

## On the Political Thought of George Parkin Grant: Book Reviews by George Elliott Clarke, Canadian Literature retrieved on July 9, 2016

Vitriolic Quixote: Book Reviews of English-Speaking Justice & The George Grant Reader - George Elliott Clarke, Canadian Literature #170-171 (Autumn/Winter 2001). (pg. 198 - 199)

[http://canlit.legacy.arts.ubc.ca/reviews/vitriolic\\_quixote](http://canlit.legacy.arts.ubc.ca/reviews/vitriolic_quixote)

The Gospel of Grant: Book Review of Collected Works of George Grant: Volume 2 (1951 - 1959) - George Elliott Clarke, Canadian Literature #184 (Spring 2005). (pg. 119 - 120)

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Granting Audience: Book Review of Collected Works of George Grant: Volume 3, 1960-1969 - George Elliott Clarke, Canadian Literature #191 (Winter 2006). (pg. 138 - 139)

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Collecting His Wits: Book Review of Collected Works of George Grant: Volume 4, 1970-1988 - George Elliott Clarke, Canadian Literature #208 (Spring 2011), Prison Writing. (pg. 153 - 155)

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English-Canadian polemicist George Grant (1918-1988) lived out his biblical threescore-and-ten as both a vital pacifist and a vitriolic *philosophe*. Though a conservative who loathed the American assault on Vietnam and pitied the devastation of Nazi Germany by "technological war" (between the United States and the Soviet Union), his essay titles often use the combative phrase, "In Defence of...." His sermons – those poetry-infused meditations, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965) and *English-Speaking Justice* (1974) – offer elegiac embraces of stolidly conservative politicians, like John Diefenbaker, together with ferocious eviscerations of their charming liberal foes, like John Kennedy. Grant's destruction of the hypocrisies of "progressive" courts and legislatures are scathingly comic. Yet, he can carry his calculated offensives too far, as when, in his 1983 attempt to rehabilitate the anti-Semitic French writer Céline, he sympathizes with Adolf Hitler's "agony of loneliness in the gaudy decay of pre-World War I Vienna, and his identification of the Jews with that society...."

The image of Grant that emerges from the short essays compiled in *The George Grant Reader* – ably edited by his biographer, William Christian, and by his widow, Sheila Grant – is that of a Canuck Don Quixote: a knight tilting at machine-guns. One sees Grant fighting – flailing – to preserve the wisdom of "the ancients" or "the great minds of the past" (especially Plato) and the revelation of Christ against modernity's terrific – and terrifying – mania for technique, the Molochian power that allows human beings (mainly of the English-speaking persuasion), to dethrone God and manipulate Nature and human nature for their own purposes. To Grant, this vision of "scientific" progress is Gothic horror: it replaces divine truth with rights-based regimes, thus robbing human beings of "nobility" and making them into things instead.

Scholars debate whether Grant's work is a mishmash of Plato, Martin Heidegger, Friederich Nietzsche, Leo Strauss, and Simone Weil. Let them: Grant is a guerilla believer who uses the *bons mots* of these thinkers as he feels just. Crucially, Grant iterates a phrase from Strauss – "oblivion of eternity" – in his essays, usually without attribution (or even quotation marks), for it specifies the ideational flaw in secularized Judeo-Christian civilization. By putting Darwin ahead of Genesis, "Freudian sex" and "Marxian economics" ahead of The Gospels, moderns forget that, to quote the conclusion of

*Lament*, "changes in the world . . . take place within an eternal order that is not affected by their taking place." Grant deflates the vanity of historicism by insisting that the eternal – or, the divine – exercises an invisible sovereignty over human destinies. Thus, Grant employs the temporal term *tradition* as a synonym for perceived truth. In a 1954 article, he states that the religious "live in tradition"; in *Justice* (1974), he warns that a "lack of tradition of thought [that is, religious philosophy] is one reason why it is improbable that the transcendence of justice over technology will be lived among English-speaking people." For Grant, to live outside of tradition or philosophy or eternity (these are all related ideas for him) is to live outside "the matrix of nobility."

Significantly, Grant loves chivalric words like *noble/nobility*, *excellence*, *virtue*, and *great*. He peppers his essays with references to the plight of "human nobility in the modern world," to "human excellence," to the loss of "the goodness once defined as the cultivation of virtues," and to the "Classical Greats" (a phrase illuminating his respect for "the ancients"). Grant's adoration of concepts like *greatness*, *nobility*, and *virtue* suggests he read the French Jewish intellectual Julien Benda, whose masterful – and austere Platonist – anti-nationalist polemic, *La Trahison des clercs* (1927), is echoed, ironically, in Grant's archly nationalist *Lament*. Grant agrees with Benda that the erection of a "universal and homogeneous state" would be an impious tyranny, and he borrows Benda's citation of Hegel, namely, that "*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*."

Grant's refusal to define his medieval-romantic terms weakens his arguments, however. He makes reckless assertions, for instance that France once had a "noble stature." But his prejudices pose an uglier problem. Grant halves the world between the white, Protestant, Anglo-dominated West and "Asiatics" – or "Asians" – his code name for Buddhists, Hindus, State Communists, and, perhaps, Jews. True: Grant lauds all of these groups, deeming them to be more faithful than Occidental infidels to ideals of sacrifice. Yet he can write with aplomb about the "mystery of the Jews" and decide that living with this "mystery" requires "reverence and good judgment." At best, the argument is patronizing; at worst, it is much worse. Too, Grant's discourse on the West ignores dissident (particularly racial) minorities – save Quebec Catholic francophones. Then, his eccentric Orientalism omits Islam and Muslims. Sadly, when Grant uses the word *our*, he always means *Anglo-American*, sometimes *European* or *Judeo-Christian*, but never any multicultural plurality.

Grant conceives women's struggle for gender equality as a vanity that renders them the prey of technology, specifically in the quest for economic "success." For Grant, this appetite reduces women to objects of biological manipulation and instruments of "feticide." In a 1988 essay, "Triumph of the Will," he holds that the liberal-ordained supremacy of the individual "will" over "Truth, beauty, and goodness" means that all – especially pregnant – women are "freed from the traditional constraints against killing." Hence, Grant eyes feminism as the ally of a rights-based "fascism" engendered by "intellectual oblivion of eternity."

In his introduction to the reissue of *English-Speaking Justice* (where Grant first attacks abortion), Robin Lathangue posits, *contra* William Christian, that Grant was no mere academic philosopher, but a "public intellectual." Sure, but more importantly, Grant the

writer is a superb controversialist, one who damns his opponents as "Procrustean" (another favoured word) and who sculpts choice, balanced sentences and witty metaphors to declare his love of the "good." His finest essays remain fresh, pungent interrogations of "our" assumptions. They aspire to a beauty appreciating that "the beautiful at its heights gives us purposiveness but its good transcends us (oh dangerous word)." They also ask, perhaps dangerously, who among us happy moderns should escape whipping?

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Collected Works of George Grant: Volume 2 (1951-1959) appeared, as if intuitively, one year before the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada expired, betrayed by its leader, Nova Scotian girondin Peter MacKay, who let the US Republican Party's northern chapter, the Canadian Alliance, swallow up his once-proud, national party. Its publication also occurred a year prior to the death of Robert Lorne Stanfield (1914-2003), the Nova Scotian Red Tory who nearly won 24 Sussex Drive in 1972. Yet, the writings of Grant (1918-88) — that Nova Scotia-loving, irascible intellectual, instinctive Tory, and Christian philosophe, prophesy, already during the 1950s, well before his trenchant, poetic re-stating of the thesis in *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965), the inevitable demise of a distinctive, Canadian conservatism — and, thus, dominion. But the curious excellence of Grant's adult-education political science is its descent from philosophical speculation grounded in love of Christ, admiration of Plato, and suspicion of liberalism. If *Collected Works of George Grant: Volume I* (1933-1950) introduces us to the nascent discontent, whose apparent pessimism about modern usurpation of divine authority stems from the *theologia crucis*, a doctrine insisting one view the world as is, Volume 2 further establishes Grant's estrangement from doctrines of "progress" as well as his abhorrence of its "scientific" but arrogant "will to mastery" of nature and human beings.

As a tyro professor of philosophy at Halifax's Dalhousie University in the 1950s, Grant's developing thought was fashioned in relation to the demands of lectures and public education via journalistic articles, radio addresses, community engagements, and, ultimately, his first book, *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (1959). His style is almost always deceptively work-a-day, for he seeks understanding by an audience larger than those confined to his classroom or to his publication in journals. His *vox populi* aspirations make him one of our first contemporary public intellectuals (along with Marshall McLuhan), a point stressed by editor Arthur Davis' appending to this volume of a catalogue of Grant's Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio and television broadcasts, from 1949 to, posthumously, 1989.

A quirk of Grant's is his prolific use of such terms as "noble," "great," "tradition," "mystery," "strange," and "tragedy" (note: a medievalist vocabulary) as shorthand for concepts otherwise left unexplained. One may suss out implicit definitions, however, so that "noble" signifies a person or culture of faith, "tradition" religion (or classical philosophy), "mystery" the whims of divinity, and "tragedy" failure (i.e. acceptance of the destructive tenets of modernity). From the first substantial entry in Volume 2, Grant's writing of a 1951 Commission essay on the status of philosophical inquiry in English Canada, to the issuance of *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, these terms are

leveraged incessantly to support the essential argument: the European philosophical tradition — Judeo-Christian and Greek — “with its faith in human reason’s pursuit of the Good” underlies any notion of “human excellence” or, for that matter, Canadian sovereignty, in opposition to the sullyng, corrosive effects of liberal “pragmatism,” whose emphasis on technique and technology erases the basis for morality — and national borders. Grant states the argument directly: “The question is simply whether a society gains more from its MIT’s or from its Institutes of Medieval Studies.”

Grant’s defence of classical belief requires his scornful indictment of present-day scientism: “It has often been the way of modern men to laugh at the medieval student for discussing how many angels could stand on the point of a needle. Our modern laughter must be humbled by reading theses on the excreta of rats for which PhD’s have been awarded.” He attacks the “dogma of progress” by subjecting its supposed apostles — Marx, Russell, Sartre, Popper, Berlin, and a host of acolytes “lite” — to critiques enforced by the exacting strictures of Plato, the Bible, St. Augustine, Leo Strauss, and “a modern saint,” Simone Weil. In Grant’s own “gospel,” the “Fall” is re-enacted as the West’s choosing of modern freedom and will-power over “ancient” faith and virtue. The consequence of this fresh “sinning” is the triumph of an amoral social and biological engineering that dehumanizes us, leading to, in Grant’s view, Auschwitz on one hand and abortion on the other. In contrast, there is “The truth of conservatism [i.e.] the truth of order and limits, both in social and personal life.” Or, “The idea of limit is unavoidably the idea of God.”

Though Grant’s analyses of our nation, our civilization, and world history are impassioned, challenging, and visionary, intriguing lacunae appear. Apart from his appreciation for “the African” St. Augustine, peoples who are not British or European or Judeo-Christian are “Asiatics” — a Cold War, catchall phrase of Orwellian import. Likewise, while Grant comments on everyone’s sex obsessions, and though his wife, Sheila, was a general, unacknowledged collaborator on these manuscripts, there is little commentary on women, save for chivalric nods to the Simones — De Beauvoir and Weil. Too, Grant’s contemporary belles-lettriste thinkers — such as George Orwell and Julien Benda — are absent, as is any sustained treatment of “classical” liberal philosophers like Locke, Rousseau, Macchiavelli, and Montesquieu, or of conservative scribes like Vico and Burke. His scrutiny of religious thought (and its “perversions”) may have blinded him to pronouncedly secular political imagining. (True: he criticizes “change-the-world-now” Marxism as a secular religion.)

Nevertheless, the irrefutable strength of Grant’s Christian classicism is its unflinching engagement with our world of poverty, disease, war, and suffering, and glamour, riches, technological achievement, and art. His magazine scanning, as it were, allows him to juxtapose Mrs. Nikita Krushev to Mrs. Jack Kennedy and to prefer the former to the latter. A university literature syllabus based on Grant’s putative library (as evinced by his quotations) could range across Shakespeare (Macbeth and King Lear), Donne, Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, Hopkins, Dostoevsky, Wilfred Owen, Mauriac, Céline, and Sartre (The Flies). He also refers, frequently, feelingly, to Mozart.

Editor Davis’s notes are authoritatively researched and exquisitely written. His inclusion

of such ephemera as Grant's lecture notes, notebook excerpts, one Wordsworthian lyric, and three Donne-styled sonnets is defensible, for it yields enlarged access to the dimensions of the man's thought.

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If *Collected Works of George Grant: Volume 2 (1951-1959)* reveals the emergence of philosopher George Parkin Grant (1918-1988) as a public intellectual, via his adult-education ventures and his radio sermons, *Volume 3 (1960-1969)* showcases the maturation of that "Mass Age" messenger. In that most critical decade of the post-World War II era, the 1960s, when the promise of liberal "improvement" and messianic science seemed affirmed by Marilyn Monroe glitz and moon-shot glamour, Grant appeared, with the rhetoric of a Hebraic prophet, pronouncing lamentation and pointing to the napalmed babies and blazing ghettos in the wings of JFK's show-biz Camelot. A cigarette-puffing Daniel, Grant warned a dazzling, technicolour Belshazzar of the writing on the wall that spells out doom.

Nowhere was his dissent more powerfully and poetically expressed than in his accessible and fantastically popular *Lament for a Nation: the Defeat of Canadian Nationalism (1965)*, which casts once-Prime Minister John George Diefenbaker (1895-1979) as a Miltonic hero, one who strove to prevent Canada from becoming a satellite of the "American Empire," but was defeated by traitorous capitalists, "swinger" Liberals, and by the pro-US zeitgeist itself. *Lament for a Nation* is one-part Bob Dylan snarling, "Like a Rolling Stone," but also one-part Malcolm X, denouncing the greed and violence of "imperialist" America. It is also a concentrated, pungent summary of Grant's critique of modernity, wherein the "disappearance of Canada" becomes a tragicomic sideshow.

Grant's argument depends on several iterated beliefs: 1) The "classical" Greek philosophers and "ancient" Hebrew prophets viewed humanity as flawed creatures of potential divinity: not perfectible, but redeemable by reason (Plato) or by grace (Christ); 2) the modern philosophers (Bacon, Nietzsche, Marx, Rousseau, Hegel, Kant, Heidegger) view humanity – and Nature – as malleable and perfectible; 3) thus, liberal, secular humanists, to eliminate the evils of war, sickness, and poverty, seek to create one unified, rational, and scientifically mastered world; 4) this yearning must result, however, in cultural homogenization and the erasure of "petty" sovereignties (such as Canada's), but also in unimaginably sophisticated tyranny: savage force either softened by media-mediated thought control or prosecuted by sci-fi weaponry. A quarter-century before Francis Fukuyama's infamous "End of History" essay (1989), Grant had already argued that history was moving, via the aegis of the United States, towards the erection of a global police-state wherein humanity would submit to the soul-destructive gods of science, machinery, and pleasure. For Grant, this destiny is a denial of "human excellence."

Like all conservatives, Grant believes in a Golden Age. For him, it seems to have been the Canada of his parents: quietly British, supposedly (somewhat) respectful of the French (Quebec), and conscientiously suspicious of the American Way. But now, in the 1960s, Canada is whoring after mini-skirts and nuclear weapons; it seems to want to become American. For Grant, the larger issue is, however, that Canadians have

embraced the ultimately amoral, US-championed liberalism of our time, based on the rhetoric of “rights” and the “triumph of the will”: if it feels good, do it. With such a philosophy (and theology), one may abort fetuses, bomb developing countries, contaminate and despoil the environment, and act in viciously inhumane – or, better, impious – ways.

Although editors Davis and Roper illuminate, via their introduction and generous, detailed annotations, the sources of and influences upon Grant’s thought, giving proper attention to contemporary philosophers such as Simone Weil (1909-1943) and Leo Strauss (1899-1973), they – and, to be fair, Grant himself – omit one name: the French Jewish philosopher Julien Benda (1867-1956). True: Benda’s great polemic, *La Trahison des clercs* (1927), is an attack on the nationalist (really, fascist) inclinations of leading European intellectuals of the inter-war period, while Grant’s *Lament* executes an acid defence of nationalism. However, both Grant and Benda believe that the erection of the “universal, homogeneous state” will constitute a profound oppression and diminution of humanity. Thus, *Lament for a Nation* is one more attack on “treasonous” intellectuals.

This possibility creates an intriguing connection between Grant and Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1919-2000), an intellectual whose anti-nationalism was so indebted to Benda that he titled one of his most archly provocative articles, “Nouvelle trahison des clercs” (1962). Although Grant opposed Trudeau, they were both from the same generation, enjoyed patrician childhoods, flirted with the Left (while veering occasionally to the Right), became best-selling authors, loved penning polemic, and, perhaps most significantly, cultivated an aloofness to the different publics that offered them adulation. Not only that, they shared some political views (including an admiration for Diefenbaker). When Grant advises Diefenbaker, in 1965, “To compromise the fundamental prerogatives of the national government would mean that Canada would become a series of disconnected regions, rather than a nation,” the political philosopher (as he styled himself) sounds downright Trudeauvian.

Of course, Trudeau was able to reshape Canada through laws, but Grant changed English Canada, at least a little and at least temporarily, through the force of his ideas. His *Lament* generated just enough leftist nationalism to push the Trudeau Government to pursue cultural nationalist goals (which Trudeau preferred to term “pan-Canadianism”) and even to attach the adjective Canadian to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (a superfluous gesture in a Canadian constitution). Although we tend to consider the 1960s-1980s in Canada as a struggle between the federalist Trudeau and Quebec sovereignty champion René Levesque (1922-1987), Grant’s voice is also crucial and definitive. His 1960s writings – including screenplays, TV interview transcripts, public and course lectures, book reviews, letters-to-editors, and the books – make it so.

In a time – the Age of Aquarius – when most effective dissenters were “-outs” and “radicals,” rock stars and drug experimenters, Grant attained this status as a tweedy, professorial Christian. Only one other confessed Christian of his era so managed to transform his society: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968).

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Edited consummately by Arthur Davis and Henry Roper, this fourth and last compilation of the books, articles, talks, and jottings of the Christian *philosophe*, George Parkin Grant (1918-88), establishes that the polemical intellectual never had a dull thought. Indeed, the *succès de scandale* of Grant's 1965 extended pamphlet, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*, which sparked both English-Canadian nationalism and anti-Vietnam War protest, ensured he now had to explain and defend his "prejudices."

Thus, in the early 1970s, Grant defines terms he once took for granted (excuse the pun). Now, "excellence," "great," "noble," "tradition," and "tragedy," *et cetera* (a classicist's vocabulary), are spelled out, programmatically, to attempt to stave off potential *misprision*. Simultaneously, Grant apologizes for *Lament*, explaining, in 1973, "anger is a bad motive for a philosopher."

Yet, because he now boosts partisan conservatives, Grant offers opinions that seem gross idolatry. So, in a 1971 squib, US President Richard Nixon is viewed kindly as a Republican doing his damndest to end a war perpetrated by evil Democrats. After Nixon meets his Watergate, so to speak, in 1974, Grant imagines, "the bell of liberalism sounded in [his] fall." Grant does not acknowledge the countless deaths that Nixon countenanced in Cambodia. Similarly, Grant approves of President Ronald Reagan's anti-abortion stance, but is silent on the Great Communicator's assault on Grenada and bankrolling of the bloody, "Contra" insurgency against Nicaragua's Sandinista government. Grant seeks to buttress ballot-box conservatism, but the pacifist ends up backing warmongers. He knows better: "ideologies are surrogate religions pretending they are philosophies."

Grant's philosophical sallies also merit reservation. In 1971, he salutes the desire "of many French-Canadians to exist as a Franco-American community in the midst of the homogenized English-speaking sea." But he references the First Nations, in 1974, as only "some easily conquered Indians." He identifies the "West" with Plato and Christ, i.e. with European Caucasians, but the victims of Occidental enslavement and imperialism are cast, again in 1974, as "alien races." Grant also lauds Britain for exercising "some restraints [in] imperial adventures": Here's cold comfort for "colonials" massacred by British arms. Grant writes sensitively of Jews in 1974 and denounces anti-Semitism in 1979; yet, in 1983, he affirms Adolf Hitler's "agony of loneliness in the gaudy decay of pre-World War I Vienna, and his identification of the Jews with that society. . ."

For a politic cleric who savages UK/US imperialism, Grant's practical omission of "race" is weird. Reading him, one cannot know that the struggle against African servitude helped to shape modern ideals of liberty. True: in 1974 Grant condemns UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill's appeal to "pure racial will"; in 1983, he observes that French author Céline narrates "the collapse of the 'white' races"; and, in 1988, he says, "the central stage of world history now moves from Europe to Far Asia, as China is developed." Yet, Grant never cites anti-imperialist philosophers like Julien Benda, or decolonization thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, or even that avatar of wicked statecraft, Machiavelli. Nor does he recognize African-American leader Martin Luther King's radical, non-violent, Christian movement. Grant's views on Occidental "destiny"

descend from Oswald Spengler's in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* – or *The Decline of the West* (1918), a racist tome that Grant references in 1975-76 lectures.

This belief in “degeneracy” anchors Grant's thought: because Western philosophy has dethroned God, positing that human beings are free to make their own history, in obeisance to technology-empowered “will/ing,” with only appeals to “law” and “morality” (detritus of the dead, Judeo-Christian religions) to guard “rights” and “equality,” we may liberally exploit and degrade each other – to the point of genocide. In societies ignorant of eternity (God), and void of reverence (respect for human life as a divine “gift”), one may exercise “The Triumph of the Will” (the title of a 1988 article) and destroy fetuses, sack nations, and bully “others” – *via* brutal policing and/or subtler powers of persuasion (psychology, psychiatry, and advertising/propaganda). For Grant, the erection of this state, one that aspires to universality, denies our “nobility” and enacts a (benign) tyranny. (Is he wrong? Recall the “Coalition of the *Willing*” that raped Iraq in 2003.)

Grant pooh-poohs Freud, but psychoanalysis has its place. Arguably, Grant's Christianity stems from his loss, in 1941, to the Blitz, of a married, English woman who had brought him “sexual peace” (Christian 76). Does Grant's recollection of her death by aerial bombardment underpin his opposition to the napalming of Vietnam, his adoration of Celine's “Trilogy” chronicling the saturation bombing of Germany, and his love for the French Jewish-Christian mystic and intellectual Simone Weil, who knew *two* war's terrors and died in England in 1943? (Tantalizingly, Grant scribbles in a 1972-73 Notebook, “I fear that my turning away from homosexuality made me see God.”)

Influenced by Weil (and German philosopher Martin Heidegger), Grant embraces a surprising heresy: in 1985, he endorses polytheism, deplores the early Christians who “wanted to destroy the vestiges of paganism,” and rues the “bare monotheism” of Islam and Judaism. He turns full circle: from an implicit acceptance of the occultism of Spengler (cf. Surette 1993) to that of Weil. Apparently, “revelation” came to humanity, not only from Athens and Jerusalem: add Languedoc (and Benares).

The *Collected Works* prove Grant was one of our chief intellectuals, ranking easily with Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan (both of whom he lambastes), Harold Innis (whom he admires), and Linda Hutcheon. If Grant's aphorisms sound cranky, his critique of modernity rings true. In many texts – *Lament, Technology and Justice*, the Céline and Weil accounts, the *Globe & Mail* reviews – philosophy and poetry marry. (Sheila Grant's co-authorship, inking of some pieces, and her own editing are regularly Superb). Editors Davis and Roper serve Grant beautifully and justly. In 1110-plus pages of text, there are just two typos (71 and 1080). Moreover their introductions and endnotes are erudite, eloquent, and usually correct. However, the US did not “withdraw” placidly from Vietnam in 1975; no, its nationals *vamoosed*, they *scrammed*, in chaos and panic.