

**THE OLD CHRISTIAN RIGHT:
THE PROTESTANT FAR RIGHT
FROM THE GREAT DEPRESSION
TO THE COLD WAR**

by **Leo P. Ribuffo**

(Temple University Press; 354 pp.; \$29.95)

Garrett Ward Sheldon

This book is valuable for several reasons. It provides a careful historical study of some leading figures of the religious Right of the 1930s and '40s and the impact of those figures on American politics into the '50s. It employs a methodology uncommon in American historical writing, using both sociological and psychological analysis in daring, and often brilliant, ways. And it places the religious Right of our own time in historical perspective, showing Jerry Falwell et al. to be at once more tame and more sophisticated than their Protestant predecessors.

The "Old Christian Right" endorsed in varying degrees during the 1930s the fascist theory of an "international Jewish conspiracy" and advocated alignment with Nazi Germany. Professor Ribuffo presents the movement through biographies of three of its prominent representatives: William Pelley, Gerald Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith. Of the three, Pelley was perhaps the most explicit in his fascistic tendencies, organizing the "Silver Shirts" on the model of Hitler's Storm Troopers and publishing regular anti-Semitic diatribes in his journal, *Liberation*. Gerald Winrod was broad-minded enough to distinguish between "good" and "bad" Jews but, like Pelley, attributed the world's ills to a conspiracy of Jewish international bankers and revolutionaries; his argument was based equally on *The Protocols of Zion* and biblical prophecy. Gerald L. K. Smith combined fundamentalist Christianity with populist demagoguery in his appeals to good old lower-class envy:

"A favorite technique was to ask who in the audience owned four 'good suits of clothes, coats and pants to match,' or two pairs of shoes, or three sets of underwear with 'all the buttons on.' Whatever the item, few hands rose to confirm ownership. Then Smith preached on this 'text': J. P. Morgan possessed copious apparel, including shoes and underwear. . . ."

In his analysis of all three prominent Far Right Christians, Ribuffo finds a common social past and psychological disposition. Pelley, Winrod, and Smith all grew up in families headed by low church Protestant ministers who supplemented their preach-

ing income with pathetically unsuccessful business ventures. The sons inherited both their fathers' religious fervor and their penchant for failure, along with tremendous ambition and delusions of grandeur. Religion, then, became at once a way of rationalizing frustration and a means of achieving upward mobility. As their careers drifted downward, they were able to explain their personal failings in political terms, i.e., the international Jewish conspiracy. This allowed them to adopt a crusading Christian fascism that would cleanse the world of its leading malevolent force and propel them into their own proper position of greatness. In a society whose market values told them they were small and insignificant, the fascist cause offered them dignity and greatness.

Ribuffo finds many similarities between the social and psychological origins of American fascism and those of German fascism in the same period. But lacking a rich feudal heritage to transform into a fascist ideology, the Americans developed different political programs from their German counterparts. These ranged from Bellamian socialism to petit bourgeois capitalism, and sometimes both. It is not, therefore, for their theoretical sophistication or practical significance that such characters are worth studying. What makes them important, for Ribuffo, is the way in which liberal Americans responded to them and the subsequent effect that response had on American politics.

Despite their weak ideology and relatively insignificant following, FDR resented the vitriolic attacks of the three leaders on the New Deal and his administration's support for the Allies. Using constitutionally questionable tactics, Roosevelt prosecuted and suppressed them, all the while receiving the cheers of liberal academics and journalists—who would themselves suffer at the hands of right wingers using similar tactics during the cold war. The Left's Brown scare of the 1930s, Ribuffo argues, contributed to the Right's Red scare of the 1950s by encouraging public hysteria and diminishing regard for the due process of law.

The Old Christian Right concludes with a rather too brief comparison of the 1930s religious Right and the 1980s religious Right: Jerry Falwell et al. do not hold a candle to their predecessors of the Protestant Right. But if the Moral Majority is a pale imitation of Pelley, Winrod, and Smith, is it because of changed historical circumstances or because of the Moral Majority's concern with money-making or because fundamentalist rhetoric no longer grips the American public

as strongly as it once did? Has democracy's tendency to homogenize culture rendered all our "extremes" less extreme? Professor Ribuffo does not answer these questions. But he does make it clear that the contemporary Christian Right is far more the handmaiden of conservative politics than was its progenitor. As such, it seems much less ominous than the caricature of it painted by the liberal media. **WV**

**WINDS OF HISTORY:
THE GERMAN YEARS OF LUCIUS
DuBIGNON CLAY**

by **John H. Backer**

(Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. [New York]; 290 pp.; \$25.50)

John B. Keeley

The military is one of America's most isolated backwaters. Nevertheless, during the years between World Wars I and II, the military produced the group of extraordinary men who created and led the massive organizations that brought victory to the United States during World War II. To many Americans their names are legendary: MacArthur, Eisenhower, Marshall, King, Nimitz, Halsey, Stilwell, Clark, Patton, Bradley. It is remarkable that so many of these men emerged from among a cohort of officers only a few thousand strong. Equally remarkable is that these men of energy, determination, and imagination had spent most of their lives in organizations that were rigid and intellectually sterile.

Our legendary heroes of wartime, however, were not the only extraordinary men of that generation. There were other officers whose greatest success and opportunities for service came after the war, in the crises and confusion of setting the world right-side-up. It is perhaps understandable that these men did not at the time receive recognition for their extraordinary achievements. One of them is Lucius D. Clay, general, U.S. Army, military governor of the United States occupation zone of Germany from 1945 to 1949, the subject of this volume. John H. Backer's exceptional book has saved General Clay from any danger of obscurity.

Winds of History is the third of Mr. Backer's volumes on Occupied Germany. The first two—*Priming the German Economy* and *The Decision to Divide Germany*—have provided the foundation for this comprehensive analysis of the victorious powers' single most serious challenge in postwar