



Anna Myeck-Wodecki

A Not So Wonderful Life

by Thomas Fleming

"To us your good Samaritan was a fool to risk the security of his family to help a stranger."

—Joey Tai in Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon*

It has been more than a year since we put out the March 1989 number of *Chronicles*, "A Nation of Immigrants," in which it was suggested that the United States had a political and cultural interest in regaining control over its borders. By now everyone must be tired of reading about the controversy that ensued, but I shall make one last effort to explain our intentions, then and now. The best way to accomplish this will be to answer a number of questions that have been raised by our critics.

If you read only the mercenary press, by which I mean editorial columns and "opinion magazines," our discussion of immigration exiled us forever from the delightful company of really important people. Actually, the response was varied, ranging from enthusiasm: "I'm glad someone had the guts to tackle this subject honestly and without hysteria," to polite disagreement: "I think you are wrong, but I don't see what all the fuss is about—most people are wrong most of the time," to a gleeful Aha!: "I always knew you were a bigot, and at last I have the evidence." Most of our readers, if I can judge from letters and telephone calls, sympathized either with our position or with our plight.

Some of our detractors have been just clever enough to detect a pattern in our editorial themes. They are right. We do take an especial interest in political and social issues that are connected with what we sometimes call the "American identity" and at other times the "national interest." In recent numbers of the magazine we have talked about: the degradation experienced by the many of our citizens who are bound to that system of voluntary non-labor we call

welfare, the collapse of standards in all the institutions of our cultural life—education, literature, and the arts, our crumbling infrastructure and lagging performance in the world's economy, the gradual erosion of sovereignty as the United States cedes its power and interest to international bodies and to the ideology of human rights, the extinction of the old republican ideals of responsible citizenship, and the moral decay that we measure daily in rates of divorce, abortion, child molestation, illegitimacy, AIDS cases, drug use, and business fraud.

Faced with this transformation of a decent republican nation into an empire of consumerism and self-gratification, some "conservatives" cry out "Hurray for capitalism and for the triumph of individualism." I attend their conferences and read their newsletters proclaiming the triumph of conservative principles and urging their fellow conservatives to bear the burden of government, and I wonder what world they are living in. Are Washington, D.C., and New York City really so distant from America that they do not know what is going on out here? Or are they so deafened by the rattle of their begging bowls that they cannot hear the complaints of the men on the street?

There are a few simple things that most Americans, liberal as well as conservative, used to take for granted. We used to believe that there was such a thing as the United States, a nation with its own history, traditions, and culture; that we as American citizens had the obligation to maintain our national integrity and identity against any nation, movement, or population that by accident or design posed a

threat. It is not xenophobic to admire the Japanese and wish them well, without at the same time wanting to become like them, and it is not bigotry to discuss the advantages of trade and immigration policies that might serve the national interest rather than the global economy or the UN declaration of human rights.

This general position of ours is moral and cultural; it does not lead necessarily to any specific policy on trade, any definite set of quotas on immigration. It does, however, generate answers to many of the questions most frequently raised by people on the other side.

The most respectable arguments for open borders come from libertarians, who rest their case on a general philosophical point. Access to markets of trade and labor, they argue, is a fundamental human right that ought not be abridged. I respect their position, without subscribing to it, and will go so far as to say that prudence and history both suggest that government intervention in these matters is more often productive of evil than of good.

◆

**Our survival depends upon our willingness
to look reality in the face.**

◆

But, I ask my libertarian friends, what basically are you defending—an abstract principle of freedom or the real liberties enjoyed by Americans? If it is just any freedom to do as one likes in a state of nature, then the conversation is entirely hypothetical. But if we are talking about such down-to-earth facts as limited government, the absence of national identity cards, freedom of movement within the country, then it becomes a question of trade-offs. Very few of our precious liberties are enjoyed by the peoples of Nigeria or China or Bolivia, and there is no reason to suppose that those countries will become hospitable to libertarian principles any time in the near future. The United States has demonstrated a considerable capacity for transforming immigrants into Americans—although its best successes have been with Europeans who share at least some of our traditions—but the time has come to wonder whether we are not beginning to strain that capacity. What will it be like in the next century, when—as *Time* so cheerfully predicts—white people will be in a minority? Ah well, every cloud has a silver lining, and once we join the ranks of Third World nations, we won't have to worry about a flood of immigrants.

A number of compromise positions have been entertained in conversations with libertarians. For example, we could allow people into the country on six-month work permits (as they do in Switzerland) and still jealously protect our citizenship and our borders. We could also make immigration policy contingent upon welfare policy, either by forbidding welfare to any but native-born Americans, establishing a waiting period (ten or twenty years) on eligibility for welfare, or tying the two together in an inverse relationship: the more generous we are with welfare, the stingier we have to be with immigration, and vice versa.

Of course, if we left this in the hands of the libertarians,

there wouldn't be any welfare state to begin with, and I do not lie awake at night worrying about a libertarian takeover in the United States. We have gone so far in the direction of statism, that a ten-year imposition of liberty could only be a blessing.

The key to understanding the argument is the level of discourse. The libertarians take their stand on principle; the "Big Government Conservatives" in New York and Washington attack motives. It is all, they say, a question of greedy self-interest: "These nationalists and protectionists," they whisper, "are all in the pay of Southern textile manufacturers." They do not even balk at calling Anthony Harrigan a socialist.

Let me go on record as welcoming contributions from textile manufacturers, the tobacco lobby, and the automobile industry. I only wish we received enough money from protectionist businessmen to threaten our integrity. But we do not. Of course, this charge of self-interested nationalism invites the counter-charge of self-interested *internationalism*.

In whose interest, after all, is unrestricted immigration or free trade? Some (by no means all) liberal Democrats obviously sense a great opportunity. They have lost much of the blue-collar constituency that was essential to the New Deal coalition, and their traditional bastion of strength, the South, has turned its back on the party of Jesse Jackson. What better recruitment device could there be than to import a set of ready-made minorities who can be put on the dole and taught to practice the politics of envy?

There is, of course, a fairly small number of committed one-worlders who would like to turn over everything to something like the United Nations. But they are on the losing side of history, if only because they have been stupid enough to announce their aims. I put my money on the advocates of East/West convergence, North/South dialogue, and the World Bank—those who believe that the world should be ruled by a coalition of top corporate executives, military leaders, and technocrats.

Working in tandem with the Jimmy Carter Democrats are the Rainbow Coalition conservatives in Washington, who think they can put the New Deal alliance back together, and the Democratic Globalist conservatives, who have borrowed the principle of continuous revolution from Mao and Trotsky. The ultimate aim of both (they are, after all, mostly the same people) is a confederation of social democratic nations trading peacefully under an umbrella of multinational corporations: "Imagine everybody, living life in peace."

If the only choice today were between the leftist internationalism of the one-worlders and the rightist internationalism of free-trade-open-borders-democratic-globalism, then an American who loved his country would be better off canceling all his subscriptions and watching old movies on the VCR. At least in the films of John Ford and Howard Hawks and Frank Capra, we can catch a glimpse of the old America of our dreams.

It is no accident that of the two filmmakers who arguably did the most to define celluloid America, John Ford and Frank Capra, the one (born Sean O'Feeney) was the son of Irish immigrants, the other an immigrant from Sicily. The

films of John Ford have been discussed more than once in these pages. All I will say about them now is that all the mythic themes of 19th-century America can be found in such movies as *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and *Cheyenne Autumn*, and what Ford was to the last century, Capra was to the mid-20th century.

For most Americans Frank Capra is remembered for one film: *It's a Wonderful Life*, done to death simultaneously on every cable channel throughout the holiday season. If there is anyone who does not know the story by now, I will not be the one to enlighten him. But one segment of the film turned out to be remarkably prophetic. When George Bailey is given the chance to see what his town would have been like if he had never lived, in place of Bedford Falls we are given a vision of Pottersville, a factory town filled with mean streets, gin joints, and cynical characters who might have escaped from 40's film noir into a screwball comedy.

This celebrator of the old America and all that it was doing for immigrants was an Italian who cheerfully attached himself to his adopted nation's ideals. In his autobiography, Capra explained that he made the sort of pictures he did in order to pay back the country that had been so kind to him. Not all Italians adapted so readily, but when they were left alone in their own neighborhoods, Italian-Americans minded their own business, reared their own families, served in the Armed Forces, and refused to constitute themselves as a voting bloc or interest vote.

Unlike my Irish relatives who devoted themselves so enthusiastically to the Democratic machine, the Italians until recently largely stayed out of politics. Perhaps it was the language barrier or the fact that so many came from Sicily and Southern Italy—an area that approached the Third World in poverty. But Italians turned a disability into a virtue. By remaining what they were, they took a long time in becoming fully American, but they did not have to pass through the anti-American phase of so many other immigrant groups.

I am not afraid of ethnic enclaves or the persistence of Old World folkways on American soil, especially when it is an ethnic group, no matter how apparently alien, with whom we share part of our history and part of our culture. An Italian will boast of Cicero and Vergil, Dante and Michelangelo, Verdi and Puccini; all of this we are prepared to appreciate, and our lives are richer for it. Even the strangest aspect of his culture—the cuisine—has been somehow incorporated into our own, and Americans have been attempting to eat Italian since Jefferson began serving pasta to his guests.

This cultural mixing of Italians and Germans and Slavs and Jews and Scandinavians into an already established Anglo-American mold is a strange and perilous experiment, but it is one that we must make work, if we are to survive. Our survival, however, depends upon our willingness to look reality in the face. There are limits to elasticity, and these limits are defined in part by our historical connections with the rest of Europe and in part by the rate of immigration. High rates of non-European immigration, even if the immigrants come with the best intentions in the world, will swamp us. Not all, I hasten to say, do come with the best intentions. Once upon a time, the grateful immi-

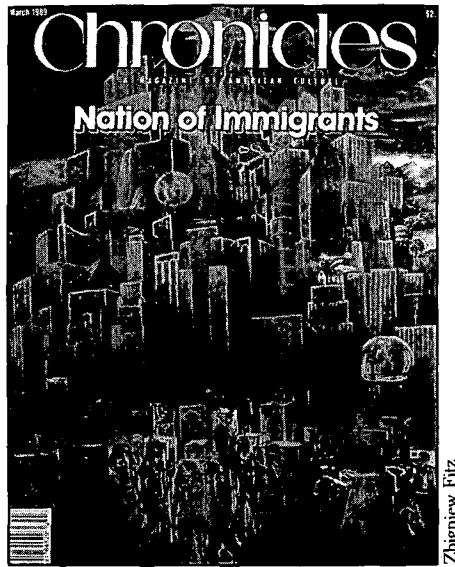
grant was the norm. Now he is an anomaly in a nation where foreigners are hardly off the boat or under the wire before they are squabbling with their traditional enemies. The Serbs and Croats, for example, are engaged in a metaphorical genocide over each group's representation at Voice of America. Why don't we import several million each, Armenians and Azeris, or Iraqis and Iranians, and let them fight it out in Nebraska or Jersey City? Why don't we turn the whole United States into Miami, which now bears the nickname "city of immigrants"?

Frank Capra saw the future, and realized that without people like George Bailey it is Pottersville. It is the world of our generation, an America that has gone from Jimmy Stewart to Mickey Rourke and John Travolta and Madonna. Why? If there is a film that captures the difference, it is *The Year of the Dragon*, directed by another patriotic Italo-American, Michael Cimino. Mickey Rourke plays a Polish cop (who has changed his name to White) trying to clean up New York's Chinatown. It is not a struggle between WASPs and hyphenated Americans, but a crusade waged by an immigrant's son who served his tour in Vietnam and came back to discover that he had to fight against the same things in New York: drugs, a brutal disregard for human life, and "thousands of years" of Chinese civilization. Stanley White's answer is brutal and direct:

You people think gambling and extortion are kosher because it's a thousand years old. All this thousand year old stuff is s---t to me. This is America you're living in, and it's 200 years old, so you better get your clocks fixed.

Blame it on the New Deal. Blame it on the schools. Blame it on the media. Blame it on the inevitable decay and fossilization that overtakes all republican institutions. Blame it on whatever or whomever you like, but remember this. So long as this was, fundamentally, an Anglo-American country with Anglo-American culture, language, and heroes, we knew who we were as a nation, whatever our individual backgrounds were. So far as I know, I don't have a drop of real English blood in my veins, and I grew up meeting and hearing of relatives from all over Europe—the Balkans, Scandinavia, and Britain. I take a personal interest in all of my ancestral groups and have even gone so far as to study their languages (except Norwegian), but insofar as I am an American, I am also English in the same way some tree-worshipping Celt or skull-swilling German had to become a Roman if he was to live within the empire.

If we really are the last generation of Anglo-Americans, then we are also the last generation of Americans, period. Let the Japanese buy the Washington Monument; go ahead and flood the country with Indian and Pakistani doctors and engineers whom, if we had a particle of charity toward Third World nations, we would compel to return home and serve their own people; get rich on bribes from foreign businesses; write editorials on how everyone else in the world would make a better American than the present population. Because, if we continue the cultural and moral slide that took us from the world of Frank Capra to the world of Michael Cimino, in thirty or forty years there won't be an America worth slandering or selling out. ◊



The Pros and Cons of Immigration

A DEBATE

JACOB NEUSNER
 Graduate Research Professor of Humanities
 and Religious Studies,
 University of South Florida
 Martin Buber Professor of Judaic Studies,
 University of Frankfurt

Immigration nourishes America, affirming the power of its national ideal: a society capable of remaking the entire world in the image of humanity in democracy. No country in the world other than this distant magnet of ours exercises so compelling a power to win for itself the commitment of strangers: we want to be with you and like you, share what is yours and give what is ours to share. When we lose faith in the power of this country and its unique social system to take the foreigner and make the stranger one of us—in our image, after our likeness—and make ourselves over too, we shall deny the power that has made us unique among other nations.

The perpetual encounter with the other, the faith in our way of life that gives us confidence in our power to change and to be changed by the stranger—these on-going experiences, and the attitudes that make them possible, explain who we are as a nation. So far as ours is a story bearing direction and meaning, it is the tale of newcomers coming to be changed by, and to change, the country and its land. Ours has been a history of immigration from the start to today: first came the West Europeans and Africans, then the East Europeans and Asians, and now South Asians and Latin Americans, all colors, shapes, sizes, languages. No

other nation in history and none today exercises such power over the mind and imagination of outsiders.

Those of us who regard the social order as critical, who see the laws and institutions and traditions of this country as the best humanity has ever had, must find the immigrants' commitment a rich resource for conserving all that we affirm. For the immigrant, whether my mother's grandmother, leaving as a young woman from Odessa, or this morning's young Irish woman from Dublin, or young black man from Jamaica, or Mexican crossing a border that, a hundred and fifty years ago, did not separate him from his destination in the north, looks for a better life, takes initiative, shows the enterprise that sustains the free economy. Immigration brings to this country the already grown-up and ready to work, the already educated: a rich investment in nurture and education by foreign economies has readied the immigrant for productive work with us, in this country.

Though with Thomas Fleming I find myself in agreement on most issues, on the real American dilemma, as he characterizes immigration, I cannot concur. His seems to me to be not a conservative position at all, since conservative opinion has always affirmed the power of received traditions and institutions to govern the social order. And our system has not only accommodated difference but has always been nurtured and perpetually been nourished by it. America has stood from the beginning for the capacity to make of anyone a real American. Conservative opinion, favoring as it does the rights and immunities of Americans, cannot now despair of the tradition that, from the first, has defined this society.

Migration from what he calls the Third World as much as