

SECOND GUESSING THE PUNDITS

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In the December 1980 issue of *HARPER'S* (which was composed and had gone to press before the election on November 4), there are a couple of articles of current interest. One, on the art of punditry, reviews a book on Walter Lippmann, the greatest pundit of them all, and comments from the viewpoint of minor journalists who cover election campaigns on some of our present pundits. The other, on Auberon Waugh, the iconoclastic British columnist, contrasts his opinionated, free-ranging and often libelous style with the blandness of contemporary journalism here. Both are worth reading, particularly now in the aftermath of an election whose results made monkeys out of most of the so-called experts in the opinion forming industry.

In discussing the style of Waugh, the second article laments the lack of vicious wit among today's American columnists whose journalism is overloaded with facts but without conclusions that might alienate authority or offend readers. "The zero-sum style of, on the one hand this, on the other hand that." In his columns Waugh attacks any and all subjects considered by him to be humbugs. The article quotes as an example his opinion of Russia: "The essential clue to Russian literature, and indeed to the mysterious Russian character, is that all Russians are shits. They know they are shits, and that their whole, repulsive society is based on a succession of lies which nobody really believes. The only proof that they are not, as Hitler believed, morally subhuman, is to be found in their occasional propensity to despair and suicide." Waugh's comments on Carter and Reagan are not quite as devastating. With the possible exception of R. Emmett Tyrrell's editorials in the little read *AMERICAN SPECTATOR*, such explicitness would be hard to find in American journalism today.

The other article defines the pundit (or the "Bigfoot" as he is derisively known to lesser journalists who all aspire to reach that level eventually) as "any senior officer of the press permitted by status and function to leaven fact with advertised opinion." Walter Lippmann, the prototype of all punditry, pursued the art in a profound and sober manner from the days of Teddy Roosevelt to those of Richard Nixon. In retrospect, despite his self-admitted wisdom, his access to every one of importance, and his ability with words, Lippmann was wrong most of the time about almost everything. Like all the aspirants to his throne who have followed, he was skilled at explaining or ignoring past blunders, a master at fence straddling, and always adaptable to the change of political winds.

This adaptability of pundits is evident today, as is their talent for second guessing. Now, two weeks after Reagan's convincing victory and the success of conservative politicians everywhere, most of the established oracles of columnar press and their

counterparts in television news analysis (nearly all of whom saw the election as "too close to call") have come around to agreeing that Jimmy Carter was not really effective either as a national leader or as a party politician. They even seem to admit that the liberal socialist policies of the past decades (most of which they once defended) are out of step with the times and relics of a misguided past. They are busily at work now choosing a cabinet for Reagan and offering him wise advice on how to conduct foreign policy. Some of them have even discovered a new and likeable Reagan and are remaking him into a jovial man of moderation whom all of them will soon be capable of admiring. Why they, themselves, had been unable to discover all of these apparent truths a year or more ago is never a topic for punditry.

It is too bad we have no Auberon Waugh here who, according to the *HARPER* article, "retails the kind of opinion that American journalists express freely at cocktail parties, before sitting down to the typewriter with long, serious, pundit faces." And especially since Alexander Cockburn, who wrote the article on the pundit's art, tells us that punditry is now so popular that he is concerned about its becoming a second career choice for almost everyone temporarily out of a job. The prospect is frightening when one considers the number of liberal politicians who will be looking for work and vindication next year.

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