

## From the Bottom Up

by Richard J. Margolis

Richard J. Margolis, Director of the National Rural Voter Project, was a Fellow of the Institute of Politics during both the fall '83 and spring '84 semesters. This article is his fall semester fellowship report.

"These unhappy times call for . . . plans . . . that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid."

—F.D.R., 1932

Outside my window they are building from the bottom up—cement mixers slowly turning, orange cranes pirouetting against a pale blue sky. The scene is a wonder of industry and accomplishment: on the girders workmen come and go, welding tomorrow's status quo.

Here at my typewriter, where achievements are measured less concretely, it occurs to me that I may have been building from the top down. Certainly it is true that the people I have met at the Institute and the friends I have made here operate from positions several notches above the pyramid's base. Equally certain has been the peculiar weightlessness of many of the words and ideas—the cranes and mixers of our trade—that we have cheerfully exchanged these past three months over coffee and sherry. Groping for solid ground, for an adequate explanation of the American condition, we fleeting Fellows have constructed our share of "mansions in the skies."

If I begin on this somewhat discouraging note, it is only out of respect for balance. The truth is, since early September I have been enjoying a state-of-mind roughly akin to euphoria. Even now, with the days growing short, I am delighted to linger and reluctant to carp. To a most happy Fellow, toughminded assessment does not come easily.

Still, as JFK once noted, "Of those to whom much has been given, much is required"—including, in my case, this report. Some of the other "requirements" associated with the Fellowship turned out to be more surprising. Who could have predicted, for example, that I would devote many hours here to the aid and comfort of undergraduates, one at a time? Quite a few students found their way to my office, some in search of help with their writing, some in need of career advice, but most, I suspect, just wanting someone to talk with. It is possible to be very lonely at Harvard, especially if one is young, rural and unaccustomed to breathing air charged with high-voltage ambitions. To some, at least, my office provided an occasional port in the ongoing electrical storm.

Not that I minded—quite the contrary; and not that I came up empty-handed, either. Among my souvenirs from Harvard students are: several recommended books that proved personally important; valuable help with my research (and much warm encouragement); new insights to ponder and new friendships to nurture; and invitations to socials, dinners and discussion sessions. One upshot has been my renewed respect for the talents, ideals and dilemmas of the present student generation, as well as a fresh perspective on the days of my youth.

The Study Group I led—"American Politics and the New Rural Vote"—extended my range of student acquaintances, including a number of graduate students. One reason we were able to learn a great deal from each other was that the graduate students came with rich political backgrounds and asked sharp political questions, though on occasion one or another might lapse into pedantry. The Kennedy School student who informed us, for instance, that "Researchers investigating the quantitative impact of deregulation on rural public transportation have found the numbers inconclusive"—may have learned her lesson a mite too well. The response, offered by a freshman from North Dakota, speaks worlds about the difference between scholarship and experience. "It's pretty hard now," she said, "to get to Grand Forks by bus."

In general, I am glad the graduate students came to our Student Group, though I wish more undergraduates had come as well, and that more of those who did attend had found their voice. Also—since I seem to be listing small regrets—I wish that the Rural Action Committee, a student organization that was thriving three years ago when I led an earlier Study Group here, had been able to summon as much energy this time around. I spoke at RAC's only fall semester meeting, at Phillips Brooks House. The last I heard, they were still searching for a chairperson. I do believe that student interests tend to follow social fashions, and that the subject of rural politics has probably been out of fashion at Harvard since Thoreau left Cambridge and tramped back to Concord. The Institute showed its mettle in making it possible for me, a self-appointed rural specialist, to drop a few morsels down Harvard's urban maw.

Part of my work at the Institute has been to focus on the political folly of our urban ways—not just because rural Americans merit an equal break, but also because they make up nearly one-third of the total electorate and their proportion is growing each year. I have written a paper, "Notes on a Rural Electoral Strategy for 1984," that makes the case for considering rural Americans as a discrete and significant voting entity. The essay, which I hope to expand into a book, is a direct product of my Fellowship, without which I could have found neither the time to write nor the scholars to help me think. The resulting work can be considered pioneering or pointless, depending on future events. My own guess—and the wish may be father to the thought—is that both politicians and political scientists in years to come will be paying much more attention to rural citizens and their voting behavior. What

Mr. Dooley said of Supreme Court decisions seem equally true of political fashions: they follow the election returns.

One of the enzymes now at work in rural political chemistry is choice. People today are living in what Margaret Mead has called "elective villages," whereas a generation or two ago village residency seemed more an accident of birth, and often a grim entrapment to boot. The difference becomes clear when one compares the poetry of the two periods. To E.A. Robinson, village life was "as familiar as an old mistake, as futile as regret." To John Gill, an upstate New York poet born in Chicago, it is a constant delight. Even blizzards can entertain Gill, who sits at his kitchen window enjoying the view of a pheasant in the deep snow, "his bronze, his red carnival colors" against the white. More than ever before in this century rural people have become the subjects of poetry written just down the road from them. Yet most remain unfamiliar with the poets and their works. Since last summer I have been trying to persuade the National Endowment for the Humanities to support a project that will bring rural poets and rural residents together in a series of regional conferences, on the theory—to cite JFK again—that "When power narrows the areas of man's concerns, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence."

NEH recently turned down my first proposal on grounds that the sponsoring organization I had chosen, Rural America, might "politicize" the proceedings. (Rural America is a liberal advocacy group in Washington.) But NEH officials encouraged me to try again, this time with an application offering assurances that the program will be bias-free. Some of my time at the Institute has been spent in drafting a second proposal, with the benefit of valuable advice from Professor Helen Vendler, whose course in poetry I had the good fortune to audit last semester. Among other things, Professor Vendler introduced me to a list of rural poets whose works I had not read. I am reading them now and rebuilding the proposal—from the bottom up.

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## Easy-Going Nihilism: The Contemporary University

by Allan Bloom

*The following is excerpted from the opening and the closing segments of a public address by Allan Bloom, member of the Committee on Social Thought and Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Chicago, in the ARCO Forum on January 9, 1984. Professor Bloom's appearance was co-sponsored by the John M. Olin Foundation and the Institute of Politics.*

Tonight I shall discuss what we consider to be our virtue: openness. There is one thing a professor can be absolutely sure of: every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction—they will be uncomprehending. The one thing one should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as if he were bringing into question two plus two equals four. These are things they don't think about. The students' backgrounds are as various as America can provide, some are religious, some atheists, some are to the left, some to the right, some are poor, some are rich. They are unified only in this, and in their allegiance to the university, and the two are related in a moral intention. The relativity of truth is not a technical insight, but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, as they have all been equipped with this framework early on. It is the modern replacement for the inalienable natural rights which used to be the traditional American grounds for a free society. That it is a moral issue for them is revealed by the character of their response to the challenge, a combination of disbelief and anger. "Are you an absolutist?" which is the only alternative of which they've heard, uttered in the same tone as, "Are you a monarchist?" or, "Do you really believe in witchcraft?" This latter leads to the indignation, for someone who believes in witches might be a witch hunter and a Salem judge. The danger that they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error, but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to the university and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than 50 years has dedicated itself to inculcating.

Openness, and the relativism which makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth, and various ways of life, and kinds of human behavior, is the great insight of our times. The study of history and of cultures teaches us that all the world was mad in the past. Men always thought they were right and led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The task is not to correct the mistakes, and really be right, but not to think you are