The Capitulation of James Baldwin

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chairman of Harvard's Afro-American Studies Department, recalls in the *New Republic* (June 1, 1992) how writer James Baldwin (1924–87), having been pushed aside as a spokesman for black America in the 1960s, courted "a new vanguard, one that esteemed rage, not compassion, as our noblest emotion."

In an impossible gambit, the author of No Name in the Street *[1972] sought to reclaim his lost authority by signaling his willingness to be instructed by those who had inherited it. Contradicting his own greatest achievements, he feebly borrowed the populist slogans of the day, and returned them with the beautiful Baldwinian polish. "The powerless, by definition, can never be 'racists,'" he writes, "for they can never make the world pay for what they feel or fear except by the suicidal endeavor that makes them fanatics or revolutionaries, or both; whereas those in power can be urbane and charming and invite you to those houses which they know you will never own." This view—that blacks cannot be racist—is today a familiar one, a platitude of much of the contemporary debate. The key phrase, of course, is "by definition." For this is not only, or even largely, an empirical claim. It is a rhetorical and psychological move, an unfortunate but unsurprising attempt by the victim to forever exempt himself from guilt.*

The term 'racist' is here redefined by Baldwin, as it has been redefined by certain prominent Afro-American artists and intellectuals today, to refer to a reified system of power relations, to a social order in which one race is essentially and forever subordinated to another.... To be sure, it does express, in an abstract and extreme manner, a widely accepted truth: that the asymmetries of power mean that not all racial insult is equal.... Still, it represents a grave political error.

For black America needs allies more than it needs absolution. And the slogan—a definition masquerading as an idea—would all too quickly serve as a blanket amnesty for our own dankest suspicions and bigotries. It is a slogan that Baldwin once would have debunked with his devastating mock-detachment. He would have repudiated it not for the sake of white America—for white America, he would have argued, the display of black prejudice could only provide a reassuring confirmation of its own—but for the sake of black America. The Baldwin who knew that the fates of black and white America were one also knew that if racism was to be deplored, it was to be deplored tout court, *without exemption clauses for the oppressed.*

mercial skyscrapers (for which his plans were invariably rejected) or on stores or office buildings, but rather on public buildings—libraries, schools, churches, and synagogues. The "inspirational if rather generic monumentality" of Kahn's architecture, Lewis concludes, reflects more than his own pursuit of broad abstractions such as "Silence and Light;" it reflects also "our own uncertainty about our institutions and their ultimate validity."

OTHER NATIONS

The End of the Italian Republic?

"Italy after Communism" by Giuseppe Sacco, in *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 1992), Ctr. for Strategic and International Studies, 1800 K St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006; "A Second Italian Republic?" by Angelo Codevilla, in *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1992), 58 East 68th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

In Italy, which has had 51 governments since the end of World War II, talk of a governmental "crisis" is usually taken with a large grain of salt. But today, University of Rome political scientist Giuseppe Sacco and Hoover Institution Senior Research Fellow Angelo Codevilla agree, the collapse of communism has ushered in a genuine crisis.

More than four decades ago, in the historic elections of April 18, 1948, the Italian people decisively chose alignment with the West and rejected the Communists' bid for power. Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi's Christian Democrats and their allies won more than three-fifths of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, while the Communists and their allies were held to 31 percent of the vote. That, in essence, remained the pattern during the ensuing decades (with the Socialists holding the balance of power after 1963). But keeping the Communists out of power all that time had a price. Because the anti-Communist parties had to govern together, Sacco notes, they could not confront each other in elections with opposing programs. Nor could they take turns exercising power. The voters could never really "throw the rascals out," but instead had to put up with rule by party bosses. For nearly a half-century, Codevilla observes, "cabinets have risen and fallen, policy has lurched left or right, careers and fortunes have been made and lost, strictly by deals made among factional potentates. The voters have been spectators." Now, however, that seems to be changing.

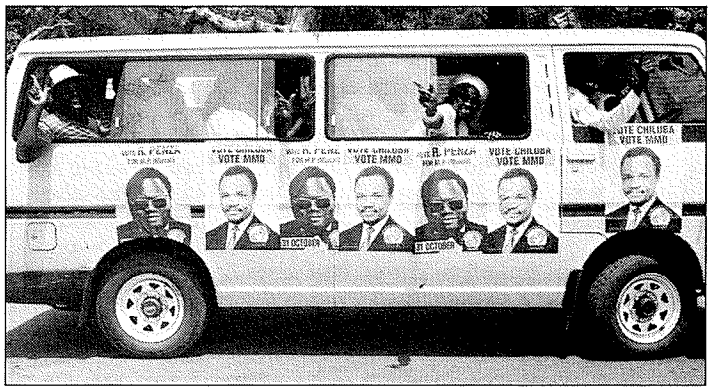
On May 9, 1991, then-President Francesco Cossiga, a Christian Democrat who urged people not to fear the term *second republic*, declared that the government had become a "*cosa nostra*" of the parties. As Codevilla observes, Cossiga "thereby legitimized the harshest criticism of the regime—that the government serves as a conduit of organized crime and that its activities are often indistinguishable from the crime syndicates'." A referendum a month later on a minor change in the electoral law was transformed into a symbolic contest between "defenders of the 'democratic' constitution against chaos or worse," who favored a "no" vote, and "advocates of people power and morality," who urged a "yes" vote. More than 62 percent of the electorate went to the polls and an astounding 95.6 percent voted yes. "Nothing in Italian politics has ever been plainer," says Codevilla. The status quo "has very few defenders."

Some blame the ills of the party-dominated system on proportional representation: The voter casts his ballot for a party, and parties divide the seats in parliament in proportion to the votes they get. Reformers such as Mario Segni, a young Christian Democrat, have urged increasing the use of direct election. Various other reforms have been proposed, and reformist rhetoric dominated the campaign leading up to the April 5, 1992 elections, in which the governing coalition retained only a slender majority of parliamentary seats. So far, however, Sacco writes, "no real choice of valid and truly different programs has been offered" to the disaffected electorate. Little is clear now, concludes Codevilla, except "that the first Italian republic is all but dead."

Zambia's Example

"Zambia Starts Over" by Michael Bratton, in *Journal of Democracy* (Apr. 1992), 1101 15th St. N.W., Ste. 200, Washington, D.C. 20005; "Zambia: A Model for Democratic Change" by Richard Joseph, in *Current History* (May 1992), 4225 Main St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19127.

A landmark event for Africa took place in Zambia on October 31, 1991. Voters there, in free and fair elections, overwhelmingly chose trade-unionist Frederick Chiluba as the nation's president, gave his Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) 125 out of 150 seats in the National Assembly, and so brought to an end the 27-year reign of President Kenneth Kaunda, the country's founding father, and his United National Independence Party (UNIP). Zambia thus became the first English-



A stunning 76 percent of Zambia's voters agreed last year to put opposition leader Frederick Chiluba in the country's driver's seat.