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TW Column by Steven Lewis

Apologies from a Baby Boomer



I began this piece last spring, in the early days of America's descent into the Dystrumpian future. So many of us liberals of a certain age held our collective breath, preparing for the coming repressions, the planetary insults to reason and civilized behavior, the Armageddon-sans-Rapture that awaits this great country. Not even a year after the election, it's already far worse than many of us feared.

How did this glorious experiment in democracy come to this inglorious moment?

At the risk of seeming an arrogant elitist bastard—as nearly half the country seems to believe about all liberals—I've come up with some answers, and frankly, they don't reflect well on me or my generation. Let's take a little walk back in time.

It's 1964 or 1965, I'm eighteen or nineteen, and the world is suddenly not making any sense. I'm just realizing that

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my history books have told me shameless lies about the American past, censoring out every hideous thing we've done to Native Americans, African Americans, women, Asians, Jews, homosexuals—anyone not white, Protestant, and male. Yeah, and something is still really REALLY fishy about JFK's assassination and that phony Warren Commission report. Plus the new president is lying through his teeth about what's going on in Vietnam, while my high school friends are dying in rice paddies thousands of miles away. Closer to home, parents and teachers are perpetrating bald-faced lies about God, country, sex, drugs, and rock and roll—then demanding that we shut up, straighten up and fly right.

But it's 1964 or 1965, and the inebriating rhetoric of the Free Speech Movement is wafting out of Mario Savio's mouth in Berkeley, crossing the Rockies, blowing like tumbleweed over the Plains, and stopping overnight in Madison, Wisconsin, where my college friends and I are just waking up to all the shameful hypocrisies perpetrated by our parents' generation.

So, thousands, hundreds of thousands, MILLIONS of my generation across the country are crowding fields many times bigger than Yasgur's farm in Bethel, New York, for Woodstock, standing shoulder to shoulder, marching, chanting, sitting-in, speaking our minds. And when we get dragged off to jail, when we are beaten by cops and rednecks and National Guardsmen, jack-booted thugs with fixed bayonets and night sticks, it doesn't matter because we are right. We are righteous.

And like all righteous people, we know God is on our side, Abraham and Isaac, the love of Jesus, flowers in our hair. It is the Age of Aquarius.

And we are the moral conscience of the country. The moral arbiters about all things good and evil. The morality police.

"You are materialistic, shallow, and self-serving," we sneer at our parents.

"Baby killers!" we chant at Vietnam vets.

"Pigs!" we yell after cops.

All conservatives are heartless, soulless jackals unfit to walk alongside the hippie Jesus we have concocted in our own image.



Now, let's trace a line from 1968—Martin Luther King mowed down, Bobby Kennedy killed on TV, and the fiery anguish of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—to the 1970 atrocities at Kent State and the bombing of the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin in Madison—to body bags that kept coming into Dover Air Force Base and elsewhere throughout the late '60s and early '70s, when everything—and I mean everything—was falling apart.

Then pause for a moment and take note of Vice President Spiro Agnew, who helped ignite the so-called silent majority. He got the attention of the less-educated, disenfranchised working-class people we scorned, branding liberal critics “pusillanimous pussyfooters” and “nattering nabobs of negativism.” And the silent majority not only heard him, they reelected Richard Nixon in 1972, crushing our anti-war hero George McGovern. We should have taken note.

Well, we didn't take note. We didn't take stock. We didn't understand the implications of demanding free speech out of one side of our mouths while out of the other we told our enemies there were some things (many things—oh, so many things) that they were not allowed to say.

Too enamored with the beauty of our truth, we failed to predict the ugly backlash that would come at us after calling our fellow citizens fascists, racists, misogynists, bullies, fools, morons, liars, and killers. We were so blind that, in the name of righteousness, we committed our own ethical and moral atrocities.

How could we ignore that they'd hate us for that? That they might never forgive us for our elitism, our snottiness, our holier-than-thou-ness? That we had turned into social bullies and abusers? And how could we have missed the utterly simple notion that they would someday come to despise us and everything we believe in so much that they'd elect another narcissistic baby boomer like Donald Trump to pay us back?

How arrogant we were! How wrong.

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Because so many of us on the left now seem to be blaming *them* for this dismal state of affairs, I speak only for myself when I say I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I've been such an arrogant elitist bastard. I'm sorry I have showed no respect for your beliefs, for your fears, for your pain. I was wrong. And, mark my words, I will work every day for the rest of my life to make sure this kind of national horror never happens again.

Publishing Information

- Spiro Agnew, William Safire, and impact on the press: "[Nattering Nabobs](#) [5]" by David Remnick, *New Yorker*, July 10, 2006.

Art Information

- [President Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy Campaigning in New York, 1964](#) [6], photo by Cecil W. Stoughton; public domain.
- [Lyndon Johnson Meets with Richard Nixon, Presidential Candidate, 1968](#) [7], photo by Yoichi Robert Okamoto; public domain.



Steven Lewis is a contributing writer and columnist at *Talking Writing*, a former mentor at Empire State College, current member of the Sarah Lawrence College Writing Institute faculty, and longtime freelancer. His work has been published widely, from the notable to obscure, including in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Ploughshares*, *Narratively*, and *Spirituality and Health*.

He's also literary ombudsman for 650: WhereWriters Read. His books include *Zen and the Art of Fatherhood*; *Fear and Loathing of Boca Raton*; *If I Die Before You Wake* (poetry); a novel, *Take This*; and a generational sequel, *Loving Violet*, due out this fall from Codhill Press.

For more information, see [Steve Lewis's website](#) [8]. You'll also find him on Twitter [@LewisWrite4hire](#) [9].

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