

communities. That is why the NRC rule requiring the participation of state and local au-

can tell you, such a strategy is more than just unfair, but is a device which is never attempted, except in

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North's Patriotism Is the Most Dangerous Kind

By Michael A. Weinstein

SOMETHING important has been ignored, one might say covered up, in all of the rhetoric surrounding Lt. Col. Oliver North's testimony before the Iran-contra committee. It's inexpedient for the committee's members to make a point of it, but Ollie North was and remains a darling and representative of the small but vocal and aggressive radical right wing of American politics.

Long before he captured hearts and minds through his telegenic performance at the hearings, North has spent part of his time criss-crossing the country as a pitchman for a dog-and-pony show shilling private donations for the contras from the convinced right wing, organized into such groups as the Eagle Forum.

It's not really significant, except from a legal standpoint, whether he actually solicited funds. More to the point: The private efforts for the contras were centered on a tiny group of contributors who have a distinctive vision of society that often places democratic values below the goal of national power for its own sake.

The radical right in its present form has been around ever since the end of World War II. Its view of world politics has been familiar for decades and is marked by its simplicity. The United States, so the story goes, is locked in a battle to the death with World Communism. Winning this war must be the overriding goal of American society and no other pursuits, however worthy, should be allowed to get in its way, including the preservation of the Bill of Rights. Anyone who does not subscribe to this vision is at best a well-intentioned dupe or a fellow traveler, and at worst a traitor.

Many Americans buy into parts of the radical right's version of history, but not with the single-mindedness of its convinced proponents. You can sway large numbers of people for short times to parrot such slogans as "better dead than red" and "America, love it or leave it," but most citizens have other concerns on their minds than the Communist threat, which tempers their zeal for the patriotism of power. The right wing core is persistent and dedicated, thereby exercising a continuous and disproportionate influence on our public dialogue.

One of the most illuminating features of North's testimony was his presentation of the pitch he gave to potential contributors to the contra cause. It was not distinguished by depth, sophistication or wisdom, but

just hammered home the vision of Red armies at our borders. The message was sharp and simplistic: If we don't stop them there, they'll be here sooner than the killer bees. It's clear Ollie North believes in his product. Indeed, he is able to lie with impunity about any number of details because he is sincere in his fundamental belief.

Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) is correct to stress that North operated under the principle that the end justifies the means. But even he is unwilling to name that end and to question the ideology that defines it. Liberals and moderates have been bullied and intimidated by years of threats into the gnawing fear that they will be judged as dupes and traitors just because they don't believe that a Soviet invasion is imminent.

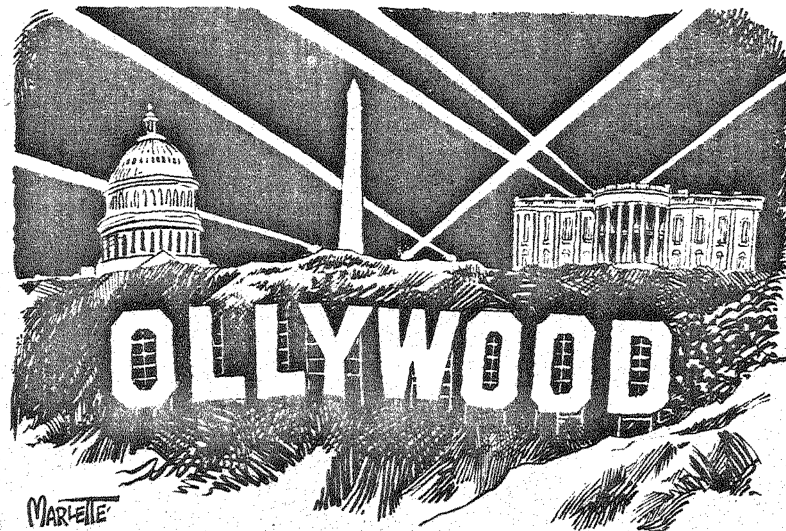
If we're not prepared to see even more serious damage done to our constitutional democracy, our leaders are going to have to be more courageous in standing up to the corrosive anxiety engendered by right-wing intimidation. Let's get the dirty secret out: It's insane to believe that we're about to be flooded by a Red Tide.

There's been a lot of talk about how Ollie North's earnest manner pulled the popular heartstrings but very little about the source of that sincerity in the mind-set of the true believer who can act with such enthusiasm and dedication because he is blinded to anything else but his vision. Somewhere along the line, North was bewitched by right-wing fantasy and from then on became an agent of a small faction of American opinion. And then he worked his way into the center of an extra-constitutional network of foreign policy as the representative of extremist groups and positions.

North's patriotism is the most dangerous kind. It takes up "God and country" and discards the Constitution. It's an eviscerated, negative and finally paranoid patriotism in contrast to the full-blooded patriotism of a man like Daniel Inouye who stands for the positive ideals of our institutions. The real heroes of the Iran-contra proceedings are the members of the investigating committee who have held fast to democratic values.

Only in light of the revelations about plans for secret government can we see how much we need responsible politicians who understand our system and include its norms within their definition of patriotism.

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