series of other Israeli arrests for similar actions to show, not a pattern of criminal activity by foreign agents, but harassment by U.S. Customs agents against nice guys. That the activities for which the arrests had been made were serious and illegal was apparently irrelevant. When citizens of other countries break our laws, the countries in question can find themselves in hot water. With Israel, the rules were very different. I was the one in serious trouble.

Baker was a good sport about the matter. He said that he certainly knew that I was not targeting Israelis but felt that I had better clear up the charges made against me.

Secretary of State Schultz was never my cup of tea nor I his. When I closed the border with Mexico over the capture, torture, and subsequent murder of a U.S. agent by the Mexican police, he went to President Reagan to get me fired. The president took my side. When I described the State Department as having "acquired an institutional form of Alzheimer's disease" over being soft on East Germany's support of terrorism, he told the president I was a troglodyte. Chief of Staff Don Regan laughed heartily, and Schultz scowled. Now he was casting me as an Israel hater. At least my victims were getting better, from Mexican police to German Vopos to Israeli Mossad!

Had James Baker not been so concerned, I would have left George Schultz to ponder his fantasies about legalizing drugs. Instead, I began trying to puzzle my way out of this pickle.

Some years before, I had been Vice President for Administration at New York University, which, in many respects, was run by Catholics and supported by Jews. They were some of the smartest and amusing people with whom I had ever worked. Surely, my old pals at NYU would find my predicament funny and would have a clever plan of escape.

Their solution was simple. Just bring my case to the most important member of the Jewish community that I could reach. With a little bit of help and introduction, I was scheduled to meet with Morris Abram, the chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, a sort of Old-Testament papal figure in New York. He was a Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations, a man of considerable influence.

It was set. The Commissioner of Customs would set out for Canossa in a week.

But what in the world would I say when I got there? I knew how to brief the President of the United States but not Ambassador Abram. My quandary was solved, however, by the man in charge of all Customs agents, Assistant Commissioner Bill Rosenblatt. He told me not to worry. He would handle the meeting.

In the taxi from the airport to Manhattan, I asked Rosenblatt what the plan was. He pulled out a loose-leaf binder marked Top Secret. All the pages bound inside were also marked Top Secret. "What the hell are you doing?" I cried. "Don't worry," he said. "This is just a bunch of routine reports that I stamped Top Secret. There is nothing even Confidential in here. I know these fellows. He will like this, feel he is being brought in on the real information, and send us on our merry way."

Ambassador Abram was a charming and avuncular man. I liked him right away. Best of all, he liked the Top Secret binder. Rosenblatt was right. Amba-

sador Abram was deeply pleased that he was being given a look inside our Operation Exodus. He further seemed to catch on quickly that I was not running anti-Israeli hit teams.

We returned to Washington. James Baker was pleased. George Schultz was appeased. The Israeli agents were never

prosecuted—the cases against them vanished like water into sand. As for the neocons, they finally made it to Damascus. I only got to Canossa. ■

William von Raab was the U.S. Commissioner of Customs during the Reagan and first Bush administrations.

This Land is Your Land

Taking a Stand with the Southern Agrarians

By Mark Royden Winchell

ON OCT. 30 AND 31, 1980, a group of scholars and other interested persons gathered on the campus of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. to celebrate the 50th anniversary of an unusual book. In November 1930, Harper and Brothers published *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The driving forces behind this volume were four poets who had been associated with each other at Vanderbilt a decade earlier and had been instrumental in publishing the *Fugitive: A Magazine of Poetry* from 1923-25. Up until 1925, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren had been primarily interested in literature and largely indifferent to economic and social issues. During the second half of the 1920s, however, they became increasingly conscious of their identity as Southerners and their social responsibility as Southern intellectuals. Although the reasons for this growing regional consciousness were as diverse as the men themselves, the great external catalyst was undoubtedly the scorn heaped upon the South as a result of the Scopes Monkey Trial in the summer of 1925. Thinking Southerners either had

to agree with the characterization of traditional Southern culture as backward and unenlightened or formulate a philosophically cogent defense of that culture. The New South liberals of Chapel Hill, N.C., and elsewhere chose apology and assimilation. Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren chose explanation and defense.

In addition to the four major *Fugitive* poets, eight other like-minded Southerners contributed to *I'll Take My Stand*. In opposing modernity, especially industrialization, these 12 appeared defiantly out of step with their age. In the best of times, they would have been accused of reactionary sentimentality. Coming 13 months into the Great Depression, their book was widely scorned as a formula for social and economic disaster. At a time when many desperate people were willing to entertain radical left-wing solutions to the national crisis, the Agrarian program had few adherents.

In one sense, the debate between the Agrarians and their progressive adversaries (including the administration of Vanderbilt University itself) was a variation on the 150-year-old debate between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jeffer-