

Chechens, who at their peak could barely populate an American city, while using the sternest possible measures over a period of roughly a century and a half, perhaps we should rethink the notion that a few Big Macs, a pair of Nike sneakers, and some Madonna CDs, together with enough English to make one's way through K-Mart, are enough to convert untold millions of Mexicans, Chinese, and Nigerians, among others, into Americans. The Los Angeles riots and the behavior of certain Latino organizations during the Proposition 187 campaign should serve as a reminder to us of what any village idiot knows: when the crunch comes, blood calls to blood and people line up with their own kind against outsiders.

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Crooning Over Chechnya

by Eugene Narrett

Leonard Bernstein was a fine mid-century American composer and conductor. He also achieved notoriety as one of the postwar period's first and most visible celebrants of extreme left-wing attitudes. Bernstein's garden parties for the Black Panthers in their baddest days evoked the phrase *radical chic*, which entered our language as an early marker of what since has become known as lifestyle liberalism.

Rebellion in the Russian province of Chechnya recently has elbowed aside Bosnia as the foreign segment of our media diet, and it is this rebellion that has provided the latest occasion for radical chic. In fairness, it is not only lifestyle liberals who are engrossed with the Chechen. Republican internationalists nostalgic for the Cold War have taken an interest in Russia's stumbling response. Bob Dole, who has been lurching into one hollow "statesmanlike" posture after another as preamble to his doomed presidential bid, has muttered darkly about resurgent Russian imperialism. This grumbling is familiar and thoroughly bogus. Those who danced with Brezhnev cannot plausibly claim

distress about the suppression of a tiny province of Muslim fundamentalists.

But it is precisely the Chechens' exotic ethnicity that liberals find so thrilling. Brezhnev's crushing of the Czech spring in 1968 may have discomfited them a bit, but in the midst of the Vietnam War they did not want to criticize the Russians overmuch. Besides, the Czechs were so boringly *Western*, part of our culture for 2,000 years. How could liberals with hearts aflame for the Vietcong glamorize white people who love Mozart and the Catholic Church?

The Chechens are a different matter, just the kind of dashing hoodlums that liberals find attractive, at a distance. Consider some of the breathless commentary from a newly minted "expert" in the Northeast's most liberal paper. Our freelancer recalls the glamorous Imam Shamil, "a holy Muslim warrior" who proclaimed a *jihad* against the troops of the czar. "His horsemen were unequalled!" enthuses the cub reporter quoting from her *Worldbook*. "Navigating the high terrain like mountain goats"—what an inventive simile—"they swooped down with reins between their teeth and hacked the Russian soldiers to pieces as they struggled up the narrow mountain passes." How exciting to envision the slaughter of a bunch of incompetent Christian white boys, scions of men who for 500 years fought to protect themselves, and people further west, from the onslaught of Tartars and Mongols.

But politically correct attitudes are nothing new to bored middle-class attitudinizers. "Shamil was a heroic figure in European capitals. Victorian ladies embroidered his black banner in needlepoint." So radical chic was alive and festering in 19th-century England. It was just that mixture of aesthetic and imperial attitudes that led some English to glorify and assist the Confederate states during our own Civil War.

There is more in this matter that reflects the liberal habit of loving abroad what they hate at home. Listen to the pack: "Violence and carrying weapons is a Chechen way of life. In the Caucasus, warriors wrote poems to their daggers." Even better, "blood feuds and vendettas still exist." Those infatuated with this portrait of violent, gun-toting natives are the same liberals who demonize the National Rifle Association and any American who seeks to retain his right to a rifle. Such double standards are a sig-

nature of radical chic and the reason normal folks resent it.

Last but not least are careerist reasons for idealizing the Chechens. If there is a protracted battle with many deaths, there will be a lot to write about, many picturesque and horrid scenes to be described with piquant sympathy for the Third World rebels. "Already volunteers are signing up for a holy war," our cub writes with an almost lubricious fervor. Chechen brutality and fanaticism will dissolve into visions of turbaned horsemen writing poems to their daggers and jiggling in the village square.

Our own national interests will become obscured as well. While the Russian army flounders as it did during World War I, and Yeltsin's control of his country fractures as did the czar's, a coup becomes dangerously possible. Our goal must be stability in Russian governance, with or without Boris Yeltsin. If we will not go to the mat for the Czech Republic or Poland with their integral links to Western culture, we must not pick fights for Chechnya, a province the size of Massachusetts and a republic only in name.

With our limited political influence and energy and our need to reform our own government and cultural values, one can only hope that the odd alliance of Cold War reflexes and radical chic will not obscure our main interests concerning Chechnya. There as elsewhere, we need statesmen who can distinguish travelogs from history and who decline to satisfy the transient fascinations of our jaded elite.

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ECONOMICS

The Flat Tax by R. Cort Kirkwood

When the new guru of the Grand Old Party waddled up to the Speaker's chair and took his oath, the clock began ticking. The GOP had 100 days to fulfill a good measure of its "Contract with America." Since House

Speaker Gingrich has been planning his takeover of Congress for more than two decades, just about all the country's problems should have been rectified by now. Alas, the 100 days are nearly past as we go to press and tax day is almost here, but the much-vaunted contract has done nothing to alleviate the income tax burden on the average American (although Gingrich and company are fiddling with the capital gains tax for their country club buddies). If the GOP is smart, by next tax day it will have forgotten about capital gains and jammed House Majority Leader Dick Arme's proposal for a flat tax on income down President Clinton's throat.

The income tax is a bad tax, but Arme's proposal is a winner on several fronts. First of all, like other flat tax proposals, it simplifies the tax code enough that you can file a return on a postcard. The new tax rate would be 17 percent. A single man or woman could claim a personal exemption of \$13,100, while a married couple filing jointly could claim \$26,200. Each dependent is worth a \$5,300 deduction, but other deductions would not be permitted. A family of four with an income of \$50,000 would pay taxes on \$13,200, or \$2,244. A family of four with an income of \$34,000 would pay no income tax at all. The rate of 17 percent would also apply to businesses, which would subtract revenues from expenses and pay a tax on the difference.

What's more, Arme's legislation, called the Freedom and Fairness Restoration Act, recognizes the fiction of "unearned" (meaning investment) income and would, as Gingrich's contract promises, eliminate the tax on capital gains, an outlandishly unfair tax on investors. As things stand now, an investor can be clobbered three times by the IRS on one simple investment. Playing the stock market, for instance, means paying a tax on the wages used to purchase shares. Then the company pays a corporate income tax, a cost borne by the company's owners, the shareholders. Lastly, the shareholder pays a capital gains tax on dividends from his investment.

Yet there is more to Arme's proposal than the burden it lifts from a taxpayer's shoulders. It ends withholding and requires Americans to write a monthly check to the Internal Revenue Service, a measure that would open taxpayers' eyes to the real cost of govern-

ment. Withholding helps hide that cost. Moreover, Arme would cap federal spending and require the Congressional Budget Office to calculate the risk to public health and safety and cost of complying with new federal regulations.

Of course, the measure has its opponents, many of whom march behind the chariot of Citizens for Tax Justice. This group, which receives 99 percent of its funds from the AFL-CIO, breathlessly claimed that Arme's proposal would balloon the federal deficit by a minimum of \$132 billion a year, which, if true, would certainly doom the proposal among liberal Democrats who might otherwise grudgingly support it. It turned out that CTJ tried pulling a fast one with some of Arme's data. In fact, the proposal would increase the deficit only \$40 billion, which as Arme says is a problem easily remedied with a few minor spending cuts. Professor Arme did not spare the Clinton administration's goofy analysis a failing grade either. When the Einsteins in Clinton's Treasury Department published their critique, Arme, an economics professor by trade, found a \$500 billion error. Of course, Clinton's myrmidons still say the proposal is not "revenue neutral," which is true provided no steps are taken to cut federal spending severely. But that is socialist math for you.

Arme's supporters abound. The most important are the hundreds of Americans who wrote to him after he published a piece about his proposal in the *Wall Street Journal*. They like it because they have become galley slaves chained to the federal government's sinking ship. Working Americans spend 5.4 billion hours wondering how much they owe the government and worrying about an audit. Even worse, the average family now pays more in taxes than it spends on itself. Americans work from New Year's Day past Independence Day to support government. As one man from New Jersey put it, "I am a senior citizen (WWII) who the President said when we were young we saved the world. I didn't save it for the IRS."

That is reason enough to back the proposal, but here are two more. Lawyers and accountants, who get rich translating the tax code for the untutored, get the shaft. "It's hardly an accident," business writer Robert Deitz says, "that over the past several years law and accounting firms' revenues nationwide have almost doubled, at the same

time the gross national product has grown by only about one-fifth that increase." Interpreting the tax code, of course, means exploiting deductions that are really a form of social control. As Arme says, "through a bewildering array of deductions, exemptions and credits, the politicians who wrote the code tell us . . . that investing in a municipal sewer system is better than investing in the next Microsoft. . . . A government does not have the right to use the tax system to massively influence the economic decisions of its citizens."



Common sense like that gave the GOP its majority in both houses. This begs the question of whether the Stupid Party will answer opportunity, which is banging down the front door, or roll over in bed and pull the covers over its head. Unhappily, a spokesman for Arme says the flat tax proposal will not land at the Ways and Means Committee until August, which means it does not stand a chance of coming to a vote anytime soon.

That is too bad, because Arme's plan is faithful to the contract and benefits the little guys who earn less than \$50,000 and do not have enough to invest to make a reduction in the capital gains tax an immediate, tangible benefit. They care less about what they will pay when they sell a house five years hence than about what they pay in taxes every week.

Guru Gingrich can prattle on about MegaTrends, Alvin Toffler, and capital gains all he wants. He can force Congress to obey federal laws because the rest of us do and never ask why the federal government should pass them or anyone should obey them in the first place. But all the fast talking and window dressing on Capitol Hill will not amount to a hill of beans if Americans do not get a break on the fee they pay for their franchise. Otherwise, they may tell the new pachyderm potentate and his bush beaters in the Stupid Party to pack their trunks and leave town.

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