

# Scribbling While Rome Burns

David Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*, Simon & Schuster, 1991, 270 pp., \$20.00

reviewed by Samuel Taylor

This book is not what its title suggests. It is not about the millions of non-white immigrants who are turning Los Angeles into a city that is no longer recognizably American. It is not about Salvadorans, Koreans, Mexicans, or Ethiopians. Instead, it is about white people; how they live, and what they think—when they do think—about immigration. For author David Rieff, a New York City free-lance writer, the waves of aliens are a looming presence that is as obvious as it is uninteresting. He does not even bother to tell us how many Third-Worlders now live in Los Angeles, much less how many illegal immigrants are on welfare, or in jail, or have babies in city hospitals.

What he does do, and he does it very well, is describe what white people think about what is happening to Los Angeles. He is fascinated to find that people who have subtle, well-reasoned opinions about nearly anything else are happy to mouth slogans when it comes to immigration. Though he doesn't quite realize it, Mr. Rieff has stumbled onto one of the most appalling mysteries of late-twentieth century America: that people who live face to face with the imminent dispossession of European America have scarcely given the future a thought.

## "Little Brown People"

Since Mr. Rieff is not looking for immigrants on welfare lines or in maternity wards, he finds them where upper middle-class whites find them. To the oblivious Anglo, what Mr. Rieff calls the "little brown people" appear primarily as maids and gardeners. Virtually anyone with a white-collar job can afford someone to clean the apartment, and no one with a back yard need do the mowing or pruning himself. Dirt poor Third-Worlders are delighted to work below the mini-

mum wage, and the threat of deportation keeps illegals docile.

The other point of contact with immigrants is at the ubiquitous "strip malls." Traffic in Los Angeles is so snarled and full-time house-wives so rare that white Angelenos have taken to shopping at ugly, over-priced, but convenient mom-and-pop stores that have sprung up everywhere. Blacks are not willing to put in the 60- and



70-hour weeks it takes to run them, so white Angelenos now buy beer and potato chips from small brown people who scarcely speak English.

Mr. Rieff is startled to discover how many whites think and act as if the immigrant presence amounts to no more than this. Of course, Los Angeles covers many square miles. There are huge, ever-growing tracts of it into which whites never venture. The ten-to-a-room world of rape and gang warfare that is on the TV news every night might as well be on a different planet—even though that is

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where the cleaning lady lives. The brown tide laps ever closer, but so long as whites still have white neighbors, and the only non-whites at the office are janitors, white Angelenos need never realize that they are a dwindling remnant.

What happens when they do? To Mr. Rieff's astonishment, the thinking

of whites invariably glides along well-worn grooves. One runs like this: "L.A. was great, L.A. was now full of newcomers, therefore the newcomers must be great." Similarly, he writes of the "suspension of disbelief" that makes the following kind of reasoning possible: "If L.A. was the city most open to the new, and the new was also, by definition, what was best, then the immigration, which, whatever else it was, could hardly be described as anything but unprecedented, also had to be a fundamentally good thing, however it might appear on the surface." After all, the United States is supposed to be a country in which everything always gets better, so immigration must be part of this perpetual betterment. And why would millions of people be coming from all over the world if Los Angeles weren't such a wonderful place?

Mr. Rieff is also fully attuned to the contradictions inherent in coupling trendy environmentalism to trendy "tolerance" of non-white immigrants. "One of the most perplexing aspects of conversation in ecologically minded West L.A.," he writes, "was to hear people who worried over the slightest disturbance to the ecosystem assert that as far as human boundaries were concerned, there should be virtually no constraints at all, let alone prosecution of those who were found to be in the country illegally. So sensitive were liberal Angelenos to the possibility of appearing xenophobic that they almost invariably used the term 'undocumented worker' rather than 'illegal alien' . . ."

Nor surprisingly, Mr. Rieff also finds the same defense of immigration most commonly given on the East Coast: "There was an enduring conviction, particularly among liberal Angelenos, a disproportionate number of whom were Jews, that, despite the evidence of their own eyes, the new immigration simply recapitulated the immigration of 1900; in other words the experiences of their own grandparents and great-grand-

parents." Typical white Angelenos "preferred to believe that the new immigration was just a rerun of what had happened before, or else to hunker down into the privileged folds of their careers and private lives and insist that nothing was happening at all."

Of course, not everyone is fooled. Gleeful Hispanic activists talk about reconquering the land that Mexico lost to invading gringos in 1846-48. They already have a name—Aztlán, meaning "the bronze continent"—for



the chunk of the Southwest that they look forward to breaking off from the rest of the United States. Hardly a month goes by without Mexican-American "spokespersons" demanding that the statues of white explorers and conquerors be torn down.

Leftist whites who hate the United States also look forward to the future. As Mr. Rieff puts it, "Exuberant Third World-loving activists . . . were describing L.A. to anyone who would listen . . . as the capital of a new country

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that they had taken to calling Mexamerica."

Even the benighted white man has moments of lucidity: "Most Anglos understood, if only instinctively and intermittently, that what they were in fact witnessing was the de-Europeanization of Southern California, and, only a little farther down the line, of the United States as a nation as well . . ." The problem, of course, is that this is a racial question just as much as it is a cultural question, and a racial analysis of what is happening is strictly out of the question.

### False Explanations

Mr. Rieff is smart enough to understand this and to see through the false explanations that are obligatory in a society that must ignore race. For example, many neighborhoods that remain white have taken to blocking off through streets. This is called crime prevention or community building, but the true purpose is to keep out non-whites. Many of the local "no-growth" movements that are couched in environmentalist terms are meant to keep immigrants out.

An even better example of disingenuousness is the typical talk about public schools. They have gone down hill in perfect parallel with the decline in the number of whites who attend them, but dogma forbids that this be noticed. Mr. Rieff scorns the naïveté of those who talk about how the schools have "failed" the immigrants rather than recognize that the schools have been overwhelmed by little brown children who do not speak English. As he points out, there are signs everywhere of de-Europeanization and the decline that inevitably follows, but whites must pretend that the explanations lie elsewhere.

Even when they are forced to acknowledge what is happening, they profess not to care. According to Mr. Rieff, the common feeling is: "So what if Hollywood High—alma mater of countless movie stars, from Lana Turner and Mickey Rooney to James Garner and Carol Burnett—now ranked in the bottom 20 percent of all California schools and was better known for its English as a second language program than for its amateur dramatics?"

Mr. Rieff himself has no illusions about what this means. "After all," he writes, "nobody got up one balmy afternoon on the Capitoline Hill sometime in the fifth century and said that the Roman empire was over and the Dark Ages had begun. Had something equally important taken place without anyone quite having realized it? More and more, the answer seemed to be yes."

Of course, plenty of people realize it. But while Mr. Rieff is contemptuous of whites who refuse to see that the brown tide is about to push them aside, anyone who notices and

objects is an ignorant "racist." For him, the ideal state of mind is to have no illusions about the imminent destruction of the United States, but to maintain a studied detachment from it all.

After a conversation with a white about the city's transformation, Mr. Rieff writes that his informant "placed no value on what was happening." Though Mr. Rieff permits himself a shiver at the thought, he finds that he agrees. It may be fascinating to watch it happen, but Mr. Rieff is no more concerned about the end of America than he is about the end of the Roman Empire. Once the "little brown people" start swarming too close for comfort, perhaps he will move back to wherever his Jewish forebears came from. It doesn't matter whether America prospers or enters the dark ages; what matters is that he enjoy the spectacle without emotion or illusions.

Illusions are for little people: "When Angelenos did occasionally take a moment to think about what was going on in the city, they tended toward slogans and formulas that were all but guaranteed to inhibit thought . . ." he writes. To be sure. Yet only 27 pages later, Mr. Rieff ends his book with words that are a *tour de force* of cynicism: "We must love one another or die." Mr. Rieff has no love for the little brown people, but he has no funeral plans either. Someone else will have to love them. ●

### I Grieve for my Country

Mario Vargas Llosa is a Peruvian novelist who campaigned for the presidency of his country in 1990. He has no illusions about what others think of Peru: "It is spoken of outside its borders—when spoken of at all—as a horrible caricature of a country that is slowly dying because of the inability of Peruvians to govern themselves with even the minimum of common sense . . ."

Many Americans who see their own nation destroying itself understand Mr. Llosa perfectly when he adds: "It is less exact to say that I love my country than that it is continually in my thoughts and a constant mortification. I cannot free myself from it, and it grieves me deeply."

# O Tempora, O Mores!

## Welcome Mat for Illegals

There is a section of Interstate 5, just north of the Mexican border, that is a common crossing point for illegal immigrants. It is eight lanes wide, and 100 illegals have been hit and killed trying to get across. Rather than stop the illegals at the source, the authorities have tried to make it easier for them to cross the highway. They have put up signs warning drivers to watch for sprinting Mexicans, and have installed special flood lights so that drivers can see illegals better at night (see *AR*, March 1991).

This summer, the California Department of Transportation decided to close off the passing lanes and funnel traffic into just two lanes going each way. The idea was that this would slow cars down, and illegals wouldn't have so many lanes to negotiate. The median strip is now flanked by two empty lanes on both sides, and once they make it that far, illegals can



take a siesta before they cross the rest of the way. The word quickly went south, and the number of people making the crossing doubled to 2,000 per day, and is still headed up.

The Border Patrol does not make arrests on the median strip for fear that illegals will run into traffic and be killed. The chief of the San Diego Border Patrol, Gustavo De La Viña suspects taco vendors and taxi drivers will soon set up business in the empty lanes.

## The Invasion Moves North

Once they make it into California and Texas, Hispanics are discovering that those parts of the United States have become rather

like home—too much crime and poverty, too many surly bureaucrats and bad schools. What do they do? They head north, where America still has a few pockets of white tranquility that have not yet been “culturally enriched.” In the last ten years, the Hispanic population of Midwest states has burgeoned. Minnesota saw a 68 percent increase; Illinois 42 percent, Kansas 48 percent, Wisconsin 48 percent, and Nebraska 32 percent.

As white people always do, these solid Midwesterners have welcomed the harbingers of cultural depredation. Last year, the Iowa legislature passed a law requiring companies to pay for interpreters if more than 10 percent of the work force speaks the same foreign language. City fathers have set up Anglo-Hispanic Welcome Committees, and police are taking Spanish lessons.

Some small towns are losing characteristics that may be generations old. Willmar (MN), for example, has always been strongly Scandinavian. In the last five years, its Hispanic population has grown from nothing to 2,000—11 percent of its population of 17,500. All over the Midwest, bumper crops of Hispanic children have forced schools that had never even heard of bilingual education to hire foreign teachers. In some communities, crime and welfare rates have shot up.



## Thanksgiving Greetings

Why is it that white people fail to see the obvious—that Hispanics, who have turned much of the Southwest into the image of their underdeveloped homelands, will only do the same to the Midwest?

## Justice is Blind

One night in 1987, New Jersey state troopers were making a routine check of a freeway service area. About mid-



night, they noticed someone asleep in a car parked in front of a Roy Rogers restaurant. One of the officers walked up to the car with a flashlight and saw a knife with a three-inch blade on the floor. When the driver woke up and rolled down the window, the trooper also noticed an open can of malt liquor. When the officer asked the man to step out of the car to take a balance test for drunkenness, the man fur- tively hid something in his back pocket. The officer discovered that it was cocaine, and brought the man in for illegal possession.

Another triumph for alert police officers? No, racial harassment. The man was a Jamaican, with his hair in dreadlocks. His lawyers argued that he would not have been approached if he had been white, and this summer a state appeals court upheld Judge Mathias Rodriguez' earlier ruling that the police acted out of racial prejudice. The discovery of the cocaine was therefore found to be improper, and the charges of possession were