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## Book Review

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# Fighting cancer, or fighting culture?

by Janet West

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### **The Dread Disease Cancer and Modern American Culture**

by James T. Patterson

Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987  
380 pp. hardcover, \$25.95

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This book is worth reading, though not for reasons one might at first think. Patterson presents an overview of reactions to cancer in the United States throughout the last century, beginning with the death by cancer of Gen. U.S. Grant in 1885. He then details the establishment of the American Cancer Society (formerly the American Society for the Control of Cancer), the National Institutes of Health, and the National Cancer Institute. He documents the fight waged by the people associated with these institutions, scientists, and politicians for increased funding for research, and against the fear and superstition of much of the population.

Patterson presents an enormously detailed work, seemingly taking great pains to present an objective and balanced viewpoint. After all, he is writing a history. However, as in any history, the pattern of what is excluded is as important as what is written. Despite his detail, he excludes any mention of the very promising recent developments at the frontiers of biology—optical biophysics. And, despite the book's title, he also excludes discussion of the actual culture upon which this nation is based.

The true subject of this book is the cultural shift that has occurred in the United States, in particular, in the last two decades, against the defense of human life. Patterson favorably describes the last two decades of environmentalism, with hooks such as Rachel "Silent Spring" Carson arguing that human industry causes cancer and advocating "treatments" that involve less medical care and less technology.

Cancer, for many centuries, has been viewed as the paradigm of a death sentence. As Patterson quotes others' descriptions:

"Fears of the disease stemmed from the belief by doctors and laymen alike that it was an alien and living invader that gave little or no warning before 'eating' into people. . . . To

most Americans, it remained an insidious, mysterious, indiscriminating, impoverishing and painfully wasting disease that could hit anywhere, anytime, and could not be arrested once it appeared."

In confronting a disease such as cancer, what is immediately brought to the fore is, will one, will one's society and culture, fight for life?

The conception of the sanctity of human life, and the defense of that idea, was the cornerstone of the Golden Renaissance; it was later epitomized by our own Declaration of Independence, the Preamble and the U.S. Constitution; the ideal echoes throughout Western civilization. Strangely, in Patterson's representation of American culture, this idea is ignored. Oh, certainly, he discusses the battle of researchers and scientists to find a cure; he notes how the fight against cancer used to be favorably compared with the Manhattan Project—that it required the same level of resources as to solve the mysteries of the atom; and was later compared to the effort to land a man on the Moon. Patterson also relates how, with the advent of new diagnostics and treatment, such as radioactive isotopes, those who put themselves forward as "guinea pigs," did not do so out of despair, but out of hope that this could lead to medical breakthroughs for those who came after them.

However, time and again, Patterson mocks the cultural optimism of Americans: "Americans taking on professional and white collar tasks in the cities began to chafe at the confining routines that regulated their lives. Living in a society of ever greater abundance, they rejected restraints. They began to think that there might be no limit to the potential of the body, no finite amount of energy to be harnessed and utilized." He adds, "Financial resources underwrote a new growth industry of cancer research in the late 1940s and 1950s. Then—at last—the alliance against cancer achieved visibility and political power in American life. While that power rested most broadly on the strength of contemporary cultural values—faith in medical science and expectations about good health—it was distinctively American in its assurance . . . that money and improvements in medical technology could conquer anything. . . . The postwar years were increasingly prosperous, confident and patriotic—years of assertive and distinctively American positive thinking."

He continues, "[John] Cairns was especially pessimistic about popular reactions to prevention campaigns. Like many experts, he was persuaded that the surest ways to avoid the disease were to stop smoking and to eat more balanced diets. But millions of people refused to heed such advice. Their behavior demonstrated a constant feature of the modern social history of cancer: durability of personal habits. Most people clung to established life-styles, especially those which gave them great pleasure. With so much to enjoy in the affluent society, they were often more intent on gratifying themselves in the here and now than on worrying about the long-range costs of self-indulgent behavior."

The book leaves little doubt as to which side Patterson is

on. He includes long references to "legitimate" environmental dangers. "The accident at Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania and discovery of toxic chemicals dumped at Love Canal, further awakened the public sense that environmental pollution could lead to terminal disease."

He praises Rachel Carson. "Fueling the environmentalist movement was the growing feeling that industrial growth was dangerous in itself. This belief drew heavily on the eloquent arguments of Rachel Carson [whose arguments are fatally flawed-JGW] whose *Silent Spring* [1962] was the key document of the new environmentalism." "Not until the culturally tumultuous late 1960s and the economically unsettled 1970s—decades of growing doubts about American institutions—were environmentalists able to get much of a hearing."

He then contradicts himself. "Americans had always idealized the countryside and been ambivalent about industrialization and the city." And in general, he treats the environmentalist movement as a legitimate contender in the arena of cancer policy, arising "spontaneously" on the American political scene.

### **An incredible assertion**

Toward the end of the book, Patterson makes a most incredible assertion: "Only one development in the 1980s seemed to have the power to eclipse fears of cancer in America. That was the eruption of . . . AIDS." By 1986, he continued "the head of the World Health Organization [stated] 'We stand nakedly in front of a very serious pandemic as mortal as any pandemic there has ever been.' Federal officials calculated in 1986 that at least 1,500,000 Americans were already infected by AIDS, and predicted that five to ten million Americans would be infected by the end of 1991." Patterson continues, "If AIDS were to become epidemic in the United States, it was certain that cancer would lose some of its hold on the fears and imaginations of the American people. *By 1987, however, no such epidemic had occurred.*" (Emphasis added)"

On the contrary, the extent of the spread of AIDS is being concealed from the American people, by agreement of government and the medical establishment, which—like Mr. Patterson—appears not to care much for the value of human life, when that conflicts with budgetary constraints or ideological commitments. Patterson admits he is no scientist. But he endorses the environmentalist mythos that places "crimes against nature" above crimes against humanity, and cruelly uses fears of cancer to oppose scientific and technological progress ("industry causes cancer").

This book can serve as a case study, on how the omission of the idea of the sacredness of human life and the uncompromising nature of the fight for life—the cultural superiority of Western civilization—can shape what a person, or a generation, thinks is possible for mankind to accomplish. The deadliest, most insidious cancer is the cultural pessimism Patterson purveys.

## **Books Received**

**Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right**, by James Coates. Hill and Wang, N.Y., 1987. \$17.95 hardbound, 294 pages.

**Pepper: Eyewitness to a Century**, by Claude Denson Pepper with Hays Gory. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, N.Y., 1987. \$17.95 hardbound, 336 pages.

**The Body Victorious**, by Lennart Nilsson in collaboration with Jan Lindberg. Delacorte Press, N.Y., 1987. \$25 hardbound, 196 pages.

**Hitler: Memoirs of a Confidant**, by Otto Wagner, edited by Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., translated by Ruth Hein. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., and London, 1987. \$13.95, 333 pages.

**Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism**, by Aileen Kelly. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., and London, 1987. \$14.95 paperbound, 320 pages.

**AIDS and the Law: A Guide for the Public**, edited by Harlon L. Dalton, Scott Burris, and the Yale AIDS Law Project. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1987. \$22.50 hardbound, \$7.95 paperbound, 382 pages.

**AH-1 (Modern Fighting Aircraft, Vol. 13)**, by Doug Richardson. A Prentice Hall Press Arco Military Book, N.Y., 1987. \$12.95 hardbound, 64 pages.

**An Illustrated Guide to Tank Busters**, by Mike Spick and Bruce Quarry. A Prentice Hall Press Arco Military Book, N.Y., 1987. \$10.95 hardbound, 155 pages.

**An Illustrated Guide to Modern Fighters and Attack Aircraft**, by Bill Gunston. A Prentice Hall Press Arco Military Book, N.Y., 1987. \$10.95 hardbound, 151 pages.

**William C. Norris, Portrait of a Maverick, Founder of Control Data Corporation**, by James C. Worthy. Ballinger Publishing Co., Cambridge, Mass., 1987. \$19.95 hardbound, 259 pages.

**The Messianic Legacy**, by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. Henry Holt and Co., Inc., N.Y., 1987. \$19.95 hardbound, 364 pages.

**Rayburn: A Biography**, by D.B. Hardeman and Donald C. Bacon. Texas Monthly Press, Austin, Texas, 1987. \$21.95 hardbound, 554 pages.