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PROPHETS OF BAD NEWS AND GOOD NEWS

Two recent books show the down-side and the up-side of the nation's mood. The French philosopher Jean-Francois Revel gives the case for pessimism in "How Democracies Perish," while Ben Wattenberg argues for optimism in "The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong."

Revel thinks that modern democracy may be nothing more than an "accident," an experiment whose time is almost over. He thinks that the West may not survive beyond the end of this century, but will perish beneath the relentless advance of Communism.

Revel seems to think that the West will be getting its just desserts because of its persistent failure to recognize the reality of Soviet expansionism. He thinks that Communism's expansion could not have succeeded as much as it has unless the West had been predisposed to succumb to it.

Obviously, Americans and other free peoples don't choose to live under Communism. But Revel concludes that we have effectively made that choice because the democracies themselves "have adopted the Communists' image of the world and their perspective on history."

In other words, Western countries have permitted the Communists to "frame" the life-and-death issues of national survival. They, not we, have determined the intellectual battleground of debate as well as the physical battleground of confrontation. It's as though, Revel analogizes, the West's football team had "disqualified itself from going beyond the 50-yard line."

The best thing the Communists have going for them is their unshakable faith that history is on their side, that they will inevitably win, or, as Nikita Khrushchev so colorfully said, "we will bury you." Many Americans act as though they believe that all they are doing in their daily lives is waging a holding action against the eventual triumph of socialism.

Revel's gloomy vision of the future reminds us of how, in the mid-1940s, Whittaker Chambers said he believed he was leaving the winning side (Communism) and going over to

the losing side (freedom). That's what made his "Witness" so compelling.

What Revel says about Western attitudes toward Communist expansion is also true about the defeatist attitude of American non-liberals toward government controls and spending. Until the phenomenon of Ronald Reagan, most non-liberals had allowed the liberals (in the media, government and academia) to "frame" the agenda for discussion, based on <u>their</u> assumption that, in a democracy, people would always vote for more and more government handouts, and the best a non-liberal could do would be to delay the triumph of socialism.

Ben Wattenberg shows in his new book "The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong" that all these prophets of gloom and doom are off target. He asks, why is our national brow wrinkled with worry when our nation, "excuse the expression, never had it so good?"

Instead of reporting that the increase in life expectancy in America is a marvelous achievement, the media give us daily accounts of pollution, cancer risks and medical malpractice. The big news is that Americans are living longer and we have conquered so many diseases that kill at younger ages.

Instead of reporting that the American private sector has created 6-1/2 million new jobs in the last two years, and 26 million new jobs since 1970, we hear only about the fewer who have lost their jobs. Instead of reporting the incredible generosity of Americans to the less fortunate at home and abroad, through both private and public charities, we see vivid TV dramatizations about a few welfare cuts.

The fact that 64% of young people in the age group 18 to 24 voted for Ronald Reagan is the most devastating body blow to the liberal psyche since Alger Hiss was convicted in 1949. This 1984 election statistic has knocked the props out of the ideology that only liberals appeal to the young and the progressive, and it has knocked the wind out of their confidence in the future.

In asking college students why they voted for Ronald Reagan, the most consistent answer I received was: "It seems like all my life growing up (during the 1970s), people were running down America. Reagan is different; he makes me proud to be an American."

In the 1984 election, Americans chose Wattenberg's thesis, not Ravel's. Ronald Reagan articulates the good news about America and has thereby shaped the mood of our nation. Give him a chance and he can also restore our faith in the ultimate victory of freedom over Communism.