
selves in action in Vietnam. McCain's ordeal was the most notorious: as a prisoner subjected to humiliation and brutality in the Hanoi Hilton, he held to the military's highest standards of honor and courage. (McCain is now a U.S. senator from Arizona.)

The physical and emotional trauma of the war was only a portion of its legacy for the five men (and for hundreds of thousands of other veterans). They returned home to "hostility, contempt, ridicule, at best indifference." Little wonder, then, that the fault line in the society grew so wide: the spat-upon veterans came to view the pious activists who surreptitiously (or illegally) evaded service with an equal measure of moral contempt.

For the most part, Timberg's subjects managed to get on with their lives after the war and make successful careers. But for McFarlane, North, and Poindexter, he argues, something was missing. They had been "stunned into silence" by the hostility and ridicule of their fellow Americans. Timberg likens them to nightingales, who find their voice only when they hear another nightingale sing. Ronald Reagan's full-throated patriotism and generous praise for Vietnam veterans restored their voices, even as it provided "resonance" for the message in Webb's novels and "mood music" for the emerging politician McCain, who had remained "silent by choice."

In 1984, the Congress—full of individuals who had not served in Vietnam and could not appreciate "what it meant to be bloody, hungry and out of ammunition"—voted to cut off all aid to the contras in Nicaragua. Determined that the United States not betray another ally, as it had South Vietnam, and seduced by patriotism's song, North, McFarlane, and Poindexter became involved in a covert plan to support the contras with proceeds from Iranian arms sales. They acted for what they thought good and noble reasons, and they suffered eventual rebuke on both sides of the fault line.

For all but the seasoned ornithologist, Timberg's governing metaphor is strained. The considerable strength of his book lies rather in the wealth of stories through which he gives individuality to each of his five prin-

cipal characters and makes of their collective histories a vivid account of America's social and political climate from the morass of Vietnam to the quicksand of Iran-contra.

THE TYRANNY OF NUMBERS:

Mismeasurement and Misrule. By Nicholas Eberstadt. AEI Press. 310 pp. \$24.95

We Americans are allowing statistics to rule us and drive public policy, argues Eberstadt, a visiting fellow of the Harvard University Center for Population and Development Studies and a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. But how do statistics gain ascendancy, and what happens when we cede control to them? Eberstadt takes aim not at any specific political ideology but at the faith we now place in the official figures collected by governments. He believes that, despite current doubts about the future of the nation-state and its centralized methods of governance, the rise of public sectors in free societies has yet to reach its peak: "The modern voter and his agents have demonstrated already that they are quite capable of inveighing against the heavy burden of an excessive government even as they militate for additional state subventions." Because more will be at stake in the political redistribution of resources, the need for reliable data—from governments and other sources—will grow, and the data will continue to inform politics.

Eberstadt analyzes contentious public claims about social problems by examining how numbers are constructed for the purposes of argument. On the controversial issue of poverty in America, for example, he insists that "the poverty rate" itself is "an arbitrary and, in some ways, a seriously misleading statistical indicator" because it focuses on income rather than consumption. That focus resulted, Eberstadt explains, from a federal agency's unwillingness 30 years ago to collect information about expenditures because data about income were already available. Having a different (and less alarming) measure for material deprivation, Eberstadt argues, would create a different public debate about poverty.

On a second controversial issue, Eberstadt suggests that ineffective governmental and medical systems may not be responsible, as many believe, for high rates of infant mortality in America, and that we need to know more about the attitudes and behavior of pregnant mothers. But research into this aspect of the problem meets strong resistance—for political reasons. It “blames the victims,” something avoided at all costs these days, even that of failing to understand—and end—the true causes of high infant mortality.

Eberstadt’s approach is clearly provocative, and his passionate commitment to getting the figures and the correlations right lends his work a genuine moral dimension. That’s too rare a quality in contemporary social science to be ignored.

VIRTUALLY NORMAL: An Argument about Homosexuality. By Andrew Sullivan. Knopf. 205 pp. \$22

Andrew Sullivan, the editor of the *New Republic*, is a romantic at heart, or maybe just below the skin. He still believes in happy endings; at least, he refuses to disbelieve in them. Sullivan’s book is “about how we as a society deal with that small minority of us which is homosexual.” Unimpeded by statistics and footnotes, it has the pressing, insistent tone of serious conversation. It is inevitably a book about politics—specifically, the conflicted politics of homosexuality in America today. What Sullivan wants for homosexual citizens is nothing more than public equality with heterosexual citizens, that is, equal treatment by the state. That is all, he believes, one can or should expect of the state, and it would be enough. The state cannot legislate an end to private scorn and hatred of homosexuals.

Sullivan argues from observation and lived experience, true to his epigraph from Ludwig Wittgenstein: “One can only describe here and say: this is what human life is like.” On the basis of his own life and the testimony of many others, he contends that “for a small minority of people, from a young age, homo-

sexuality is an essentially involuntary condition that can neither be denied nor permanently repressed.” For such individuals, homosexuality is, quite simply, natural, and to deny it is to go against their nature.

Sullivan assigns—somewhat artificially, as he admits—the most prominent arguments currently being made about homosexuality to four groups: prohibitionists (for whom homosexuality is an abomination and an illness, and who feel that homosexual acts call for punishment and deterrence by the society); liberationists (for whom homosexuality is not a defining condition or inherent natural state but an arbitrary social construction); conservatives (a variety of liberals, actually, for whom homosexuality is a condition to be tolerated in private because individuals’ privacy must be respected, but disapproved in public lest it fray the social fabric); and liberals (for whom homosexuality is an individual’s right, to be protected by law in the society, along with the myriad other “rights” liberals have discovered in the process of educating a skeptical and reluctant public about what’s good for it).

Alert to the need for nuance and qualification, Sullivan gives each of these positions its due before arguing its insufficiency. He would replace all of them with his own politics of homosexuality, “one that does not deny homosexuals their existence, integrity, dignity, or distinctness.” What he proposes is less a parting shot than an opening volley: an end to all public (as distinct from private) discrimination against “those who grow up and find themselves emotionally different.” “And that is all,” writes Sullivan, as if the proposal were as simple as it is reasonable: accord homosexual citizens every right and responsibility that heterosexuals enjoy as public citizens.

The consequences? Well, for one, equal opportunity and inclusion in the military. For another, and even more provocatively, legalized homosexual marriage and divorce. For many in the society this would be the last straw; for Sullivan it is the best hope. He may be prescient, and he may be right; for the historical moment in American politics, he is merely quixotic—romantic even. But his book honors and advances the debate.