

The blooming of a delphic fraud

by Mark Burdman

The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*

by Allan Bloom, foreword by Saul Bellow
Simon and Shuster, New York, 1987
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"Sometimes I can't believe it. It's fun being No. 1 on the best-seller list. It's like being declared Cary Grant, or a rock star. All this energy passing through."—Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, in an interview with the *International Herald Tribune*, January 8, 1988.

It is a symptom of our troubled times, that Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, has become, during 1987 and the early parts of 1988, one of the most widely spoken-about commentaries on the current state of affairs in the United States. Bloom's book deals with very real and disturbing issues, and the author is quite clever in his own way. But the book, taken as a whole, is a nasty, although not unsophisticated, fraud.

During 1987-88, Bloom has received an extraordinary degree of attention both in the United States and internationally. He has been featured in the press of Great Britain, Israel, India, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere, and has been on interview shows on French television. The Swiss publishing house Kundig, SA of Geneva presented its first-ever "Rousseau

*Published in West Germany under the title, *Die Niedergang des amerikanischen Geistes: Ein Plaidoyer für die Erneuerung der westlichen Kultur*, by Hoffman und Campe, Hamburg, 1988, 516 pp.

Prize" to Bloom in April 1987, at the annual Geneva Book Fair. A German-language version has been produced in the spring of 1988, and is featured in bookstores throughout the Federal Republic of Germany.

The *Japan Times* of Aug. 21, 1987 portrayed the best-seller status of Bloom's book as an "unmistakable sign" of a "backlash in the United States" against rock music," and this acclaim was echoed in the *Daily Telegraph* of London in March 1988. It is hard to reconcile that praise with the "rock star" quote with which this review began, but it is precisely such a curiosity, that points to the success of the fraud.

It is no accident that many of those so enthusiastically praising Bloom, are those who become apoplectic at the very mention of the name, "Lyndon LaRouche." Bloom may indeed portray himself as the champion of Socrates and the Platonic Academy, but it is to the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi that one must look for his epistemological-philosophical roots. This book is delphic fare, and one of the more curious examples of "pseudo-LaRouche" around.

Bloom is a creature of the University of Chicago, belonging to what might be called "the neo-conservative wing of the liberal Aspen Institute." He signs the preface to the book, "Chicago, May, 1986," an interesting time and an interesting place. At that time, soon after the victory of LaRouche candidates in statewide elections in Illinois, Aspen's intelligentia undoubtedly became aware that LaRouche's years-long campaigns for the revival of education and cultural optimism had been one among the issues that had tapped a responsive chord in the American population. That may not entirely explain the reason Bloom wrote the book, but it has a lot to do with its popularization. Certainly it is the case, for example, that the Rousseau Prize award to Bloom was seen by the

prize's patrons as a counter to LaRouche. And, indeed, some of his promoters, like book-jacket endorser Bernard Lewis of Oxford and Princeton, are important figures in that same "Project Democracy" nexus in the United States, that ran such violent campaigns against LaRouche candidates when they insisted on the restoration of classical education, during New York school board elections in 1983.

The question of Socrates

The readers whom Bloom addresses are the growing number of Americans lately becoming most disenchanted with the rock-drug-sex counterculture of the recent 25 years. As the "Flapper Era" of the 1920s ended with the Hoover depression, the mid-1980s upsurge of hard times—and the shocking advent of the AIDS pandemic—has reminded our citizens that there are other values in life than the mere pleasures of kaleidoscopic successions of new fads in sexual play and foreplay. Bloom captures and addresses this ongoing, rapid shift in popular moods; it is to that mood-shift that he appeals.

The book's political purpose has been to capture the attention of the book-reading American undergoing that mood-shift, to give that reader a new orientation in outlook, and to prevent the healthy reaffirmation of traditional values to which a majority of Americans would naturally tend to return.

Hence, the book begins with an aura of rationality, mirroring some of the concerns made popular by LaRouche and his associates over the past two decades.

He states that the United States is in a state of educational and philosophical crisis, if not near collapse, caused by the infusion of moral relativism, value relativism, etc., which have undermined the earlier belief in natural law derived from the Founding Fathers. This moral relativism comes from the pernicious influence of John Dewey, Margaret Mead, Charles Beard, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Britain's John Stuart Mill, and the like.

So far, so good, although from the beginning Bloom evidences no capability to differentiate between "Cartesian rationality" and a true understanding of natural law. Nonetheless, it is not bad as a beginning. If the book were nothing more than this, and were we to give a charitable reading of his last chapter's attacks on the devastations caused by the 1960s and his appeal to return to reading Socrates, we might conclude that Bloom is nothing worse than a flawed rationalist with a confused understanding of Socrates.

It is because of this pretension of rationalism and classicism that Bloom's book may ensnare certain honest patriots in the United States and elsewhere. Certainly, *The Closing of the American Mind* reflects a deep and real concern. Illiteracy, both in the literal sense of reading and writing, both also about history and politics, has become epidemic. Reporting on the popularity of Bloom's book, the *Times* of London of Sept. 9, 1987 reported on a U.S. government survey which found that more than a third of American 17-

year-olds thought the Watergate affair happened before 1950, and that the U.S. Navy beat the Spanish Armada in 1898. One survey organizer was quoted: "We are raising a generation of historical and literary incompetents."

In this holocaust, a certain faction of the American policy elite has looked to reviving awareness of Socrates, as critical to the United States today. For example, in a Sept. 4, 1987 speech at the University of Wyoming, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said: "If I were to search for a great man who best embodied the love of free inquiry and the love of free citizenship, it would be Socrates."

Indeed, the matter of Socrates has become a subject of impassioned debate in the United States, although the debate often has the appearance of the proverbial dog-and-pony show. Hence, the new book of leftist scribbler I.F. Stone praising the judicial murder of Socrates, has led to a counter-movement defending Socrates, in which spokesmen like Bloom and kooky logical-positivist Sidney Hook have taken pro-Socrates public stands. Matters have gotten so curious, that on May 1, the Italian Communist Party daily *L'Unita*, which had in the days immediately before this been concocting new and absurd slanders against LaRouche, published an attack on Socrates as "reactionary," and praised I.F. Stone to the skies. As an example of the "reactionary" influence of Socrates inside the United States, they cited Allan Bloom! When Bloom starts serving as a decoy, or symbol, for attacks on LaRouche, the expert in the field of counterintelligence begins to have a most interesting time!

Mud and cynicism

After the introductory moments, the book begins to get strange, if not psychedelic. Part 1, under the overall heading "Students," is a mixture of provocative truisms and impressionistic meanderings, which ends up creating mud. Take his section on "Music," the one that has won him so much acclaim for his attacks on rock music. In the midst of some precise comments about the deadly effects of rock music on the mind, one finds the most incoherent commentaries on music as such. What is one to make of this, for example:

"Plato's teaching about music is, put simply, that rhythm and melody, accompanied by dance, are the barbarous expression of the soul. Barbarous, not animal. Music is the medium of the *human* soul in its most ecstatic condition of wonder and terror. Nietzsche, who in large measure agrees with Plato's analysis, says in *The Birth of Tragedy* (not to be forgotten is the rest of the title, *Out of the Spirit of Music*) that a mixture of cruelty and coarse sensuality characterized this state, which of course was religious, in the service of gods. Music is the soul's primitive and primary speech and its alogon, without articulate speech or reason. It is not only reasonable, it is hostile to reason. Even when articulate speech is added, it is utterly subordinate to and determined by the music and the passions it expresses."

Elsewhere, Bloom admits that he "instinctively" sided

with gifted students who “responded to the beat of the newly emerging rock music,” as opposed to “good” students who studied physics and listened to classical music, because the former expressed “real, if coarse, feelings as opposed to artificial and dead ones.” Not surprisingly, he asserts, “Classical music is dead among the young.”

This is not the only section in Part 1 where Bloom reeks with cynicism. Under the subhead, “Relationships,” he writes: “The honesty of this generation of students causes them to laugh when asked to act as though they were powerful agents in world history. They know the truth of Tocqueville’s dictum that ‘in democratic societies, each citizen is habitually busy with the contemplation of a very petty object, which is himself,’ a contemplation now intensified by a greater indifference to the past and the loss of a national view of the future. *The only common project engaging the youthful imagination is the exploration of space, which everyone knows to be empty*” (emphasis added).

Bloom’s Teutonic nightmare

But it is in Part 2, under the overall heading, “Nihilism, American Style,” that Bloom really begins to go wild. Suddenly, here, Bloom has discovered that the problems with American universities result from a “German invasion” of the universities. His bias about Germany was prepared earlier, with the observation: “A phenomenon like Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a high work of art which is intended to be

wholly German, of Germans, for Germans, and by Germans, and an expression of collective consciousness, is inconceivable to Americans.”

What drive! Would the Nazis object to such a characterization of Germany? But then, it gets much worse, and much more evil, and very consciously and slyly so. The first chapter of Part 2 is entitled, “The German Connection.” Here, in a nominal attempt to draw parallels between Weimar Germany of the 1920s-30s and America of the 1960s, Bloom comes to his own version of German collective guilt. For Bloom, the importation of words like “charisma,” “life-style,” “commitment,” “identity,” etc., from German-speaking usages into American life, is a function of (in his language) “German ideas,” which came from “the peak of Western intellectual life, in Germany,” from “German thought,” “German thinkers.” Like whom? Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, Herbert Marcuse, and the Frankfurt School. “Freud and Weber were part of that great pre-Hitlerian German classical tradition, which everyone respected,” he says. Then, some pages later, “Our intellectual skyline has been altered by German thinkers even more radically than has our physical skyline by German architects.” It is “my insistence on the Germanness of all this.”

Leave aside for the moment that Freud, for example, was not a German; as any Hapsburgian Austrian nostalgic for the *fin de siècle* period of the late 19th century will tell you. Nor, for that matter, was Nietzsche, who has impeccable Swiss credentials. And identifying Marcuse in ID-format style as “German” is not too different from labeling Benedict Arnold “American.”

On the other side, Bloom’s sins of omission are formidable. Not only is there no mention of such great German Golden Renaissance figures as Nicolaus of Cusa and barely a sentence on Gottfried Leibniz, but Friedrich Schiller, who represents the high point of Weimar Classical culture, gets brief, and mostly derogatory, attention. Yet, despite Allan Bloom, Schiller’s plays are a *truly Socratic* intervention into the mind, as are his lectures on universal history and his aesthetic letters. The latter, in particular, address precisely the issues that Bloom’s book pretends to concern itself with. It is another of those curious “coincidences” that Bloom’s book went to print, soon after the publication and-circulation in the United States of a new Schiller Institute-commissioned translation of Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters*.

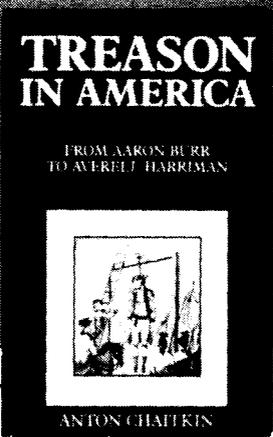
The giveaway that Bloom has committed a conscious fraud, is that none of this “German invasion” diatribe has anything to do with the book’s prefatory remarks on Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Dewey, et al. Suddenly, we have a Teutonic *deus ex machina* that has tormented us all. But, if Bloom really believes this, why did he not say so at the outset? To put the same question upside down, why does he never in the body of the book develop what he says in his introductory comments?

The most likely of explanations, is that Bloom knows “which side his bread is buttered on.” In the book, one finds

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Bloom repeatedly asserting that the university in American society today must compensate for the lack of an "aristocracy" in the United States. The true philosopher, he insists, always gravitates to the man with money and leisure, because only that latter can appreciate "the beautiful and the useless." Who owns Bloom's soul, and why he builds a willful fraud on the German question, becomes clear.

Bloom's patrons are the circles associated with the Aspen Institute, the organization originally set up by Anglophile, Bertrand Russell-worshipper Robert Hutchins and now patronized by Robert O. Anderson, the oil magnate and business partner of Lonrho PLC head "Tiny" Rowland of Great Britain. Anderson is also the patron of the Club of Rome, the Trilateral Commission, and the "environmentalist" movement. He is one of the central figures in the East-West "Anglo-Soviet Trust." It is because he needs the support of such influentials, that Bloom builds his anti-German construct. After all, it was the Aspen Institute, through the work of such as New York lawyer-financier John J. McCloy, which ran, together with Britain's Wilton Park, the post-World War II "reeducation" of the German elites. Bloom's book "reeducates" Americans about German philosophy.

Other elements in Bloom's "German problem," are dealt with in an accompanying piece by George Gregory, on the curious Mr. Leo Strauss.

The truth that Bloom hides, is that the problem with American universities and American culture since the sixties, is not a "German" matter affecting the United States. The roots are the proliferation of the "New Age" movement, which launched the rock-sex-drug counterculture in the first place. It is not hard to find the roots of the "New Age," but this is where Bloom refuses to tread. There, one finds both an "Anglo" dimension, typified by satanist Aleister Crowley, the Huxleys, and the like, and a strong Russian element, typified by Dostoevsky. It is at the merger of these two, embodied in such movements as "Theosophy," that one finds the mother of the troubles of the past two generations in the United States. It is the "New Age," not accidentally, which also wrecked Germany, not only because of the prevalence of Aquarian cults inside Germany itself, and the cultism of the Nazi inner circle, but also because of such imported influences as those of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. In the former, the "Third Reich" was an adaption to Germany of Dostoevsky's mystical "Third and Final Rome" doctrine for Muscovite Russia; the Frankfurt School explicitly labeled its own program, "The Dostoevsky Project," since the Frankfurt School founders saw in Dostoevsky's writings an efficient approach to undermining Western Judeo-Christian culture.

As for Nietzsche, the reader of Bloom's book can discover for himself what Bloom thinks of Nietzsche. Nietzsche may have hated Socrates, but Bloom can't hate Nietzsche. His prose whenever he talks of Nietzsche is the prose usually reserved for a god of the pantheon, and it is here, too, that Bloom reveals his true emotional loyalties, and which establishes *The Closing of the American Mind* as a fascist tract.

Bloom's only regret is that Nietzsche, in the past 20 years, has been usurped by the gutter New Left; his book is an attempt to place Nietzsche in a central place in the neo-conservative American pantheon.

'The eternal childhood'

The proper characterization of Bloom's emotional state of mind is "auto-erotic." When he is purporting to be rational, his is the rationalism of Descartes, and that rationalism necessarily brings with it an irrationalist component, the irrationalism of the "rock star" enjoying the "energy passing through." The university, which he yearns to be the institution of "Socratic philosophizing," is, in reality, a return to what Bloom calls "the eternal childhood." His argument, permeating the third section of the book, is that the United States, being a "democracy" and lacking an "aristocracy," must compensate for this by nurturing the university: "I bless a society that tolerates and supports an eternal childhood for some, a childhood whose playfulness can in turn be a blessing to society."

Bloom's Socrates is not the Socrates of impassioned love of mankind's development, conveyed in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the word "agapē" but an erotic devotion to the motherly warmth of a university setting. In the universe of "Bloom the rock star," eros, indeed is what matters: "Rousseau admired Plato and thought he had deep insight into human beings, but rather more as a poet than a philosopher or scientist. Plato was indeed the philosopher for lovers, but Rousseau, without consulting Plato, taught that eros is the child of sex and imagination. Its activity is poetry, the source of what Rousseau understood to be the life-creating and -enhancing illusions and thereby the source of the ultimate grounds of the folk-minds that make peoples possible. In Plato, eros led to philosophy, which in turn led to the rational quest for the best regime, the *one* good political order vs. the plurality of cultures."

Ultimately, the attractiveness of *The Closing of the American Mind* is paradoxical. While it appeals to those disenchanted with the excesses of the rock-sex-drug counterculture (what the London *Economist* referred to, in comments on Bloom, as the "New Seriousness" of the yuppies), the book ultimately appeals to the same emotional matrix as drug use does. It is an invitation to "auto-erotic" fantasizing about an "eternal childhood," a world in which the mobilization of young minds to combat AIDS, to conquer new vistas in science, to prevent mass starvation in large areas of the Third World, etc., plays no part. It is no accident, in this respect, that one of Bloom's book-jacket endorsers, former Aspen Institute-Berlin board member Conor Cruise O'Brien of Ireland, has become a leading international propagandist, through his column in the *Times* of London, for the legalization of drugs. *The Closing of the American Mind* is a narcotic by other means, and its international success has helped "close" the path to the kinds of intellectual and moral solutions the world now so desperately needs.