

culmination of a long and broad process of dissolution of principles that were once our backbone. By the 1980s victimism was telling multitudes what they were already, after long immersion in a character-corroding secularized world, disposed to hear.

Then, too, the role of events goes ignored. The confidence-shattering experiences of World War I and of the Great Depression; World War II with its frightful atrocities; the traumas of the Vietnam War; the economic convulsions of the 1970s; our soaring crime and violence—all this mass irrationality and sinfulness doubtless made victimism a far easier sell than it would have been in an earlier America.

As to the consequences of victim-mongering, Sykes focuses too narrowly on controversial race and gender issues, and fails to grasp the larger danger: that our weakened moral character is the culprit in our much-bewailed decline. A people engrossed in grievances and concocting rationalizations for failure inevitably flees from challenges and difficult but necessary tasks, demands little of itself, and delivers still less. Mediocrity, slackness, and incompetence pervade everything from education to childrearing to governance to work of all kinds.

To combat victimism Sykes suggests the following: hold people responsible; treat them as citizens and not as clients of an entitlement state; contain litigation by capping awards, requiring filers of frivolous suits to pay costs, and limiting legal definitions of victimization; return to *civitas* (a sense of membership in and responsibilities to a community) and *caritas* (“a sober and respectful affection”); set examples of virtue; have “a moratorium on blame.” “In short, Americans need to *lighten up*.” These measures will help, but victimism will never disappear until the underlying secular dogmas of determinism, solipsism, and utopia

are overturned.

Also, Sykes’s prescriptions stress fashionable complaints about a declining sense of community, but it is doubtful that communitarian scolding will avail us much or that self-obsessed “victims” will pull up their socks for society’s sake. A firmer motivation for maturity and stoicism is insuring self-respect in this life and salvation in the next. If a religious collapse has caused this disease, then a religious revival is the cure—and not because religion is socially useful, but because it teaches us how human beings are meant to live.

But for all the shortcomings, Sykes’s concern for the sturdiness of our national character is long overdue. He is saying things that need saying, and he says them with courage and common sense. While it is far from being a definitive book, *A Nation of Victims* is a pioneering and on the whole worthy one, and forceful enough perhaps to help jolt us back to our senses.

1. As noted, e.g., by Richard John Neuhaus in “When Bad Things Happen to Good Religion,” *National Review*, November 10, 1989, 52-54, his review of Harold Kushner’s *Who Needs God?* 2. See John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York, 1978) and Bruce Bawer, *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and its Critics* (St. Paul, 1988), especially the title essay. 3. See *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York, 1945), 219, 251, et al. See also Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (1960), especially chapters 15, 17, 19, 20.

## Vintage Chamberlain

WILLIAM H. PETERSON

***The Turnabout Years: America’s Cultural Life, 1900-1950***, by John Chamberlain, *Ottawa, Ill.: Jameson Books, 1991. xviii + 254 pp. (paper \$12.95).*

FOR SOCIETY and the individual, life is full of turnabouts. In his 1982 autobiography A

*Life with the Printed Word*, John Chamberlain relates how he came to turn about, prevail, write searchingly, at times introspectively. Talk about a turnabout, this man disowned his flirtation with Bolshevism and veered from socialist to free-market beliefs.

For the past six and a half decades, this keen observer of American culture, born in 1903, a graduate of Yale in 1925, has written, incredibly, almost 20,000 essays. And what essays! They cover literary criticism and commentary on politics and economics. His other work includes newspaper editorials, book reviews, magazine articles, a syndicated column, and eight books. Chamberlain served on the staffs of the *New York Times*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Harper's*, *Life*, *Fortune*, *Wall Street Journal*, and, from 1960 to 1990, *King Features* as a syndicated daily newspaper commentator. Prodigious writer. And yet, always, a most elegant, unhurried, perceptive writer, a writer who has made a difference—i.e., a writer's writer.

*The Turnabout Years* serves up vintage Chamberlain—discernment, wit, graciousness, vision, a love of individual liberty. This collection of 54 essays was first published in *The Freeman*, 1950-1952, a short-lived anticommunist publication founded by John Chamberlain, Henry Hazlitt, Isaac Don Levine (later replaced by Suzanne La Follette), and project bankroller Alfred Kohlberg, the one-man so-called "China Lobby." The collection abounds with insights on political culture and points out turnabouts of a number of distinguished people.

Illustratively, Chamberlain tells the story of a gifted novelist and former left-winger sitting in a Manhattan restaurant during the 1930s. Presciently he giped his fellow intellectual diners, probably all on the Left, by parodying the closing lines of Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). "Intellectuals of the world, unite," he spoke up with mock

solemnity, "you have nothing to lose but your brains." The speaker: John Dos Passos.

Here, then, are political insights on literary giants such as John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, and Alistair Cooke; on economists such as Henry Hazlitt and William Graham Sumner; on polemicists such as Victor Lasky, Frank Chodorov, and H. L. Mencken; on "men at the barricades"—the phrase is from Priscilla Buckley's foreword—such as Herbert L. Matthews, Arthur Koestler, and Whittaker Chambers; on women at the barricades such as Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, and Ayn Rand. And on others including Henry Ford and India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

For example, Chamberlain, in an essay here on Leonard Read penned in 1952, gives some background on the birth of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), publisher of the present version of *The Freeman*. Chamberlain describes Read, the founder of FEE, "a curious mixture of American go-getter, Tolstoyan Christian, Herbert Spencer libertarian, and dedicated medieval monk."

Surprisingly, Read started out in the 1930s as a young Chamber of Commerce man in the San Francisco region selling the national Chamber of Commerce's brand of soft fascism as put forth by Franklin D. Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration (NRA). Read, likely then untutored in the wily ways of the world, had become willy-nilly an advocate of backdoor fascism, of the NRA in particular with its "Blue Eagle" industrial codes of fixed prices and production allocations as the answer to the Great Depression.

Read's salesmanship came to an end in a Chamber-NRA mission to Los Angeles, where he met Southern California Edison Company's chairman and C.E.O., W. C. Mullendore. Mullendore knew history, knew danger, knew the New Deal score on massive government interven-

tionism. He tore apart Read's simplistic NRA thinking, pushing the youthful Chamber of Commerce man into soul searching. Read, later looking back, thought that FEE was "really born in Mullendore's office that day."

Chamberlain's essay on Whittaker Chambers—the best in this altogether superior book—tells of a generation on trial; of how Chambers' Columbia University education in the 1920s could not account for the war which slaughtered millions and left an entire continent in shambles; of how that young idealist was lured into the Communist Party; of how he was pressed into dirty underground work by an apparatus of high treason; of how Chambers, who was to become a *Time* editor, met Alger Hiss, who was to become a high State Department official. The meeting place: a Washington communist cell. The time: the 1930s. Remarkably, Whittaker Chambers' conscience caught up with him and with monumental courage he rebelled against the Party, confessed his sin to the world, forfeited his job at *Time*, and became the star witness in two sensational Hiss trials, perhaps the stormiest and most significant trials of the century.

Why so much Leftward Ho, so much "I Have Seen the Future and It Works," on the part of America's youth and intelligentsia? But then why war, why depression, why government as the panacea when it is, far more often than not, the inadvertent and sometimes advertent agent of our social ills? Says Chamber-

lain in the Chambers essay, partly addressing himself, on the loss of a libertarian heritage: "In truth, most of us who came off the college campuses in the Twenties and Thirties succumbed to the evil of collectivist thinking in little, comfortable ways. We were the Fabians. We were the lukewarm."

That was back then, in the dispiriting inter-war period. But by the time Chamberlain came to write *The Roots of Capitalism* (1959) and *The Enterprising Americans* (1963) he had undergone his own turnabout years. Like John Dos Passos, Leonard Read, and Whittaker Chambers, Saul had turned into Paul. And so Chamberlain turned about, helping the conservative movement give America new direction. As then self-redirected John Chamberlain noted in a *Freeman* review in 1952:

The notion that man's future can be planned collectively, with the state serving as the compulsory planning agent, seals the creative and the spontaneous founts that lie deep in human nature. It closes the future to the benefits of inventiveness, of energy, of elegance, of amusing diversions, of adventure, of expression, and of success in any one of the seven arts and the manifold theoretical sciences. It is not only that Henry Ford would have no chance under socialism. A Shakespeare, a Josiah Willard Gibbs or a Max Planck would be equally impossible. And a Jesus of Nazareth would be strangled at his first suggestion that Caesar is not God.

To which I can only add: Amen.

### CORRECTION

*In the Fall 1993 issue, Vol. 36, no. 1, a misprint occurred in the essay "Paul Valery: The Politics of Method," by Steven Alan Samson. The corrected text should read: "He asked a question put earlier by Nietzsche: What is a man's potential? What sort of nobility is possible in a godless universe?" (page 6)*