

SOLZHENITSYN AND THE CRITICS

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When Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn talks, people listen. Not all of them, however, like what Solzhenitsyn says. This became evident last month following his unusual commencement address to the graduating class of Harvard.

It is generally agreed that Solzhenitsyn is one of the major writers of this century. His early novels, in particular his *One Day in the Life of Ivan Renisovich*, which ultimately precipitated a forced exile from his native Russia, were well received by a Western world that hailed him as the greatest Russian writer since Dostoevsky. Subsequently, the first two installments of his massive work, *The Gulag Archipelago*, increased his literary stature; a third and final volume of the *Gulag* story has just been published.

As the *Gulag* chronicles have unfolded, the literary community, which embraced him lovingly at first, has become increasingly critical of the man and his writing. Anyone who has struggled through the first two lengthy volumes of *Gulag* can testify that Solzhenitsyn is not easy to read. It takes determination and considerable moral commitment to wade through the endless details, anecdotes, aggressive disputations and the sustained outrage he uses to describe life in the Soviet prison-and-work camp society. It may be that his wordy persistence, intense eloquence and unbridled sarcasm and fury have turned off liberal intellectuals whose enthusiasm for moral crusading is fleeting and skin deep at best.

The decline of the West has been written about often and in great detail by its own modern writers here and abroad—Spengler, Orwell, Burnham, Toynbee, Nesbit, Muggeridge and many others. None of whom is a favorite of the leftist, literary liberals who bled so copiously for the Vietnamese only a few years ago and who could find only evil things to say about this country. Solzhenitsyn's commencement theme emphasized that the West is declining, that it is losing its will to survive, and that, unless it can reaffirm its earlier moral obligations to humanity, it will eventually be defeated by the communist nations.

The harsh truths expounded by Solzhenitsyn touched sensitive nerves to upset and confuse the liberal intellectuals and, even worse, infringed on their sacred territory. They usually prefer to be the ones to point to our sins and tell us how sorry we are, while defending Russia's wonderful socialist society. Norman Cousins doesn't think Solzhenitsyn knows enough about the West to criticize, and thought his comments lacked "political balance and historical insight." Marshall McLuhan characterized Solzhenitsyn

as a "nineteenth-century mind." An ancient resurrection, Lillian Hellman, tried clever derogation. The executive editor of the *Associated Press* objected to his calling our press superficial. Columnist Carl Rowan, who views the world through dark glasses, felt the speech gave comfort to the Kremlin. William S. Coffin, former Yale chaplain and anti-war activist, labeled him a "blind anti-communist," likened him to Richard Nixon and blamed everything on our invasion of Cambodia. Archibald MacLeish thought that Solzhenitsyn's isolated seclusion in rural Vermont gave him a "limited familiarity with our culture." A graduating Harvard senior said that comedian Rodney Dangerfield, who spoke the day before, "raised everyone to a higher spiritual level than Solzhenitsyn did." More recently, the President's wife, Rosalynn, disputed Solzhenitsyn's diagnoses and took another verbal poke at him.

Most of Solzhenitsyn's critics ignored the essential message of the address which was that if the West wants to survive, it should overcome its spiritual exhaustion, develop its will power and be willing to fight for its freedom if necessary.

Our own local columnist and former editor of the *Enquirer*, Millard Grimes, made these reasonable comments:

The United States has treated Solzhenitsyn rather shabbily ever since he arrived some three years ago. Ford, as President, declined to invite him to the White House for fear of angering Soviet officials. Now he has stirred the wrath of William Sloan Coffin and the rest of the Vietnam dissenters.

It is too bad because Solzhenitsyn has a valuable contribution to make to Western culture and ideas, just as he did in his homeland. He is not a democrat, and does not pretend to be. But he is a man who has experienced tyranny in its bleakest form and he is concerned that the rest of the world could eventually fall into the same shadows.

"Should we condemn him for warning us?"

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