

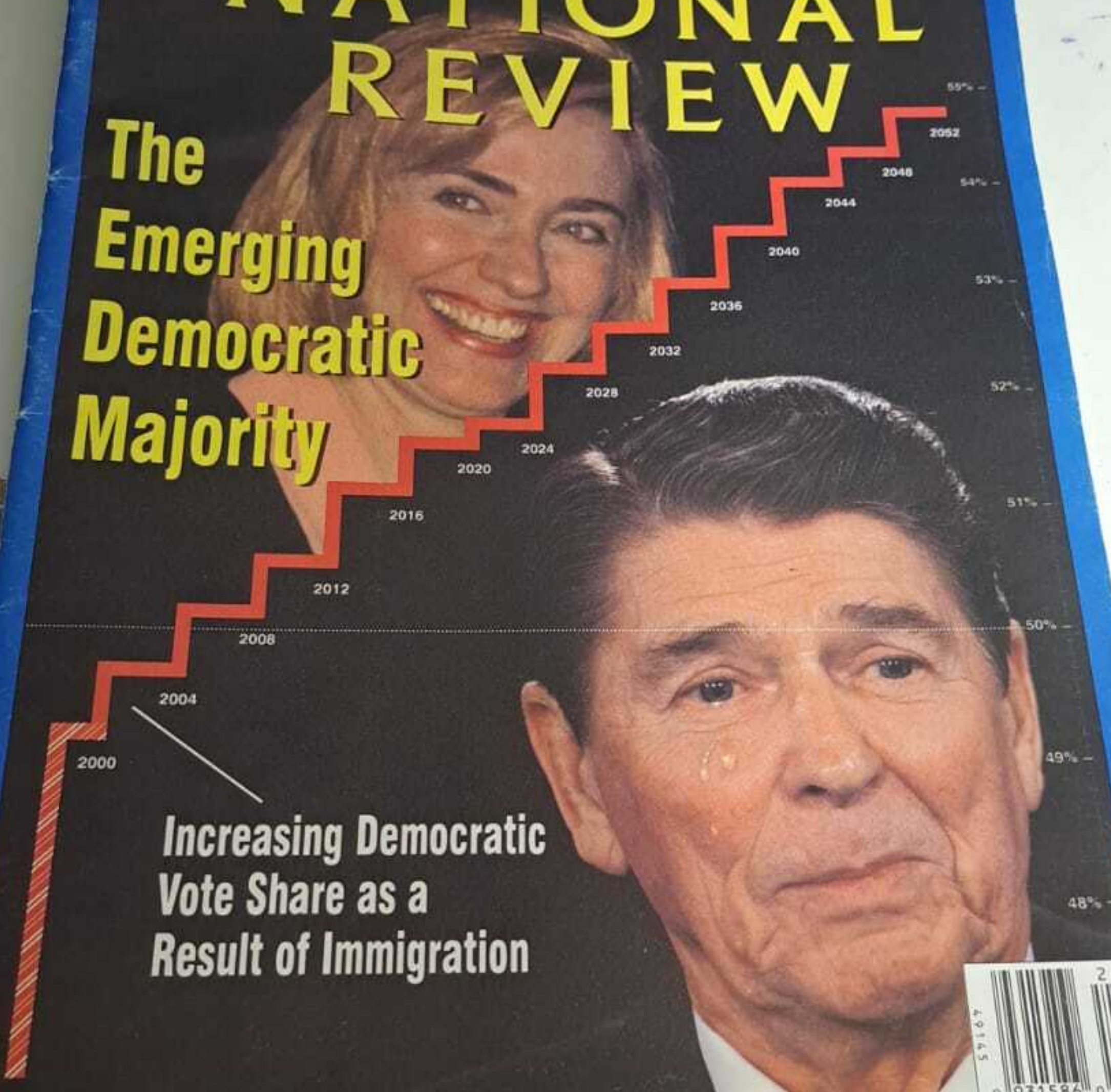
Christopher Buckley on Robert Benchley

June 16, 1997 © 49146 \$3.50 U.S., \$4.50 Canadian

Special Issue: Immigration and Politics

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## The Emerging Democratic Majority



Increasing Democratic Vote Share as a Result of Immigration



1988

World Wide Web <http://www.nationalreview.com>

effort at reporting the contents of a chapter of Romans is wildly erroneous. What is truly disheartening about this sort of book is its intellectual sloppiness. Wilson's old-fashioned mannerisms may be forgiven. His failure even to read in the best scholarly research into Paul may not, especially when he poses as an author who has done his homework. If Wilson were as schooled in *paideia* as he would like his readers to believe, then he would recognize the ways in which Paul, far from a tormented psyche whose self is spilled on every page, is a skilled practitioner of the arts of rhetoric. If Wilson had read his Plu-

tarch as carefully as his Plato, he would also know that Paul's concern for morals is remarkably at home among the popular philosophers of his day. If Wilson had read as deeply as he suggests in Jewish studies, he would perhaps have been able to recognize that Paul's use of Scripture and mode of argumentation make considerable sense within the rules set by that ancient discourse. Or, if Wilson had bothered to read Paul's letters more closely, he would have come to see that for this ancient writer it really was not "the mind of Paul" that counted, but "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). □

he is often described as your "alter ego." Just tell him that he really doesn't need all that schmutz to convey his message. Or, if "message" would be too pretentious a word for the old Newark smart aleck, then just tell him the schtick has grown routine and obvious—like that of an old man who hopes to impress the young with dirty jokes. Actually, that is what he's doing all too often, isn't it? Since you've gotten a little out of hand at times yourself, but now seem to be largely free of the need to scandalize, it should be easy for you to explain to Roth that he need not be scatological to entertain.

Here, though, Zuckerman, you've accomplished it. *American Pastoral* is readable and riveting. And aside from the odd extramarital affair, seemingly tossed in as an afterthought, it has been done without the Rothian need to *épater les bourgeois*.

And, if I may say so without giving offense, it is a serious tale as well. "Swede" Levov, Jewish all-American boy from Newark, was a successful athlete and businessman. He married Miss New Jersey, believed in and lived the

## Philip Roth's Eternal Things

MAYER SCHILLER

DEAR Zuckerman: Well, you've done it again. You've held me enthralled page after page.

*American Pastoral*, which you narrate, has everything one could want in a novel. Its rapid-fire insights into the human condition tumble down upon each other. Yet, they are delivered with just the right degree of irony, ambiguity, and humble humor, which we have

*American Pastoral*, by Philip Roth (Houghton Mifflin, 423 pp., \$26)

come to expect from you. The book is even mercifully free of the off-color detail we have sadly come to associate at times with you and more consistently with your frequent competitor, Roth.

Roth himself, though, has been showing us a gentler, softer side of late with his autobiographical *The Facts* and *The Patrimony*. The latter is a masterpiece that I have frequently reread in recent years, each time gleaning fresh insights into that foundation of our existence, parent-child interaction, where love, fidelity, guilt, failure, and assorted other ties all uncomfortably mingle.

In *The Patrimony*, Roth bathed the mundane in love and showed us how to cherish the imperfect devotion of parents. Thanks to him we can now appreciate the grandeur not only of Herman Roth but of parents, however flawed,

everywhere. In *Sabbath's Theater*, though, Roth was up to his old tricks. Frenzy and insight went hand in hand with a hearty dose of vulgarity.

Zuck, can't you talk to him? After all,

**"This book makes a dry subject fun. It belongs on the shelves of everyone interested in natural resources, the environment, markets, and governance."**

—Zach Willey, Environmental Defense Fund

Is the West running out of water? Do we face "the browning of America"? Although there has been greater reliance on water markets in the past decade, Terry Anderson and Pamela Snyder argue that further use of markets could improve water use efficiency and environmental quality. They present examples of how water markets are working in the United States and elsewhere and show where water policy is headed.

**Water Markets: Priming the Invisible Pump**  
by Terry L. Anderson and Pamela Snyder  
218 pages, \$10.95 paper/\$19.95 cloth



CAIO  
INSTITUTE

Call toll-free to order: 1-800-767-1241 (noon-9 p.m. eastern time, Monday-Friday)  
1000 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001

Rabbi Schiller teaches Talmud at Yeshiva University High School in Manhattan.

dream of all good Americans of midcentury. He was truly kind, gracious, moral, and hard-working. A volunteer hitchhiker in the Marines solidified his commitment to the land he loves.

Zuck, you knew Levov as a kid in Newark. Wooshipped him really, because the Swede was, as you are, a Jew, and yet he outgoyed the goys at their own games. As you point out to us often in this book, my friend, you've gotten on in years. (That portrayal of your high-school reunion is must reading for anyone who has a past he feels like remembering or a sense of mortality he feels like confronting.) Recently you saw the Swede again. He told you about some troubles he has endured.

The troubles turned out to be beyond anyone's wildest imaginings. The Swede's daughter, Merry, had become a New Left terrorist in the Sixties. She bombed and killed in the name of the "revolution." It was a tale so horrible that you had to get to the bottom of it. It's unclear whether the result of your investigation is fantasy or fact. (Another literary trick borrowed from Roth.) But no matter.

The breakdown of the Swede's relationship with his daughter is presented as a metaphor for the breakdown of an entire generation. Or should that be nation? Civilization? "The old intergenerational give-and-take of the country—that-used-to-be, when everyone knew his role and took the rules dead seriously... turned pathological."

There is no reasoning with Merry. She blows up the local post office, kills a man in the process, and flees. For the Swede it was incomprehensible. "That violent hatred of America was a disease unto itself. And he loved America. Loved being an American."

Yes, Zuck, I know you're wondering what Roth is thinking as he reads these lines, lines that exude a love for home and hearth the likes of which even most conservatives are embarrassed by these days. Are the Swede's thoughts as he views his daughter similar to yours as you view your nation now that, as Irving Kristol puts it, "The culture wars are over and the Left has won"?

Hate America? Why, he lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin. All the pleasures of his younger years were American pleasures, all that success and happiness had been American, and he no longer need keep his mouth shut just to defuse her ignorant hatred. The loneliness he would feel as a man without all his

American feelings. The longing he would feel if he had to live in another country. Everything he loved was here.

The Swede even calls into question the cherished Enlightenment dogma of tolerance, when he remembers his failure to remove from his daughter's room a sign which declared, "We are against

*Roth loves the right things. His parents, his relatives, his hometown. His baseball and his country.*

everything that is good and decent in honky America. We will loot and burn and destroy. We are the incubation of your mother's nightmares."

The ability to wield authority was missing from the Swede's virtues. Authority is, of course, born of certainty.

And because even though he hadn't liked it one bit he did not believe it was his right blah-blah-blah-blah-blah—because out of regard for her property and personal freedom, he couldn't even tear down an awful poster—because he was not capable of even that much righteous violence, now the hideous realization of the nightmare had come along to test further the limits of his enlightened tolerance.

Of course, Zuck, you balance the Swede's musings with those of his daughter. (It is amazing how horrible that New Left talk sounds even after all these years.) You let many others have their say too. The Swede and his wife (and even his old-time father) were quick to embrace Merry's rejection of the

## Tex-Mex Mess

JAMES BOWMAN

WHATEVER strain of gargantuan vanity persuaded Michael Lind to oblige posterity and the world of letters with a retelling of the story of the Alamo in 6,006 lines of rhyme royal is worthy of some considerable respect; his poetry,

as you point out, the Swede's generation had a hard time articulating its own first principles. And, of course, the absurdity of reality as we often experience it is never far from the surface in your writing. But damn it, man, as much as some may find it hard to believe, you do seem to be coming down on the side of decency and tradition and America as it used to be before the Merrys triumphed. It's subtle. It's lyric. It's heavily nuanced, but the conclusion is unmistakably there.

In the end Merry abandoned the path of leftist terror. In her final meeting with the Swede she had become something very different. Her ultimate fate is part of the story's suspense, and so I won't reveal it. Not that this new Merry was acceptable to the Swede either. There was no final reconciliation. Not between the Swede and Merry or between pre- and post-Sixties America.

What is Roth thinking? You know, Zuck, here's a confession. I've always liked Roth. He speaks to me, a New York Jewish child of the Fifties, in a way no other author does. In his books I find my family, friends, and emotions. I can't put these books down. Well, most of them, at least.

And what has become increasingly clear to me is that Roth also loves the right things. His parents, his relatives, his hometown. His baseball and his country. Perhaps we should describe what he loves as the Eternal Things, although Roth is too much a product of his time and place to use that term. So, rest easy, Zuck—I think Roth really likes this book of yours.

And if you fellows are in touch these days here's a thought to mull over together. Perhaps, guys, that which you both love is a reflection of a deeper Love which embraces, obligates, and in the end judges us all. Just something to think about as we all get on in years. □

alas, is not. In fact, the only interesting thing about it is the question it raises: How is it possible for someone almost entirely lacking in poetic talent or taste

Mr. Bowman is American Editor for the Times Literary Supplement.