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A Fanfare for the Little Man

By Leonard Fein

A dear friend of mine often describes us — himself, me, almost everyone we know — as “little people.” We are well-informed, politically engaged, civically virtuous — and utterly irrelevant.

“Irrelevant,” that is, in the larger world. We matter to friends and family, sometimes neighbors, too; now and then we make ripples in small ponds. But we never come close to the tides that determine our destiny. At best, we own biography, but history eludes us.

My friend brings evidence to his testimony. His constant is the 1960s, when so many of us dismissed the crazy claims of the radicals only to discover that their claims were not crazy after all. J. Edgar Hoover was even worse than they dared imagine, and the CIA was, as they asserted, out of control.

Somewhere, and not just in hidden basements but in high-ceilinged rooms with leather couches and armchairs and brass spittoons, sober men danced with the devil, planned assassinations, bought journalists and suborned perjury. They were the grandmasters, we the pawns.

They gave us designer bread and busty circuses and we read the papers and watched the news and wrote to our representatives in Congress and voted and so what? The futility of being earnest; we were had.

And are had still, my friend contends. This week, it’s Benazir Bhutto, the autocratic democrat who ended a martyr to an unnamed cause, brought home to Pakistan by her own ambition with the active encouragement of bumbling puppeteers who pull on tangled strings and supposed they knew what they were doing. We watch, and scratch. What can we do?

And more, of course: A health care system that is both irrational and immoral, that could be fixed were it not for the insurance and pharmaceutical industries, their lobbyists and propagandists and complicit politicians; tax breaks for bloated hedge fund managers; Guantanamo and habeas corpus and revelations galore of avarice, high crimes, collusion in corruption, stolen elections, lies and more lies.

Usually, I try to persuade my friend that he is mistaken, not so much because I am certain he is but because if he's not, then what's the point? Why care about civic virtue if the game is fixed? For the sake of our squeaky protests?

And then, just the other night, I saw a new film called "Charlie Wilson's War." As crisply told a story as you'd expect from writer Aaron Sorkin of "West Wing" fame and director Mike Nichols, it tells the basically true story of how one congressman and one CIA operative changed the face of history, successfully plotting the victory of Afghanistan's mujahadeen over the mighty Soviet army, hastening the implosion of the Soviet Union itself — and doing so by persuading Egypt and Israel and Saudi Arabia, among others, to join in secret enterprise.

The film's a hoot — and a caution. Long before its final and tragic conclusion, when the end game of the endeavor is totally messed up and the Taliban emerge, we are given to understand how very much is daily hidden from public view, from our view.

Government of the people and by the people is a cruel joke, and government for the people is a crap shoot. What's a body — a citizen, mind you — to do? Are the grandmasters chuckling as we scurry about with our Boy Scout manuals and our Constitution?

But then I remember: The Soviets lost their war in Afghanistan because Russian mothers took to the streets to demand their boys be brought home. In Argentina, Los Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the mothers of the disappeared children, demonstrated every Thursday afternoon, would not allow Argentina to forget, to ignore, to hide behind a shroud.

And in Israel? Here's Ari Shavit, of Ha'aretz: "Four Mothers was probably the most influential protest movement in the history of Israel. It was founded immediately after the 'disaster of the helicopters' — the collision of two Air Force helicopters carrying soldiers to Lebanon in February 1997, leaving 74 soldiers dead. The movement never amounted to more than a few dozen women (and several men). However, within three years it swept the country

and fomented a shift of consciousness that led, ultimately, to Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000."

And all that gets me thinking, thinking about the people here who took to the streets and finally forced us to leave Vietnam, and before that the young people whose persistent heroism brought an end to legal segregation. About the women of Ms. Magazine and all the others who rendered gender discrimination ridiculous as well as illegal. About Rachel Carson and Ralph Nader (in his earlier years) and Al Gore. About the thousands and tens of thousands, the little people whose names I will never know but whose deeds have changed and enhanced our world, our lives.

About all those who never ever thought that the little people cannot redirect the tides, about all those who knew and know that no matter how sluggish and selfish and sinful the "system" is, no matter how filling the bread or how diverting the circuses, there remains room for passionate conviction, for righteous indignation, for action.

I think about those who with a word changed how we think and with a march changed who we are.

The subterranean system will doubtless persist. If the rest of us belittle ourselves, it will triumph every time. If all that we do is we mutter and grumble, then the plutocrats and their hirelings will pay no mind to us, will hold us in contempt.

Thus Zarathustra: "One must still have chaos in oneself, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: you still have chaos in yourselves."