
Satire, Broadax-Style

Reviewed by
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"From personal and religious beliefs I consider abortions an unacceptable form of population control. Furthermore, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life—including the life of the yet unborn. For, surely, the unborn have rights also, recognized in law, recognized even in principles expounded by the United Nations."

Richard Nixon
San Clemente, April 3, 1971
As quoted in "Our Gang"

Would you believe, Dr. Spielvogel, that the day after our President stood on

Books

OUR GANG (Starring Tricky and His Friends.) By Philip Roth.

(Random House, 200 pp., \$5.95)

the Law of Moses to decry the slaughter of fetuses his conscience impelled him to release Lt. William L. Calley from the stockade while he pondered the case against the man convicted of the murder of 22 Vietnamese civilians?

Sure you would. You believed him the other day—didn't you?—when he wanted to eliminate lunches for 1½ million presumably needful schoolchildren, a proposal his own nutrition expert called "mean-spirited." You believe him when he decided to save American lives by hurtling American soldiers into Cambodia. You believed that stepping up is

stepping down when it comes to war, that less is more and more is less, and that But enough. Having listened to the confessions of Alexander Portnoy, doctor, you may be forgiven for believing anything.

Now Philip Roth is a firmly committed words man. He believes—one might say he believes absolutely—in their value and power. A few of these words from President Nixon caused him to muse and then to interrupt work on the novel that was to have followed "Portnoy's Complaint" to write "Our Gang," a satire. It is

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the one book of the season that is certain to be ignored by the President and his friends, who pass through its pages under such less than subtle names as Trick E. (Tricky) Dixon, Defense Secretary Lard, Attorney General Malicious, former President Lyin' B. Johnson, the Rev. Billy Cupcake, etc., etc.

The work of the satirist is to develop with remorseless logic given premises to their own lunatic conclusions. No one has claimed the process should be gentle or tasteful (*vide Swift*), and "Our Gang" is neither. Indeed, Mr. Roth pursues his goal with the unrelenting zeal of a college humorist, and college humor has its moments of deftness but a lot of it is merely sophomoric.

The same is true of this book. From a glorious beginning, Mr. Roth becomes the victim of his own outrageous—and sometimes, but not often enough, outrageously funny—zaniness. Nicholas von Hoffman has accomplished the same end with greater finesse and at considerably less length in his columns. Mr. Roth could have cut with a rapier but chose instead to swing with a broadaxe. As a result, only the converted will buy it.

Mr. Roth takes for an epigraph to "Our Gang" a section from George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." Orwell wrote in 1946 that "the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. . . Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appear-

through these corridors of power and halls of justice and closets of virtue and dumbwaiters of dignity and cellars of idealism, leaving us in the end, if not stronger, wiser; and if not wiser, stronger; and if alas, not either, both."

But what if, Mr. Roth asks, among the men and women and babies in that ditch at Mylai, there was one pregnant woman? In that troublesome case—hypothetical, to be sure, but still presenting a moral dilemma—can the hard but lofty principle embodied in the first statement ("the sanctity of human life" and the equally honored, extralegal virtue embodied in the second (mercy) be made to square in action?

Well sure they can, in Mr. Roth's book. "It's all well and good," Tricky tells a troubled citizen, "for us to be Monday Morning My Lai Quarterbacks, you know, but there's a war going on out there, and you cannot always expect an officer rounding up unarmed civilians to be able to distinguish between an ordinary fat Vietnamese woman and one who is in the middle, or even the late, stages of pregnancy . . . in that all of them seem to go around all day in their pajamas, it's almost impossible to tell the men from the women, let alone the pregnant from the nonpregnant . . . In my review of Lt. Calley's case, I will now be particularly careful to inquire whether there is so much as a single shred of evidence that one of those 22 women in that ditch at My Lai was a pregnant woman. And if there is—if I should find in the evidence against the lieutenant anything whatsoever that I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life, including the life of the yet unborn, I will disqualify myself as a judge and pass the entire matter on the Vice President."

Tricky's defense of the "yet unborn" leads to an uprising of the Boy Scouts,

The book ends with Tricky in Hell, running for Satan's job. "And let there be no mistake about it: if I am elected Devil, I intend to see Evil triumph in the end; I intend to see that our children, and our children's children, need never know the terrible scourge of Righteousness and Peace. Thank you."

One does recognize the voices.

In a small but highly recommended work of satire called "Animal Farm," which was published in the same month of 1945 that atomic bombs slipped through the skies toward Hiroshima and Nagasaki, George Orwell lay down seven commandments of his new animal society. They were loosely based on 10 earlier rules revealed on a mountaintop to an old Jew and reported in "Exodus," which had already been kicking around for some centuries.

One of Orwell's commandments was, "No animal shall kill any other animal," a noble if untenable precept which the animals modified in practice to read, "No animal shall kill any other animal without cause." Moses, more the absolutist, saw no need to revise his version, although he lived 120 years and saw much.)

Both books have been hailed as classics of their kind. "Exodus" is a sort of travelogue that lived. ("The style is lively and vigorous," one English sage noted,