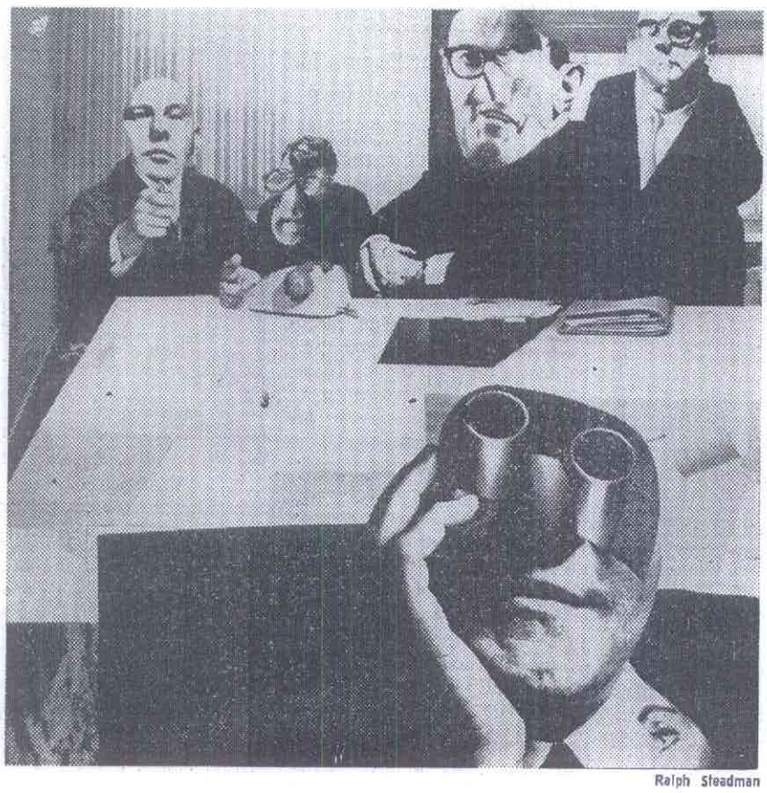
Can It Happen Here?



Ralph Steadman

By BERTRAM M. GROSS

Could it happen here?

Back in the 1930's Sinclair Lewis wrote "It Can't Happen Here" to warn that it might. Today, some people—shocked by the more flagrant forms of police brutality and Justice Department injustice—claim that fascism is already on the way. Others, more impressed by America's democratic traditions, claim that it could *not* happen. For them, "fascism" is just an empty epithet.

In my judgment, the "it"—as developed in Germany and Italy decades ago or today in Greece—could *never* happen in America. Totalitarianism in this country would be an outgrowth of peculiarly American conditions, exploiting the vast potentialities of post-industrial technology, organizational forms, mass media and urbanism.

The purpose of these notes, therefore, is to present an image of neo-fascism American style, without discussing *any* of the factors that might bring it—or prevent it from coming—into existence.

In my judgment, American totalitarianism would be a pluralistic "friendly fascism" that might be epitomized as follows:

A managed society ruled by a faceless and widely dispersed complex of warfare-welfare-industrial - communications - police bureaucracies caught up in devoting a new-style empire based on a technocratic ideology, a culture of alienation, multiple scapegoats and competing control networks.

Behind its cosmetic facade, such a regime would capitalize on all our potentialities for internal and external aggression and carry us and the world into an orgy of destructiveness that would make Hiroshima look like kindergarten play.

Let us now look at some of the major points.

First, the present military-industrial complex would be very considerably broadened and strengthened. It would include three new components: the communications complex (including Madison Avenue as well as the networks and A. T. & T.) an expanded welfare establishment and a vast grid of police, espionage and *provocateur* agencies.

Second, the social backgrounds of the key élites would be diverse. The hard core would doubtless be middle-aged, male WASPS from the aristocracies of both the old Social Register and the new managerial "technopols." Tactical mop-up roles would be played by hard-hat storm troops, John Birchers and "blockhead" or "Know Nothing" officials of the Lester Maddox or George Wallace variety. Somewhat greater roles would be played by "safe and sane" savants: natural scientists, social scientists, professionals and intellectuals. American-style Adolf Eichmanns would be complemented—if not indeed organized—by American-style Albert Speers.

Third, the foreign posture of the new "pentagon of power" would be vigorously expansionist under the umbrella of a grand Atlantic-Pacific alliance. More extensive domination of Europe would provide a stronger basis for expansion in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa.

Fourth, under the banner of an end to ideology, American-style fascism would be based on a full-blown technocratic ideology. This essential element of neo-fascism would provide a continuing illusion of human progress through new technological gadgets for killing people, controlling their behavior, eliminating physical and mental labor, and wasting natural resources.

Fifth, instead of a phoney *volkskultur* to whip up the masses, the dominant tone would be a culture of alienation. A lonely crowd is safer than an organized one.

Sixth, neither Jews nor blacks would be Chosen Scapegoates. Over-attention to one group in a heterogeneous society would hardly meet cost-effectiveness standards. Membership on the index of official scapegoats would be open to all "driveling cowards" and "effete snobs" irrespective of race, religion, age, sex or previous condition of servility to the system.

Finally, direct repression would operate through, around, under and over the old constitutional procedures. The guiding principle—to be developed by an expanded Rand Corporation—would be to get a pound of terror from an ounce of *schrecklichkeit*. This economizing would be facilitated by extensive use of indirect controls: welfare state benefits made conditional upon good behavior; credentialized meritocracy; accelerated consumerism; and market manipulation. Equally important would be extensive co-optation to buy off the most intelligent leaders of dissident group.

This polished and flexible form of public repression would need no charismatic dictator. It would require no one-party rule, no mass fascist party, no glorification of the State, no dissolution of legislatures, no denial of reason. It would probably come slowly as a cancerous growth within and around the White House, the Pentagon, and the broader political establishment.

To prevent public repression we must first overcome personal repression. Only through courageous willingness to fear can we develop articulated fears to match the magnitude of an unclear but present danger.

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