

Imperfectly Clear

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NOTES ON THE OLD SYSTEM: To Transform American Politics. By Marcus Raskin. McKay. 180 pp. \$6.95; paperback \$2.95

By JAMES FALLOWS

"I AM CONCERNED with the obvious," says Marcus Raskin in his book's first sentence. That is true, but it is no fault. The erosion of democracy, the rise of the corporate state, the imbalance between presidential and congressional branches

of government—these and the other themes Raskin handles are hardly novel, but they are nonetheless of basic importance and urgency.

"Some of my friends and colleagues have insisted that I make the obvious clear," the second sentence says. Alas, they have not insisted firmly enough. Although Raskin raises dust all along the trail toward understanding of our economic and political dilemmas, the one thing this book signally fails to do is make anything "clear." *Notes on the Old System* is a maddeningly vague and elliptical piece of work, often more like the outline for a book than a finished and self-con-

tained argument. From most writers a similar effort would not be worth reading; here, Raskin manages to convey a glimmer of his meaning just often enough to make the reader persevere.

The "System" which Raskin sets out to define is the confluence of economic and political forces which, in his view, has deprived the citizen of anything resembling democracy and has created the preconditions for tyranny. As he puts it in his introduction, "Modern tyranny is the maintenance of organized power in the hands of the state, its military and bureaucratic apparatus, and its corporate system. The corporate forms seek the death of politics, favoring instead hierarchic and administrative processes through which human concerns are transformed into matters of interest, ideological pretension, or quantitative measurement. Deliberative bodies such as the Congress or the town meeting are seen as outmoded."

These lines, with their air of overgeneralization and their core of insight, are typical of what follows. It is clear that Raskin has given hard, original thought to some of the major issues of the day. He examines the way presidents from Lincoln, to FDR, to FDR's successors have used "crises," real and imagined, to arrogate power to the fourth branch of government, the presidency. He explains how and why Congress has acquiesced in this process, even when appearing to stand up for its rights in struggles over impoundment and, yes, impeachment. He describes the economic "baronies"—corporations, banks, public and private bureaucracies, labor organizations—which have built a wall that separates the unorganized citizen from any exercise of meaningful political power.

Raskin has even accomplished the mi-

raculous feat of saying something interesting about the downfall of our former President. Richard Nixon was the victim not of too little principle, but too much, Raskin suggests. Because he really did believe in anticommunism, Nixon kept plugging away in Vietnam when smarter politicians would have quit. And because, even after his conversion to Keynesianism, he still imagined that the economy worked on competitive, free-market principles, he hesitated to use the arsenal of near-dictatorial economic powers Congress kept trying to force into his hands. If he hadn't been a believer, Raskin says, Nixon might have turned himself into a crisis-management president, like FDR or like Kennedy during the missile crisis, and thereby saved his skin: "For those who are corrupt and whose corruption is discovered, their best personal protection is to reach out for greater areas of power . . . The supreme political irony of the economic crisis since 1971 is that if the President had adopted the suggestions of Senator Henry Jackson or Congresswoman Bella Abzug for controls over the economy—which would have meant in practice, exercising control with the cooperation and support (cooption) of leaderships of the largest organizations (sic) economic units—he might have escaped unscathed from Watergate."

But because Raskin has done only half the job of persuasion, his insights lack the force they might have. He says that the book is an act of passion ("these Notes are an appeal from a man who is appalled and angry . . .") but the passion has led him only to state, rather than prove, defend, or elaborate upon, his views of the world. The problem, simply put, is that one is often not sure just what Raskin means. For example: (Continued on page 3)

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• In a list of projects which "manifest the Nixon principles of how things work," Raskin says that John Ehrlichman was responsible for the following task: "A 'metic' class was to be authorized through 'social welfare' legislation." Even those who instantly grasp the connotations of "metic" (from the OED: "*Gr. Antiq.* A resident alien in a Greek city, having some of the privileges of citizenship.") may wonder what Raskin is talking about. Aliens, in the literal sense of the word? If not, what? "Authorize" how? Through what kind of "social welfare" legislation? Through the Family Assistance Plan? If so, how—and why?

• "It is assumed that representatives from the defense industries will be appointed to run the Department of Defense." McNamara—maybe. But Clifford? Laird? Richardson? Schlesinger? How do they fit in?

• In an analysis of congressional abdication of the war-making power, Raskin says, "The party of the imperium, the Democratic party, wanted a restoration of congressional power. Its leaders believed that the brokering function needed to be shared between the Congress and the President to maintain order within the United States. (The record shows that imperialists would have risked very little by such a political concurrence between the Executive and Congress.)" What record? Which imperialists? How, where, and when?

The sympathetic reader can, of course, supply the answers to many of these questions. Unfortunately, that limits the audience to the already converted.

At the very end of his book, Raskin proposes a solution which suffers from a similar lack of focus. As a means of restoring power to both the Congress and "the people" (another term never clearly defined), he suggests a system of "congressional grand juries," 24-member panels, one for each 50,000 people in a congressional district, empowered to investigate everything from corporate operations to national defense policy and then to "develop *ongoing* local assemblies of the people to deliberate on all questions of national, transnational, and local concern." While somewhat out of proportion to the all-pervasive problems he has previously described, this is an interesting idea—and one that raises questions. At a one-per-50,000 ratio, there would be something like 4,000 of these grand juries across the country. Would they all investigate, say, the new SALT treaties? If not, how would they divide the labor? And what, in the end, could they really *do*? Raskin's four-page treatment of the juries leaves the answers up in the air.

This is the first book I have read in years which should have been twice as long as it is, with the extra material consisting of details, amplifications, re-definitions. I hope that will be Raskin's next project. □