

the future; all of us are in a position to examine the past. It is Ashby's insouciance about the growth of state power (and this after years of *liberal* rhetoric on the "military-industrial complex"!) that most clearly places him in the liberal camp.

To the extent that this insouciance is at the very heart of liberal ideology and politics in America today, we plead guilty to the charge that our article is an assault on liberalism.

We are not interested in making fine sociological points. We *are* inter-

ested in the designing of policies that will attack social injustice without disrupting the fabric of society. We can think of no better partners in this enterprise than those who share Warren Ashby's moral and human engagement.

## The Ethnic Connection

Michael Novak

Thinkers are not disembodied spirits. Neither are they atomic individuals. Thinkers are both *embodied* and also *socialized*. These are the main premises of "the new ethnicity."

Richard Neuhaus, as evidence his article "Going Home Again: America After Vietnam" in the October issue of *Worldview*, does not understand the new ethnicity, precisely because he is so thoroughly entrapped in "the old ethnicity" of his own variety.

Is it uninformative that his favorite stream of philosophy and theology is German?

Is it uninformative that the image of "civil religion" to which he would invite us is, so precisely, Protestant—as if the immigrants, the Spanish-speaking, the Indians, the Jews and others had made no modification of the American project?

Is it uninformative that his favorite metaphor for America is one that leaves countless millions absolutely cold—namely, "covenant"? (I do not accept the ideology that America is a "covenanted nation.")

Is it uninformative that his understanding of law and Gospel, as he himself suggests, is Lutheran?

Richard Neuhaus, like every other human, is an ethnic thinker. He is not universal. His thoughts do not speak for all. What marks him as a participant in "the old ethnicity" is that he is so naively unconscious of the narrowness of his own consciousness.

Each assertion that he makes about *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* in his recent article is un-

happily erroneous, and the pattern of his errors is identifiable:

1. Neuhaus fails to see that the target of my polemic is neither the WASP nor the intellectual but rather, more accurately, the "superculture"—the new class that believes in uniculture and believes it has escaped ethnic consciousness.

Traditional WASP culture has been just as victimized by superculture as any other ethnic culture. So has genuine intellectual life. Missing that point, Neuhaus misconstrues my whole book.

2. He says I was "impressed" by Kevin Phillips's book. I reviewed that book when it appeared. I detest the resentment which is its inner drive. I have argued consistently during my entire career that the lower-middle-class white yearns for a progressive politics and is conservative only by default.

3. I never thought that Muskie was an ethnic candidate. He was long ago cut adrift from authentic ethnic consciousness. He presented himself in 1972 as an ambivalent blend of Yankee and repressed Polishness (his "testiness," his slow steadiness).

The clearly ethnic candidate in this election is the Scotch-Irish Methodist, George McGovern. He has had difficulty communicating to virtually every other ethnic group. He is an authentic, self-conscious participant in his own ethnicity.

4. As virtually everyone agrees now, the election of 1972 will be de-

cidated precisely where I was among the first to say it would: in the urban Catholic ethnic neighborhoods of ten key states. Through blindness, mistakes and unconscious insults, the McGovern team systematically alienated that progressive, restless ethnic vote and, by September, had driven it in unparalleled fashion into the arms of Richard Nixon. Herculean efforts on George McGovern's part since early September may or may not be sufficient to turn the tide.

But the issue raised by *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* lies far deeper than 1972. It concerns the whole tide of American politics since at least 1960 (when I first began to write about it); the tide will have effects for decades. The instincts of white ethnics are, and have been, powerfully progressive, especially in economic issues. These are the instincts for which many of us now struggle to give political expression.

5. I spent the whole summer of 1970 with Sargent Shriver, working on behalf of Congressional candidates, helping in a campaign in direct *defiance* of Scammon and Wattenberg.

6. Neuhaus speaks of "ethnic passions and prejudices" without examining his own. That is a traditional attitude toward Southern and East-

---

MICHAEL NOVAK, author, most recently, of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* and a traveling speechwriter with Sargent Shriver's campaign staff, prepared these comments prior to Election Day, 1972.

ern Europeans: *They* have prejudices, *we* are reasonable. He speaks of "contrived nostalgia" on my part, yet treats us to pages of Protestant nostalgia about the Protestant civil religion—a civil religion painfully bigotted, years ago and now, against a genuine pluralism.

7. Nowhere in my book are the divisions of the past "uncritically celebrated." White ethnics wish no more than an accurate perception of their actual history in this country.

But my real focus is on the reality of *today*: those divisions still exist. I show evidence that many efforts at homogenization are inauthentic and repressive. Divisions—not those of the past but those of the present—are to be understood, nourished and creatively directed; they cannot, without violence, be repressed.

8. I do not, as Neuhaus asserts, question the *value* of becoming American; I question its *meaning*. Each cultural group experiences America in a different way. To become "American" is not to become uniform or homogenized or placed within one "essential" tradition. There are pluralistic ways of becoming American. The Slovak ways are not the German ways.

9. When commenting on various candidates in 1970 and 1972 Neuhaus fails to note the strategies of Adlai Stevenson, III, John Tunney, Edward Kennedy and others in 1970. His view of McGovern's strategy in 1972 is romantic.

I heard George McGovern tell a crowd of blacks in Watts "Come home, America," an hour after Angela Davis was acquitted. He spoke of returning America to "the ideals of its founding fathers." Recalling 1789, not many blacks in Watts that day wanted to go back to the founding fathers—wanted to "come home" to *that*. Ethnics do not want to go back to the cruelties of 1880-1940, either.

10. "Come home, America" is a theme calculated to flatter Anglo-Saxon prejudices. Neuhaus calls it "the almost fundamentalist appeal of the essential American tradition." But that is merely an evidence of his own ethnic bias. That is not "essen-

tial" America, only essential *Protestant* America.

I would not like to see America go back to ideals expressed, perceived and practiced in ethnically biased ways. I hope we do not go back to the Anglo-Saxon civil religion my grandparents encountered on their arrival (or ahead to the Anglo-Sax-

on civil religion Richard Neuhaus imagines). My grandparents *modified* that civil religion. It is, in part, *our* civil religion now. Richard Neuhaus hasn't yet grasped the implications of our immigration and our growing self-consciousness. He lacks the modesty his ethnic identity calls for. It is a common deficiency.

## Richard John Neuhaus Responds

Mr. Novak is uncommonly deficient in clarifying his complaint. It seems I am a German ethnic *and* a representative of the WASP tradition of cultural imperialism. I am a product, it would appear, of Teutonic Lutheranism, on the one hand, and of Perry Miller's New England, on the other. If I did not know that the aspiration toward universality is, in Novak's ethnic dictionary, the very essence of sin, I would feel complimented. In fact I feel cause for neither exultation nor despair in the fact of my German and Jewish forebears. Certainly I, and unlike Novak, feel no compulsion to come out of the closet as an angry ethnic. "Growing up in America" has not been for me "an assault upon my sense of worthiness" (*Unmeltable Ethnics*, p. 52). I am sorry that Novak—whose books sell well, who was educated at Rome's Gregorian University and Harvard, who is at ease in higher political and social circles in our land, who has a lovely home on Long Island and is sustained by a charming wife (of German lineage, way on back somewhere) and three delightful children—feels so ill-used. Since Novak has been away so long from the Slovak neighborhood he celebrates, the people who have known him over the years can hardly be blamed for failing to realize that all along they were not dealing with the real, the ethnic, Michael Novak.

I am even more sorry that, by the nature of Novak's complaint, exchanges are reduced to *ad hominem* argument. (I realize that, as Novak has developed his thesis regarding "intelligent subjectivity," *ad hominem* arguments are the only ones that

carry weight. It is, I believe, a peculiarly wrongheaded thesis.) Explaining an opposing viewpoint by reference to ethnic background is as unhelpful and tedious as are those pop Marxists who measure the truth of a statement by the class position of the person making it. In a fearfully complex world the desire to find a monocausal explanation of reality—whether it be economic determinism, psychoanalytic speculation or genetic/ethnic history—is as understandable as it is puerile. In much of Novak's recent writing it seems that ethnicity has become a kind of Little Orphan Annie Secret Code Ring for solving the more intractable mysteries of social order.

His disclaimer notwithstanding, Novak surely knows, as does anyone who has read his book, that the polemic of *Unmeltable Ethnics* is explicitly and repeatedly against "WASP culture." To be sure, Novak has recently written (*Commentary*, October) that he now prefers the term "British-American." My article was written before this revision appeared. It is hard enough to keep up with Novak's changes of mind; it is intolerable to be criticized for not anticipating them. The haste of Novak's retreat, or revisionism, as the case may be, is such that in the same *Commentary* letter he declares his hatred of the term "ethnic." Instead of forthrightly retracting what he wrote in *Unmeltable Ethnics* about the inescapable distinctiveness of being an ethnic, however, Novak now (*Christianity and Crisis*, October 2) declares that everybody is an ethnic. In *Unmeltable Ethnics* (pp. 46f., 58, et al.) a gulf is fixed be-

tween ethnics and WASPs, who are "nativists." The Germans, we are told, certainly are not ethnics, and the Irish qualify only in connection with "ethnic politics," but not on the other important scores. Now, however, it has come to this, that George McGovern is the most ethnic of us all. If everyone is an ethnic, it would seem that no one is an ethnic. If Novak simply means to say that we all have personal and communal histories, his book and numerous articles seem to be a rather disproportionate response to the triviality of his discovery. A few months ago when he wrote *Unmeltable Ethnics*—a long time ago in terms of the rapidity of Novak's intellectual breakthroughs—Novak told us what an ethnic was and why he was different from the rest of us, and I thought his argument was wrong. Subsequent permutations have brought it to the edge of being fatuous.

I did not say that Novak *agreed* with Kevin Phillips's analysis of the "new majority." If he was not "impressed" by it, however, it is difficult to understand why in *Unmeltable Ethnics* he returns to a discussion of it at least seven times. Again in *Unmeltable Ethnics* (and I am as embarrassed to be reminding Novak of it as he may be in remembering it), Scammon and Wattenberg's thesis about the political importance of the "social issue" is a major point of reference (cf. pp. 6-8), although, to be sure, Novak criticizes them for their "failure to notice the ethnic differential."

As for Novak's never thinking that Muskie was an ethnic candidate, it is possible—although I confess it seems unlikely—that I and many others did not understand what he was saying as recently as a year ago. In *Unmeltable Ethnics* Muskie is discussed at length in connection with ethnic politics. As he was writing the last pages of the book, and as Muskie's fortunes seemed already on the decline, Novak observed: "There seems to be a war within Muskie, between assimilation and distinctiveness. Unresolved, that war blurs his identity" (p. 290). The

issue is not whether Novak saw Muskie as an ethnic candidate but whether he saw him as a successful ethnic candidate. As Muskie was not doing very well, it is understandable that Novak did not wish to hitch his argument about ethnic politics to a falling star. Better the failure should lie with Muskie's betrayal of his ethnicity than with the argument itself.

Novak's criticism of my aside about the McGovern campaign rather misses the whole point of my article, namely, that the present "return to normacy" mood in the country is based upon an illusion that we can somehow "go home again." To my knowledge, no one else missed the point. Perhaps Novak's misunderstanding can be attributed to his excessive, almost exclusive, preoccupation with my treatment of his book, which was, after all, but a small part of the article. It is a common deficiency among authors.

Finally, Novak's suggestion that he has been making the argument of *Unmeltable Ethnics* since 1960 is most regrettable. I would refer him to his own *A Theology for Radical Politics* of 1969. Aside from both books' polemic against "the liberals" and aside from the conventional caricature of "sterile rationality," two more thoroughly antithetical arguments can hardly be imagined. Indeed, in *Unmeltable Ethnics* (see,

for examples, pp. 202 and 204) Novak slashingly assaults the "privileged elitism" of the student radicalism which, in *Radical Politics*, it is his express purpose to champion. Of the latter, Novak wrote: "This book intends to take the young seriously—and thus to press their ideas. I cannot pretend to be under thirty, but I can care enough about the ideas and realities to begin the work that needs doing." Later, writing about ethnics, Novak says that, even though he is not really of them, it is his purpose to be "an intellectual who tries to give voice to their instincts." One cannot help but wonder what renascent group or promising movement—now repressed but, once made articulate, a portent of a new America—will next be favored by this spokesman of stunning intellectual agility.

As for modesty, alas, how can I help but be modest? Here I am, a Canadian-reared, Texas-educated, Missouri Synod Lutheran writing from black Brooklyn where I have lived almost the whole of my adult life, a son of Maimonides and Melancthon, a descendant of *Stell* and *Bierstube*, an intellectual offspring, says Novak, from Jonathan Edwards; I am, it must be confessed, a veritable melting pot. My illegitimacy fully warrants the disdain of the ethnically pristine one-man immigrant Slovak community of Bayville, Long Island.

If you didn't subscribe to **WORLDVIEW** in '72 here's what you missed . . .

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Martin Luther King</b>  | <b>"A New Sense of Direction"</b>                 |
| <b>William C. Fletcher</b> | <b>"Solzhenitsyn &amp; the Merger of Dissent"</b> |
| <b>Gustavo Gutierrez</b>   | <b>"Jesus &amp; the Political World"</b>          |
| <b>Hillel Levine</b>       | <b>"Soviet Jews &amp; Middle-Aged Zionism"</b>    |
| <b>Gunnar Myrdal</b>       | <b>"The Sovereignty of Politics"</b>              |
| <b>Arnold Toynbee</b>      | <b>"For the First Time in 30,000 Years"</b>       |