

Crusaders On the Right

George Barrett

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THE STRANGE TACTICS OF EXTREMISM. By Harry and Bonaro Overstreet. 315 pp. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. \$430.

SOME bedfellows are just *too* strange. The words and the emphasis come from Harry and Bonaro Overstreet in their latest Warning against all radicalism — extremism on the left, extremism on the right.

This time, however, Mr. and Mrs. Overstreet are essentially supplementing their past critical studies of the radical left with an unsympathetic analysis of the radical right. As they have called on the liberal before to make no common cause with the radical leftist, just because he happens to share views on a particular issue, now—in “The Strange Tactics of Extremism”—they call on the conservative to be similarly wary of the radical rightist, even though he shares views on some issues.

WE in America—having given extremism, as it were, a constitutional right to exist—have been able to afford the active presence of a far Left and a far Right because we have been overwhelmingly a nation of moderates. Extremism of Left and Right, home-grown and imported, has been with us always. But the liberal-conservative, or conservative-liberal, center has been the native habitat of the vast majority of our people.—“The Strange Tactics of Extremism.”

Much of the space goes, logically, to “Robert Welch, the former fudge manufacturer who chose to put out a product considerably less sweet when he founded the John Birch Society and its nationwide string of “ultra-conservative” and frequently clandestine “chapters.”

The Overstreets touch also in considerable detail on Billy James Hargis’s Christian Crusade, The Dan Sroog Report, Carl McIntire’s International Council of Christian Churches. Myers G. Lowman and his Circuit Riders, Edgar C. Bundy and the Church League of America, the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies, the Liberty Lobby, the Congress of Freedom. These and other right-extremist groups recall some of the quick-trigger—and other unflavorsome—aspects of frontier vigilante movements.

It is in their detective work that the Overstreets do some of their most revealing explorations of the subject. They take an extremist tenet, or statement —often statements that sound authentic—and turn, up enlightening truths.

For example, they cite an attempt by Edgar C. Bundy to “prove” that the National Parent Teacher, publication of the National Parent Teachers Association, has been “decidedly leftist in its choice of books to be reviewed. To build up his argument, the Overstreets show, Mr. Bundy — had to get across the impression that the journal regularly carried “a sizable book review section. Mr. Bundy, claiming he had made a “content analysis” of 220 issues, wrote: “Each issue of the National Parent Teacher carries several pages of reviews of a great many new books deemed to be of interest to parents and teachers.”

The Overstreets took the same 220 issues—representing a 22-year period—and came up with this observation: “Webster’s New World Dictionary defines ‘several’ as ‘more than two, but not many.’ A ‘content analysis’ of the 220 issues yields the following figures. In 41 issues no books are reviewed. In 110, the review space is one page; in 20 issues, a single column; in 5 issues, a page and a half; and in 24, two pages. Thus, the word ‘several’ can be applied to the pages given ‘to book reviews in only 20 issues out of 220; and almost without exception, these instances are accounted for by special booklists for children: books for Christmas or for summer reading, or books preferred by children at different age levels.”

THE excerpt, by its very insignificance, is indicative. It is a measure of the level on which many of the modern extremists operate, and it is, therefore, a measure of the level on which the Overstreets’ book must be taken. Perhaps the most damning criticism is that the Overstreet study, for the most part, reflects, the dullness and petty scope of so much of the rightist literature.

One can accept the premise that it may be dangerous to dismiss extremists who make outrageous and nonsensical statements without hesitating in many cases to call something absurd when it is absurd. It is disturbing that a man like Mr. Welch can use the word “treason” in connection with President Eisenhower and accuse him of having been “completely controlled” by Communist influences and still at this date be taken seriously by so many of us. This is a silly man. surely, and we are being silly to think him anything else.

The sane man can hope that the continuing application of talents like those of the Overstreets to such petty types of rightists can only be tantamount to using an 8-inch Howitzer (nuclear) against a nest of snipers. It’s such a waste of ammunition.

Mr. Barrett of The Times news staff has reported on groups of the radical right.

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