

a way of being together.” But she also notes that the movies shown in these theaters were powerful anticommunitarian instruments: “The most engaging heroes were possessed by wanderlust; the smartest working-women heroines believed in self-betterment; the increasingly dominant tone was against provincialism.” In short, content inevitably trumped architecture.

So did show-biz economics. In his introduction, New York University film professor Robert Sklar points out that the small-town and neighborhood theaters had always been a nuisance to Hollywood. They needed to change their bills more frequently than the first-run houses—as often as three times a week—which forced the studios to make more pictures. Renting films for as little as \$10 a run, these theaters never contributed much to the distributors’ prosperity. A big-city picture palace could generate \$10,000 a week; a small-town theater might produce just \$1,500 a year. Given the cost of extra prints and shipping, distributors might do no better than break even. As a result, these the-

aters were doomed well before television.

Which is not necessarily a bad thing. An awful lot of shoddy movies were made with an eye toward the small towns, where exhibitors tended to be noisy cultural conservatives. Beyond that, I’m not sure that community values are all that important when it comes to movies. We may go to the theater in a crowd, but once the picture begins we are alone with it, voyeurs peering into a lighted window, thinking our own thoughts, mulling our own fantasies. The structure surrounding this somewhat onanistic activity is relatively insignificant.

What’s important are the movies themselves. Instead of mourning the past, we might more usefully discuss how contemporary distribution and exhibition practices—particularly the emphasis on the first-weekend grosses of movies playing on 2,500 screens— affect what we now see. And don’t see. But that’s a different argument, one that this pretty, but to me rather idle, book does not take up.

—RICHARD SCHICKEL

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

*“THAT’S NOT WHAT WE MEANT TO DO”:
Reform and Its Unintended
Consequences in
Twentieth-Century America.*
By Steven M. Gillon. Norton.
288 pp. \$25.95

Attention, policy wonks: University of Oklahoma historian Gillon has written a delightfully subversive book about how reform legislation goes awry. With no hand-wringing, no conspiracy theories about forces of evil undermining good works, he recounts the unintended postenactment journeys of five laws. Along the way, he demonstrates that the only thing predictable about reform is that its consequences are unpredictable.

He starts with the 1935 Social Security Act’s little-debated provision to help young widows and their children. With the breakdown of the nuclear family, this modest widows’ entitle-

ment mushroomed into a \$13 billion program (eventually Aid to Families with Dependent Children) that mostly benefited families with live but absent fathers. This development in turn provoked another policy shift, welfare reform, and a change in the national consensus about government aid to the poor.

With the Community Mental Health Act of 1963, Congress sought to move thousands of long-term mentally ill residents from large, out-of-the-way hospitals into community-based settings, where they would receive continuing support from a network of mental health centers. But subsequent congresses cared more about Vietnam, civil rights, low-income housing, and urban unrest than about funding the community services. The released hospital patients often ended up on the streets, and homelessness became a political issue.

Gillon also traces the curious history of racial preferences. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 expressly barred quotas, but two federal regulatory agencies claimed the authority to

implement affirmative action, a policy that in practice came very close to quotas. The courts initially supported the regulators, and affirmative action became widespread in both the public and private sectors. Then the backlash arrived. Politicians campaigned against affirmative action, state ballot measures sought to eliminate racial preferences, and the courts imposed stricter constitutional limits. A policy that had been rejected by Congress thus slipped in through the other two branches and became a defining political issue.

These and the book's other tales (about the Immigration Act of 1965 and campaign finance reform) may sound disheartening, but I found them reassuring. Policymaking is about compromise, and the compromises don't end when a bill becomes law. Even if reformers realize all their goals in Congress—and they rarely do—they still must face implementers in the executive branch, successor congresses, lawyers using the courts to muddy the waters, and evolving social mores. Consequently, getting the policy right is not the only thing, or even the most important thing. Giving voice to the diverse interests is closer to the mark. Men and women must be able to exercise their complex, varied, conflicting, and unpredictable wills through the labyrinth of politics and governance. With his stories of apparent blunders and shortsightedness, Gillon reveals that the system works.

—MARTY LINSKY

FROM VOTING TO VIOLENCE:

*Democratization and
Nationalist Conflict.*

By Jack Snyder. Norton.
382 pp. \$29.95

ON BEING A SUPERPOWER:

*And Not Knowing
What to Do about It.*

By Seymour J. Deitchman.
Westview. 350 pp. \$32

The idea that democracies do not go to war with other democracies, popularized by Princeton University historian Michael Doyle in 1986, has become a dangerous political cliché. It is dangerous partly because of its effect on international relations—the Clinton

administration seems to believe that democracy-building equals peace, with dubious results from Haiti to Kosovo—but mostly because, by begging important questions about the nature of democracy, it leads us onto treacherous ground.

In his thoughtful and penetrating book, Snyder, a political scientist at Columbia University, analyzes imperial Britain, revolutionary France, Germany from Bismarck to Hitler, and 19th-century Serbia. Nationalism, he concludes, is a regular and sometimes monstrous feature of young democracies. These nations suffer a wild and even vicious youth; indeed, “the process of democratization can be one of its own worst enemies.” Nominal democracies without civic institutions and a sturdy middle class are especially vulnerable to nationalist demagogues. “If nationalist conflict is to be avoided,” Snyder writes, “the development of civic institutions should be well underway before mass-suffrage elections are held. Likewise, it is better if a strong middle class emerges before press freedom expands and civil society groups get organized, or else these may be easily hijacked by an elite with a nationalist agenda.”

At a time when support of democracy is almost reflexive, these are startling prescriptions. But Snyder makes a powerful case, one with which ancient Greeks and classical-minded Enlightenment figures such as Burke and Gibbon would have been familiar. Although the Russian election came too late for the author's deadline, his thesis helps explain why so many Russian reformers have soft-pedaled their democratic aspirations to back Vladimir Putin's attempt to restore a strong, centralized state.

Whereas Snyder concentrates on the problems of fledgling democracies, Deitchman considers the United States. The lonely superpower, perforce responsible for global stability, is also a media-saturated democracy that is sensitive to casualties, views the United Nations with suspicion, and expects the world to be grateful. Deitchman, formerly with the Institute for Defense Analyses, a research firm based in Alexandria, Virginia, starts with three credible scenarios. First, he asks whether the United States would really risk nuclear war with China to protect Taiwan, and he ponders the price in lost credibility if Taiwan were