

those who, like Pynchon's underground mailers, have for all practical purposes dropped out of the system and those charged with running that system, a people's frank should be added to the other reforms required by democracy's agenda. It is no more a panacea for democracy's malaise than are campaign finance reform, universal voter registration, free TV time for all candidates, a "none-of-the-above" option on every ballot and lowering the barriers to third parties. But like these other overdue reforms, a two-way frank, while not a substitute for committed, content-based political activity, can only add zest to the democratic brew.

We call those we send to Washington our representatives. But each citizen is also a representative, a representative of the public interest, and in that capacity should be encouraged to write to, rather than write off, the Beltway. It is probably no coincidence that it was Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the great dissenter, who once remarked, "The use of the mails is almost as much a part of free speech as the right to use our tongues." □

■ IMMODEST PROPOSALS—II

Give Children The Vote

VITA WALLACE

I first became interested in children's rights two years ago, when I learned that several states had passed laws prohibiting high school dropouts from getting driver's licenses. I was outraged, because I believe that children should not be forced to go to school or be penalized if they choose not to, a choice that is certainly the most sensible course for some people.

I am what is called a home schooler. I have never been to school, having always learned at home and in the world around me. Home schooling is absolutely legal, yet as a home schooler, I have had to defend what I consider to be my right to be educated in the ways that make the most sense to me, and so all along I have felt sympathy with people who insist on making choices about how they want to be educated, even if that means choosing not to finish high school. Now this choice is in jeopardy.

Since first learning about the discriminatory laws preventing high school dropouts from getting driver's licenses that have been passed by some state legislatures, I have done a lot of constitutional and historical research that has convinced me that children of all ages must be given the same power to elect their representatives that adults have, or they will continue to be unfairly treated and punished for exercising the few legal options they now have, such as dropping out of high school.

Most people, including children themselves, probably don't realize that children are the most regulated people in the United States. In addition to all the laws affecting adults, includ-

ing tax laws, children must comply with school attendance laws, child labor laws, and alcohol and cigarette laws. They are denied driver's licenses because of their age, regardless of the dropout issue; they are victims of widespread child abuse; and they are blatantly discriminated against everywhere they go, in libraries, restaurants and movie theaters. They have no way to protect themselves: Usually they cannot hire lawyers or bring cases to court without a guardian, and they are not allowed to vote.

The child labor and compulsory schooling laws were passed by well-meaning people to protect children from exploitation. Child labor laws keep children from being forced to work, and compulsory schooling allows all children to get an education. But the abolition of slavery in 1865 didn't end the exploitation of black people. They needed the right to vote and the ability to bring lawsuits against their employers. Children need those rights too. Without them, laws that force children to go to school and generally do not allow them to work may be necessary to prevent exploitation, but they also take away children's rights as citizens to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In my case, the compulsory education laws severely limited my right to pursue the work that is important to me (which is surely what "the pursuit of happiness" referred to in the Declaration of Independence).

I am 16 now, still not old enough to vote. Like all children, then, the only way I can fight for children's rights is by using my freedom of speech to try to convince adults to fight with me. While I am grateful that I have the right to speak my mind, I believe that it is a grave injustice to deny young people the most effective tool they could have to bring about change in a democracy. For this reason, I suggest that the right of citizens under 18 to vote not be denied or abridged on account of age.

Many people argue that it would be dangerous to let loose on society a large group of new voters who might not vote sensibly. They mean that children might not vote for the right candidates. The essence of democracy, however, is letting people vote for the wrong candidates. Democratic society has its risks, but we must gamble on the reasonableness of all our citizens, because it is less dangerous than gambling on the reasonableness of a few. That is why we chose to be a democracy instead of a dictatorship in the first place.

As it is, only 36 to 40 percent of adults who are eligible to vote actually vote in nonpresidential years, and about 25 percent of the population is under 18. As you can see, our representatives are elected by a very small percentage of our citizens. That means that although they are responsible for all of us, they are responsible to only a few of us. Politicians usually do all they can to keep that few happy, because both voters and politicians are selfish, and a politician's re-election depends on the well-being of the voters. Large segments of society that are not likely or not allowed to vote are either ignored or treated badly because of this system. It would be too much to expect the few always to vote in the interests of the many. Under these circumstances, surely the more people who vote the better, especially if they are of both sexes and of all races, classes and ages.

People also claim that children are irresponsible. Most of

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the teenagers who act irresponsibly do so simply because they are not allowed to solve their problems in any way that would be considered responsible—through the courts or legislature. They fall back on sabotage of the system because they are not allowed to work within it.

Some people believe that children would vote the way their parents tell them to, which would, in effect, give parents more votes. Similarly, when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920, giving women the vote, many people thought women would vote the way their husbands did. Now women are so independent that the idea of women voting on command seems absurd. The Nineteenth Amendment was a large part of the process that produced their independence. I think a similar and equally desirable result would follow if children were allowed to vote. They are naturally curious, and most are interested in the electoral process and the results of the elections even though they are not allowed to vote. Lacking world-weary cynicism, they see, perhaps even more clearly than their elders, what is going on in their neighborhoods and what is in the news.

Suffragist Belle Case La Follette's comment that if women were allowed to vote there would be a lot more dinner-table discussion of politics is as true of children today. More debate would take place not only in the home but among children and adults everywhere. Adults would also benefit if politics were talked about in libraries, churches, stores, laundromats and other places where children gather.

People may argue that politicians would pander to children if they could vote, promising for instance that free ice cream would be distributed every day. But if kids were duped, they would not be duped for long. Children don't like to be treated condescendingly.

Even now, adults try to manipulate children all the time in

glitzy TV ads or, for example, in the supposedly educational pamphlets that nuclear power advocates pass out in school science classes. Political candidates speak at schools, addressing auditoriums full of captive students. In fact, schools should be no more or less political than workplaces. Children are already exposed to many different opinions, and they would likely be exposed to even more if they could vote. The point is that with the vote, they would be better able to fight such manipulation, not only because they would have the power to do so but because they would have added reason to educate themselves on the issues.

What I suggest is that children be allowed to grow into their own right to vote at whatever rate suits them individually. They should not be forced to vote, as adults are not, but neither should they be hindered from voting if they believe themselves capable, as old people are not hindered.

As for the ability to read and write, that should never be used as a criterion for eligibility, since we have already learned from painful past experience that literacy tests can be manipulated to insure discrimination. In any case, very few illiterate adults vote, and probably very few children would want to vote as long as they couldn't read or write. But I firmly believe that, whether they are literate or not, the vast majority of children would not attempt to vote before they are ready. Interest follows hand in hand with readiness, something that is easy to see as a home schooler but that is perhaps not so clear to many people in this society where, ironically, children are continually taught things when they are not ready, and so are not interested. Yet when they are interested, as in the case of voting, they're told they are not yet ready. I think I would not have voted until I was 8 or 9, but perhaps if I had known I could vote I would have taken an interest sooner.

Legally, it would be possible to drop the voting-age requirements. In the Constitution, the states are given all powers to set qualifications for voters except as they defy the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, in which case Congress has the power to enforce it. If it were proved that age requirements "abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States" (which in my opinion they do, since people born in the United States or to U.S. citizens are citizens from the moment they are born), and if the states could not come up with a "compelling interest" argument to justify a limit at a particular age, which Justices Potter Stewart, Warren Burger and Harry Blackmun agreed they could not in *Oregon v. Mitchell* (the Supreme Court case challenging the 1970 amendment to the Voting Rights Act that gave 18-year-olds the vote), then age requirements would be unconstitutional. But it is not necessary that they be unconstitutional for the states to drop them. It is within the power of the states to do that, and I believe that we must start this movement at the state level. According to *Oregon v. Mitchell*, Congress cannot change the qualifications for voting in state elections except by constitutional amendment, which is why the Twenty-sixth Amendment setting the voting age at 18 was necessary. It is very unlikely that an amendment would pass unless several states had tried eliminating the age requirement and had good results. The experience of Georgia and Ken-



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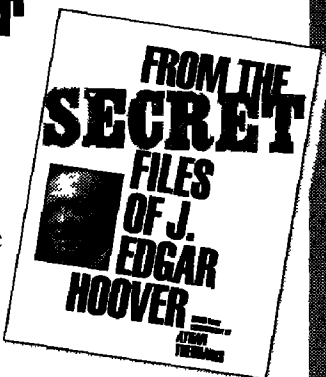
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tucky, which lowered their age limits to 18, helped to pass the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971.

Already in our country's history several oppressed groups have been able to convince the unoppressed to free them. Children, who do not have the power to change their situation, must now convince the adults who do to allow them that power. □

■ LETTER FROM EUROPE

The Dream and The Nightmare

DANIEL SINGER

"How could anyone possibly say that the October Revolution was in vain?" the poet Tvardovsky angrily told Solzhenitsyn in what now seems another age. Today the Soviet rulers dismiss 1917 as the root of all evil. Indeed, toppling statues, renaming streets, rechristening Leningrad Sankt Peterburg, they wish to obliterate seventy-four years of their existence (considering the role played in the *ancien régime* by so many of the new anti-Communist crusaders, this preference for amnesia is understandable).

The abortive putsch precipitated the pace of events but also raised a host of question marks. Can Mikhail Gorbachev recover sufficiently to be more than a figurehead at the center? Is it possible to conceive a confederation of allegedly equal states when one of the members has half the population and nearly two-thirds of the national product? What form will the class struggle take now that Russia in particular is quickening its step on the road to capitalism, and how will the "grand duke" Boris Yeltsin and his fellow "democrats" react when they meet popular resistance? And, on the world scale, how will diplomacy be carried on now that one of the two superpowers, while remaining nuclear, accepts so ostentatiously the suzerainty of the other?

These are the questions for tomorrow. Today is one of those moments of vital change when a writer, it seems, has a duty to his readers. As the new turncoats, the Soviet vicars of Bray, prostrate themselves in front of the golden calf and listen religiously to the officiating priests in International Monetary Fund vestments, as the West's huge propaganda machine seizes this opportunity not just to bury communism, socialism, Marxism et al. but to dismiss any opposition to the rule of capital as a form of mental aberration, he must, at the risk of repetition, overemphasis and oversimplification, state, however briefly, what in his opinion is coming to an end and what is at stake in the ideological offensive.

We are witnessing the ultimate stages of something that began as the heroic search for a historical shortcut. Very rapidly this experiment was turned into a Marxist tragedy, as the revolution failed to spread and the Bolsheviks found them-

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