

# The Nation.

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EDITORIAL

## OVERDRAWN BLANK CHECKS

In the beginning there was covert action, and Richard Nixon said, Let there be deniability. And then there was overtization of covert action, and Reagan said it was good.

We'll let the metaphysicians decide whether it is progress when the United States moves from illegally overthrowing governments secretly to illegally overthrowing them overtly. But the question is not irrelevant to the current Senate Armed Services Committee hearings on the Bush Administration's policies in the gulf.

As witnesses before the panel raised polite questions about the rush to war, the word went forth that such reservations, indeed the hearings themselves, played into the hands of the enemy. Seeing the division in public opinion, the hawkish argument runs, Saddam Hussein will conclude that America lacks the guts to go to war and will refuse to withdraw from Kuwait. In other words, actions, however dubious, may be overt, but debate about taking them must be covert.

On November 27, public television's valuable *Frontline* series provided a vivid and disturbing reminder of a covert episode of the recent past that has been consigned to forgetfulness—the Iran/contras scandal. The program, aptly titled “High Crimes and Misdemeanors,” showed how President Reagan, with the assistance of the C.I.A. and the rest of the secret government, flouted the will of Congress. As former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane put it, Iran/contras was nothing less than an exercise in “absolute stealth.” By averting its eyes, Congress in effect gave the executive a blank check.

Reviewing the program on *CBS News Sunday Morning*, John Leonard observed, “If you don't think that bloody blank check is relevant to what happens to us next, welcome to Kuwait.”

MILKENMANIA

DERELICTION  
OF DUTY

Edward Sorel

SAUDI DISSENT

Judith Caesar

‘CARDENISMO’

Paco Ignacio  
Taibo II

ALAS,  
KASTENMEIER

David Corn

BIG BUSINESS  
HIJACKS GATT

Daphne Wysham

TROUBLE IN  
MOTOR CITY

Lawrence  
Joseph

## LESSONS MAGGIE TAUGHT ME

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Paris

“I make up my mind about people in the first 10 seconds, and I very rarely change it.” So *The New York Times* quoted Margaret Thatcher as saying on the day of her resignation. I would be happy to think that the statement was truthful, since within minutes of first being introduced to me, Thatcher lashed me across the buttocks with a rolled-up parliamentary order paper.

It happened in the course of an exchange of views about Rhodesia in the late fall of 1977, when she was still leader of the opposition and was pandering to the racists in her party and the electorate. Influenced perhaps by the fact that we were meeting in the Rosebery Room of the House of Lords, I made the mistake of bowing as if to acknowledge some point of hers, and she took swift advantage of my posture by shrieking, “Bow lower!” and plying the document above mentioned. Like the British electorate, now shaking itself after more than a decade of Thatcherite *pouvoir*, I often look back wistfully upon that spanking in the hope of decoding its significance.

Within one year of being elected Prime Minister, in 1979, Thatcher had reversed herself and overseen the transition of Rhodesia into Zimbabwe. This achievement of hers, often overlooked, came after half a dozen Labor Foreign Secretaries had simply abdicated in the face of the white settler revolt. Nor was that the only instance of her breaking the rules of the stale, centrist, stagnant British consensus. By the  
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conduct of his campaign, it is difficult to be optimistic.

For the outside world the main message of this election is that good will is inevitably a fast-wasting asset. The Polish example has been widely quoted by the advocates of "shock therapy," notably in Moscow. If the doctor is popular, the nation is ready to take the most bitter potion, the reformers around Boris Yeltsin have argued. Now the advocates of the fast track to capitalism throughout the area are themselves in shock. If the Poles, with a labor movement behind them, have so rapidly spent the political capital acquired over ten years of heroic struggle, the precedent is discouraging.

For the same reasons, Western media reaction to the Polish election has been uneasy. Clearly, anticommunism plus capitalist shock tactics is not quite enough. Yet that is no reason to follow the arguments of some commentators in Warsaw who, echoing Brecht, are now ready to dissolve the people. Those Polish politicians who are beginning to say that their people may not be ripe for democracy would do well to look in a mirror. A year after the fall of the Berlin wall, the days of illusion are over.

DANIEL SINGER

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## Lessons

*(Continued From Front Cover)*

Anglo-Irish agreement at Hillsborough she gave up Britain's absurd claim to exclusive sovereignty over Northern Ireland. And after her first meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev she became the first capitalist politician to declare that he was for real and meant business. It is absolutely safe to say that no Labor Prime Minister would have had the nerve to do either of those two things.

So as I stood in the courtyard of the Louis Quinze embassy on the Rue Faubourg St.-Honoré on November 20 and saw her absorb the news that she had failed with her own party, I felt an unbidden emotion of regret. There seemed no disgrace in rejection at the hands of the Tory parliamentary caucus—as ripe a collection of opportunists and bond salesmen as you could meet in a day's march. I found myself hoping that she would make a fight of it, if only to expose the real disgrace, which is that under British "rules" such a caucus can, on a secret ballot, change the government in an afternoon.

It is easy to summarize the foulness of the Thatcher years: the combination of Malthus and Ayn Rand that went to make up her social philosophy; the police mentality that she evinced when faced with dissent; the awful toadying to Reagan and now Bush; the indulgence shown to apartheid; the coarse, racist betrayal of Hong Kong; the destruction of local democracy and autonomous popular institutions. Yet every Tory in the House had voted gleefully for all of those things, and one of them, her newly anointed clone, John Major, has disagreed with Thatcher only from the right. While on the ostensible issue of principle, a common European system, Labor's conversion has been too late and too shallow to be convincing.

Christopher Hill, perhaps England's greatest living histo-

rian, pointed out to me in the summer of 1988 that Thatcher had quarreled with the monarchy, the House of Lords, the Church of England, the Inns of Court, the University of Oxford and the Chiefs of Staff—every ancestral prop of the British state. Detestable though she was, she was a radical and not a reactionary. She has not been removed for any of her offenses against democracy or decency. Rather, she has been deposed by those who worship only opinion polls and their own skins and who yearn for a quiet life and business as usual—living gallantly off the fat of the land.

"An end to conviction politics," smugly wrote Peter Jenkins, Fleet Street's most devoted practitioner of consensus journalism. Let us hope not. "Thatcherism" has made possible a movement for a serious, law-based constitutional republic in Britain and has hacked away at the encrusted institutions and attitudes that stood in its path. Thatcher has herself shown that there is power and dignity to be won by defying the status quo and the majority rather than by adapting to them. If the British left, which she froze into immobility like Medusa, could bring itself to learn from this, then we might not have to look upon her like again.



Next week, the winner of the first *Nation* Magazine/I.F. Stone Award for Student Journalism.

### ★ UPON MRS. THATCHER'S WITHDRAWAL

*But why'd you have to be so mean, Maggie?*

*Why treat opponents as unclean?*

*You think a martinet*

*Is preferable to a "wet"?*

*Why not be somewhere in between?*

*You would have gotten what you got, Maggie.*

*You could have privatized the lot.*

*But no one was exempt*

*From feeling your contempt.*

*For you boot camp is Camelot.*

*So now you've had your Waterloo, Maggie.*

*As colleagues try to say adieu,*

*They cheer you with "Hear! Hear!"s,*

*They wish you many years—*

*All spent with people mean as you.*

Calvin Trillin

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