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RED, WHITE AND BLUE FASCISM?

Org. Promoting Enduring Peace

Sinclair Lewis once wrote a book called *It Can't Happen Here*, the title of which was an ironic comment on the coming of fascism to America. Written in the Hitler-Mussolini era, Lewis's novel was criticized on artistic grounds by many reviewers, but everyone agreed that the title was great, summing up perfectly the complacent attitude of Americans on the possibility of fascism in this country. Indeed, it still does; we doubt if one out of a hundred Americans would take such a possibility seriously.

Part of the problem is the word "fascism" itself, obviously foreign, un-American. The term conjures up visions of Hitler with his funny little mustache and of Mussolini, with his comical, vainglorious poses. No sensible American would follow the likes of them, it is argued, and we think correctly. If fascism comes to America, it will not be the imported model; it will be homegrown, made in the U.S.A. Its S.S. would be the local police (remember Chicago?); it would appeal not to Hitler's *Meistervolk* but to the plain folks beloved by the American politician.

How would fascism come to the United States? Its leaders would not strut and posture a la Hitler and Mussolini, nor wear the military uniforms they affected (although he might indulge in a veterans' cap on patriotic occasions). No, the American fascist leader would come to us dressed in nothing more radical than modified Ivy League, talking not about the need for more living space for American expansion but about neighborhood standards and property values, not about inferior nations and races but about America's sacred duty to the world. He would not espouse a radical program but would appeal, as Mr. Nixon did in discussing student radicalism, to the sacred national past, to "old standards," "old values," "old precepts," to use the President's words.

The American fascist leader would not come to us on a white horse but in a Caddy with a decal of the American flag on a window. He would arrive, not arguing for a foreign ideology but draped in the Stars and Stripes, and his public appearances would open properly with a chaplain's prayer. He would call not for new conquests but for the preservation of the American way of life—against the Communists, the pacifists, the hippies ("too lazy to wash," people say), radical students, black extremists, the S.D.S., the Fathers Berrigan, the Catholic Worker, and the Milwaukee 14.

America's authority figure would be, in short, not a European but a native American fascist, and the danger would not be that he would seize power but that he would win an overwhelming victory at the polls by doing little more than denouncing long hair on boys and short skirts on girls. No sane person in this country wants a Hitler, true enough, but the day may come when many want the law and order of an American fascist, flanked on one side by the representatives of the "patriotic" organizations and on the other by exponents of the three faiths ("the American way").

How likely is this to happen? At this point we would say that the odds are against it, but we would not say flatly that it could never happen here—and although Mr. Nixon is no fascist, we must confess that we were not made more comfortable by reading his campus eulogy of the good old days and good old ways, his spirited defense of the military establishment ("It is open season on the armed forces") and his endorsement of the U.S. mission as world policeman.

That is one straw in the wind. We were sobered even more by the recent warning from 45 members of Congress that we must cut the power of the military or face the possibility of becoming what they call "a national security state." In their 61-page report the nine Senators and 36 House members said, "The most urgent challenge confronting Congress today is to reassert control over the military bureaucracy and the policy decisions it has preempted." "Bloated" defense spending, they say, is leading to the militarization of American society, the diversion of national resources from American needs, and the alienation of the young.

Who is to blame? Not so much the military as the civilian leadership of the nation, for having promoted service unification and intimate cooperation between the military and giant industry, says the report. "As a result, power once checked by rivalries and inefficiency is now wielded as a single force, defying effective democratic control." (What term is proper for a society in which the military-industrial system defies effective control?) What is at issue, in sum, say the report's signers, is the transformation of the United States into "a different kind of civilization."

A different kind of civilization—there is a disquieting thought. And one must bear in mind who the signers of this report are—not radical activists of the left or irresponsible carpers but 36 well-known members of the House and 9 distinguished Senators, including such men as Fulbright of Arkansas, Hughes of Iowa, McGovern of South Dakota, Harrison of New Jersey. They are not hysterical; they are not saying that fascism is upon us. At the same time, if we read them right, they are not saying it can't happen here either. We can't read the future, but given a choice between the serious analysis presented by these men and Mr. Nixon's recent appeals to popular know-nothingism and nationalism, we have no doubt as to what the choice should be. It can't happen here unless Americans let it.

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