

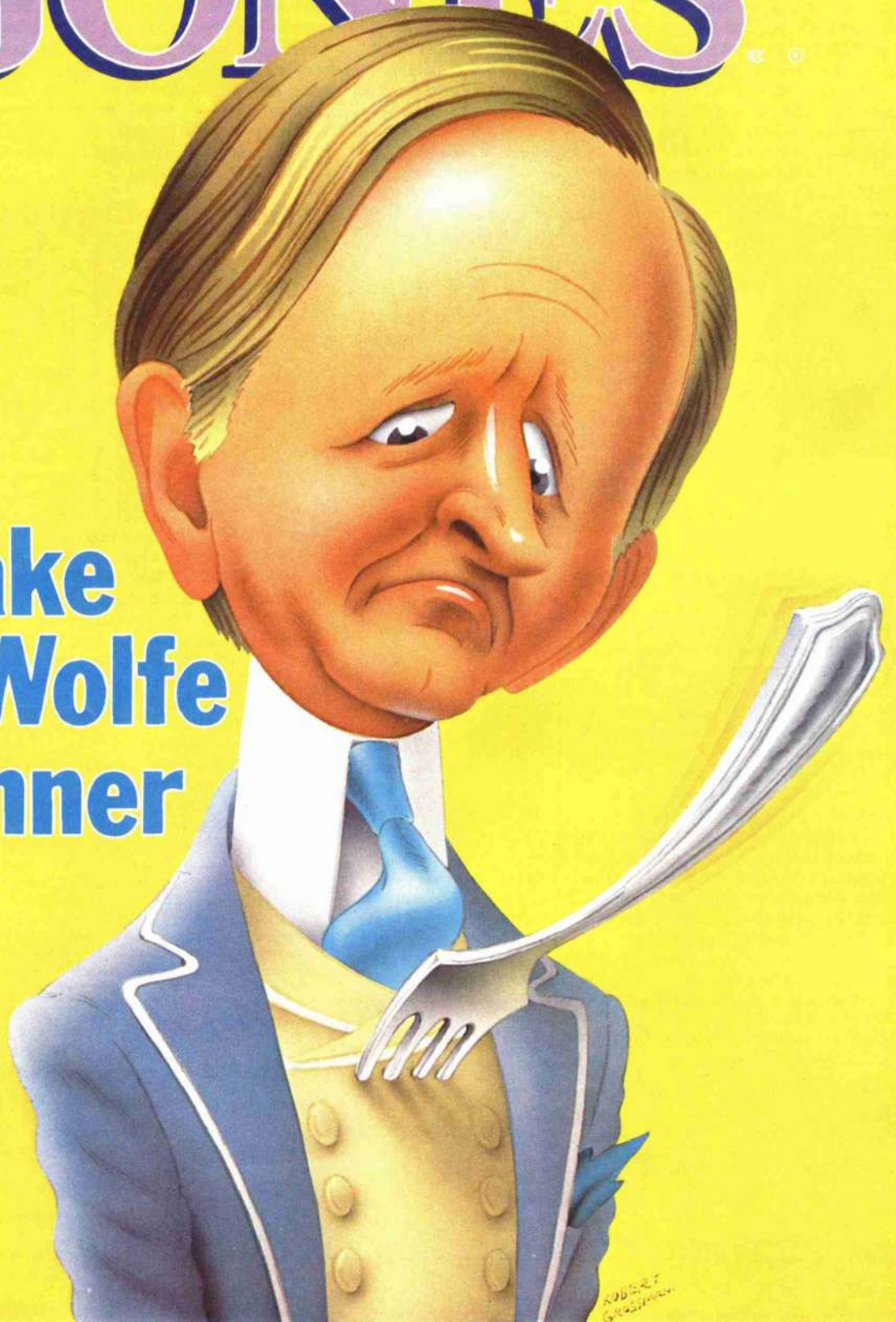
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Doctors In Dresses • New Americans

# MOTHER JONES

**We Take  
Tom Wolfe  
To Dinner**



ROBERT  
GREGG  
ANDERSON

# a WOLFE in CHIC CLOTHING

B Y  
CHRISTOPHER  
HITCHENS

I remember going to a party several years ago, where I chanced to meet a woman quite prominent in the world of painting. I'd just written *The Painted Word*, about fashion in American art, and she had sent a letter to my editor suggesting that the essay was merely a chance for me to exacerbate a deep psychological disorder. So I approached her and asked, in what I thought was a lighthearted way, if she might tell me just what my trouble was. Instead, she made a suggestion as to a quaint anatomical impossibility that I might perform on myself, and left the room.

TOM WOLFE, QUOTED IN *The New York Times Magazine*, DECEMBER 20, 1981.

I happened to see a copy of the letter and I ran into her at a party. So I said, "I must tell you, I happened to see a copy of what you wrote, and you could do me a great favor if you would explain my affliction to me, because I believe that prophylaxis is a good thing to aim for in mental health as well as in such areas as tetanus and diseases of that sort." At the very least, I expected a little dissertation on obses-

sional neurosis or something of that sort. Instead she suggested that I perform a crude anatomical impossibility on myself and then left the party. [Laughter]

TOM WOLFE, INTERVIEW WITH *Rolling Stone*, AUGUST 21, 1980.

Yeager would tell the man to check his oxygen system, he'd tell him to go to a lower altitude, and the man kept suggesting quaint anatomical impossibilities for Yeager to perform on himself.

TOM WOLFE, *The Right Stuff*, SEPTEMBER 1979.

Let's admit from the start that Tom Wolfe has had a very interesting life. A practiced raconteur, too. Haunted by a demented woman, yet remaining calm and polite while reserving for himself all the best lines. *Mmmmm*—smart as a whip. And that celebrated gift of phrase, which deserts him only in conversation. He's so seldom lost for a laconic understatement or a vivid metaphor.

The white bureaucrats, and the black ones, too, walked in trying to look as earthy and rugged as they could, in order to be "with the people." They tried

to walk in like football players, like they had a keg of beer between their legs.

TOM WOLFE, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, 1970.

The advertisers presented it [light beer] on television in commercials that always showed a thin brew in the mitts of some famous jock who walked with a rolling sprung-thigh gait, as if he had two kegs of Dortmund Dark suspended from his inguinal canal.

TOM WOLFE, *In Our Time*, 1980.

You see: he gets better all the time. Slice it whichever way you want.

The American culture is a notoriously easy one to impress. Tom Wolfe has benefited from this in two ways. First, he has done well by doing good—by pointing out the fads and absurdities, the trends and crazes that convulse the country in spasmodic and unpredict-

ILLUSTRATION

B Y

KIM  
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*Mitzi*



able waves. Second, he has *himself* become accepted as a sort of cultural authority—and if anything proves the gullibility of the American people in our time, that certainly does.

As he evolves into a fad in his own right, Wolfe makes it ever clearer what a consecrated conservative he is. There was always a reactionary growl under the tone of his writing; even at his sweetest and most amusing he usually had the time for a barb or a jeer where radicals were concerned. But as the dust settles over the '60s and the '70s, and as it begins to look as if we are in for a long winter of the Right, Wolfe has come out in even bolder colors.

Once, at least, he was the amused and detached chronicler of the great American exotic, professionally unshockable and tolerant (if cynical) about Ken Kesey, Junior Johnson and the rest. Down the years, however, he has grown an outer shell, composed chiefly of particles of distaste for modernism. Now there are the dinners at the Reagan White House, the soirees with Nancy and the chummy times with William F. Buckley, Jr. Last January, at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, Wolfe went so far as to deliver the keynote speech at a meeting of the Shavano Institute.

Shavano is the newest and perhaps the roughest of the right-wing foundations that have graced the Reagan era. Other guest speakers included Lyn Nofziger, Richard Allen, Bob Bleiberg of *Barron's* and Frank Barnett of the National Strategy Information Center, who called for an alliance of the United States, South Africa and conservative forces in the Middle East. Joseph Coors, Birchite brewer and union buster, was there. It was not by any means an amateur gathering. And yet, as William Buckley's *National Review* reported the event:

**T**he pièce de résistance of the meeting was Tom Wolfe's luncheon speech—a soaring performance, stringing anecdotes, informative and hilarious, into a resonant statement about the decline of radical chic. Intellectuals and journalists, he observed, have refused to admit the element of sheer fashion in the realm of ideas. And in the West the ideology of Marxism has long enjoyed an aura of daring, a sense

that it bespoke the social form of the future. Until Solzhenitsyn. The Gulag Archipelago destroyed the Marxist myth, utterly, despite Western reluctance to welcome Solzhenitsyn himself. . . . It transpired that Solzhenitsyn's accusation embraced all of Marxism. As a result, said Wolfe, "Marxism in intellectual circles is now in its mannerist phase—beyond Baroque."

That last sentence is typical Wolfe: apparently poised and polished, with a certain assurance and some show of learning, but finally shallow and affected. (Have you ever, really, read anything of his twice?) Even people who have scarcely read him at all, or who are unaware of his more reserved and refined prejudices, use his catch phrases and bywords: "radical chic," "the Me Decade," "the Right Stuff." He has an adman's gift. But what is he selling? What is he, perhaps it would be better to say, popularizing?

Take his single most famous essay—that same "Radical Chic" (1970), which in many ways wrote *finis* to the '60s. It is very well written and most clearly observed. Who denies, or denied at the time, that there was a lot of foolishness in those days? Yet Wolfe is striking much harder than a satirist would. His intention was really to do harm, and he succeeded brilliantly.

The adman's technique is evident at once. The phrase *Radical Chic* appears, with capital letters, eight times in the first nine pages. This is hardly Oscar Wilde, perhaps, but it is highly effective, repetitive promotion. If you want a cultural cliché to be born in your own name, it doesn't pay to be too subtle. Still more interesting, at a distance, is Wolfe's skill in understanding and using certain political codes.

He noticed, that crazy evening in Leonard Bernstein's Park Avenue apartment, something that was yet to happen on a significant register. He detected the split between liberal Jews and radical blacks. He employed some crude effects to make it evident—gossip-columnist tactics about eye contact and social tension and differences in accent—but he also quoted a handy chunk of Seymour Martin Lipset. And he made the most of the awkwardness that had sprung up between Otto Preminger and Black Panther leader Don Cox:

**M**ost people in the room don't know what the hell Preminger is driving at, but Leon Quat and the little gray man know right away. They're trying to wedge into the argument. The hell with that little number, that Israel and Al Fatah and UAR and MiGs and USSR and Zionist imperialist number—not in this room you don't—

Very sharp. There's no doubt that Wolfe has excellent ears and instincts (as an adman must) for picking up atmosphere. Not everything he tries comes off. *From Bauhaus to Our House* is corny, and "Funky Chic" just didn't make it. But, then, those are the breaks. As Gore Vidal put it to me, "He has very little talent and not much of a mind—to be successful his little antennae *must* be good." They certainly are. Indeed, a phrase from "Radical Chic" very aptly describes Wolfe's own style. What he calls "status radar" in that essay is his stock in trade, and in a nervous and unstable society anybody who has such a thing has an enormous advantage over those who merely wish that they had it.

"Radical Chic" is, of course, not quite the only time Wolfe has attacked and ridiculed the rich. But he has lampooned wealth only in the form of conscience money—what used to be called "limousine liberalism." The Super Rich, those who just *have* great wealth and consider it their right, are safe from Wolfe's waspish pen. Crass Republican money, "new" or "old," is O.K. by him. As long as you don't try to pose as a friend of the masses, he'll leave you in peace to enjoy your dough.

Nor have any absurdities of the conservative social scene (those evenings with Nancy!) ever tempted him into print. Wolfe is keeping his plate warm with the Right People.

I spent an enjoyable evening with him in New York City not long ago. We met in the company of mutual friends at Elaine's, the gruesome media restaurant high on Second Avenue. Here, rubbernecks in search of Woody Allen are seldom disappointed (nor were they that night: they got him *and* David Bowie *and* Bob Balaban *and* Mikhail Baryshnikov). The perfect spot for an evening of social ironies.

Wolfe is as dandyish as one might

expect—even a touch more. A nice pale suit in a discreet check, with a high, stiff-collared shirt. The cuffs were prominent and so were the links. The handkerchief in the breast pocket was a mere grace note to the harmony. It was just *possible* to imagine him in spats and a watch chain, but he isn't at all the type to overdress. Unlike many short fellows, he looks good in a hat.

In common with quite a few Virginians, he is rather British in appearance and demeanor. (Britishness and a familiarity with British life are some of the arrows in his writing quiver, too.) In fact, he reminded me distinctly of a minor Tory member of Parliament—an impression I checked, successfully, with two London socialites who were present. He has an easy and pleasant smile,

very nice manners, and a strangely smooth and somehow sexless kind of youthfulness about him.

A word—*fastidious*—suggested itself at once. He drank, very slowly, a light Michelob beer (good choice in Elaine's, where the house wine tastes like shark repellent). With only the slightest gesture he indicated to the servitors that his almost-untouched pasta could be taken away. An equally unacceptable Chicken Limone followed (again a wise choice—you wouldn't *think* they could screw it up, but they can) and was tasted discreetly but not finished. Wolfe, I learned, doesn't care to raise his voice. Even in the yapping hell of Elaine's he kept to a soft, undemonstrative pitch. A sign of great social confidence, I thought. Listen, if you can hear me—if not, fine. I'm not—really I'm not—trying to impress.

Conversation was possible all the same, because although Wolfe doesn't sparkle at all in person, he does take a polite interest in other members of the party and he doesn't mind listening. He told me that his new book, which is to be on high and low life in New York, would require studying the legal process a bit. When I quipped, "From Bauhaus to Bleak House," all I got from him was a pallid smile. (I thought the line not bad for the spur of the moment, but then I feared perhaps he suspected me of having rehearsed it. He can have that effect.)

He teased me a little about my participation in the American Writers Congress, the Nation Institute-sponsored gathering that has given rise to a fledgling union for scribblers. Wolfe did his dissertation at Yale on Communist manipulation of the League of American Writers, a forerunner in the 1930s of today's union. But quite soon we were talking, the way people do, about writers we liked and disliked.

I suppose I should have guessed. His favorite novelist is Evelyn Waugh and his favorite essayist is Malcolm Muggeridge. The twin spheres of pseudo-religious pessimism and conservatism in British letters. I like them, too, but as favorites, no. Wolfe, anyway, opines that history will remember American writers more and cites William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck as exemplars. Bellow? I ask. He makes a slight but definite downturn on the corners of his mouth. Well, O.K. then, who else do you *dislike*? "Any-

body who writes for *The New York Review of Books*." A noticeable choice, this—the *Review* joins *The New Yorker* on his "out" list. These two liberalish bastions are vulnerable in their way, but Wolfe doesn't mind appearing in *Reader's Digest*.

When I inquire which amongst living authors he admires, he repeats his fondness for Malcolm Muggeridge. Then, a bombshell. "I really like Taki." This, as some readers will know, is the *nom de plume* of Taki Theodoracopulos, a reactionary and a bilious little snob perhaps most notorious for his articles about "ugly women" in *The American Spectator*. Taki thinks, and even thinks it clever to say he thinks, that all feminists are physically hideous and are made so by their feminism. He was a practiced flatterer of the sorry set that hung about the shah of Iran at Swiss ski resorts. He proselytized for the Greek junta. He is a karate fan and likes to mention that fact in arguments. He is listed on the masthead of the *National Review*. He's not stylish. He's *vulgar*. I know him. I can't stand him. *Nobody* can. But Tom Wolfe admires his stuff. This is amazing. Or is it?

People who find the urge for social change to be risible can seldom leave it at that. The Ayatollah Solzhenitsyn is not the first person to conclude, from bitter and intense experience, that the impulse for freedom and equality is a destructive one, leading only to collectivist nightmares. He proposes a return to theocracy and discipline. Tom Wolfe, from what caliber of experience I do not know, found radicalism laughable long before he read or read about Solzhenitsyn. He has reaped fame and fortune from his slight but elegant talent for ridicule. And *he* proposes—what? Rule by Caspar Weinberger and William Buckley and Joseph Coors? The sense of proportion revolts.

Some years ago, in *Esquire*, Wolfe published a piece about Vietnam that I think "places" him definitively. It is called "The Truest Sport: Jousting with Sam and Charlie," and Wolfe remained fond enough of it to include it in his recent volume of selected works, *The Purple Decades*.

The "jousters" were the pilots who flew over Vietnam from the USS *Coral Sea*. "SAM" is the acronym for surface-to-air missile. You all know what "Charlie" meant. I'll have to quote from it at length here.

WOLFE'S  
PROSE CONTAINS AN UNDER-TONE OF GROWL. SOMETIMES THE YELLOWING FANGS ARE BARED IN FULL SNARL.



**T**he last time Dowd and Garth Flint were out was four days ago, Christmas Day, during the American Christmas cease-fire; and what a little tourist excursion that was. They flew a photo run over Route 1A in North Vietnam, came in under the cloud cover, right down on top of the "Drive-In," as it was called, fifty feet from the ground, with Garth taking pictures, and the Charlies were down there using Christmas Day and the cease-fire for all it was worth. The traffic jam at the Phun Cat ferry, going south to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was so enormous that they couldn't have budged even if they thought Dowd was going to open up on them. They craned their heads back and stared up at him. He was down so low, it was as if he could have chucked them under their chins. Several old geezers, in the inevitable pantaloons, looked up without even taking their hands off the drafts of the wagons they were pulling. It was as if they were harnessed to them. The wagons were so full of artillery shells, it was hard to see how one man, particularly so spindly a creature, could possibly pull one, but there they were in the middle of the general jam-up. . . .

Now, that was a good hop—and Dowd so recorded it in his journal—an interesting hop, a nice slice of the war, something to talk about, but merely a photo hop . . . and not a great hop. There was such a thing as a great hop, and it was quite something else.

You bet it was. For instance:

*Sometimes, at night, when Dowd would write on the back of his flight schedule, he'd make such entries as:*

*"Great hop! Went to Nam Dinh and hosed down the flak sites around that city. MiGs joined in the caper, but no one got a tally. Think I lucked out in a last-minute bomb run. . . ."*

I could go on. In fact, I will, for another three sentences.

*The atmosphere of the great hop had something about it that was warlike only in the sense that it was, literally, a part of combat. A word that comes*

*closer is sporting. Throughout his tour of duty on the Coral Sea, no matter how bearish the missions became, Dowd seemed to maintain an almost athletic regard for form.*

This is vintage, authentic Wolfe. That his sympathy is engaged entirely with the pilots goes without saying. But notice how he cannot help himself. The Vietnamese have the effrontery to move around their own country (during a merciful "American Christmas cease-fire"; this took place before the Christmas bombing), and not content with that, the "old geezers" are wearing the "inevitable pantaloons." They're *improperly dressed!* Observe, also, the Olympian manner in which Wolfe looks, literally, *down* on the Asians, tugging like animals at their carts while the F-4s cruise more fashionably overhead, manned by chaps with "an almost athletic regard for form." (Don'tcha love the *almost?*)

And then there's this.

**F**or two days they softened the place up, working on the flak sites and SAM sites in the most methodical way. On the third day they massed the bomb strike itself. They tore the place apart. They ripped open its gullet. They put it out of the transport business. It had been a model operation. But the North Vietnamese now are blessed with a weapon that no military device known to America could ever get a lock on. As if by magic . . . in Hanoi . . . appears . . . Harrison Salisbury! Harrison Salisbury—writing in The New York Times about the atrocious American bombing of the hardscrabble folk of North Vietnam in the Iron Triangle! . . . It seemed as if the North Vietnamese were playing Mr. Harrison Salisbury of The New York Times like an ocarina, as if they were blowing smoke up his pipe and the finger work was just right and the song was coming forth better than they could have played it themselves.

So! There you have it. America was stabbed in the back—the same back it was fighting with one hand tied behind. A few lines later, Wolfe refers inevitably to "some sort of strange collapse of will power taking place back in the States." Of course—the will, acid test of

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NING OF SO-  
CIAL IRONIES.**

the reactionary down the ages. I wrote earlier that Wolfe's prose contained an undertone of growl. This is one passage where the yellowing fangs are bared in full snarl.

Reading Wolfe's witless echo of the pilots' euphemisms for their lethal business ("great hop," "hosed down," "racked up," "a nice slice of the war") and then reading *The Right Stuff*, it's difficult to avoid a speculation or two. Whether he is dealing with the men who leveled Vietnam or the guys who flung the Stars and Stripes into space, Wolfe clearly has a certain feeling for men of action. In Vietnam, they soften the place up. They tear the place apart. They rip open its gullet. In the space program, they drink hard, drive hard, womanize hard and the rest of it. While

Wolfe, with his soft blond locks, his unlined skin and his white suit, is the mere observer of these "real men." Most male writers who have covered episodes of combat and endurance can control their vicarious macho, their feeling of penis envy. Apparently Wolfe cannot. You might think that he would at least recognize the danger, because apart from making him look like an idiot, it has a really deplorable effect on his prose.

And his prose is, very often, very good. Some of the moments in *The Right Stuff* are superbly crafted. His vignette "The Invisible Wife," from *In Our Time*, is so painfully etched that it makes you squirm. He can be funny, too, and his bullshit detector, though deaf in the right ear, is still acute. Where he falls down is in trying to be a social anthropologist.

This is a well-known bogus money-spinner, often employed by conservative behaviorists down on their luck. You begin to babble about orgasm as a sacrament, or about denims as a social uniform. From being a modest miniaturist, you become a pundit and then a full-dress blowhard and cultural censor.

Wolfe showed incipient signs of this when he wrote "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers." Ostensibly, this essay deals with the "games people play" when the people are minority recipients of welfare in San Francisco. Wolfe spends a lot of his time posing as an anthropologist here. (As he once wrote, in another resoundingly vacuous article, "Fashion, to put it most simply, is the code language of status." Brilliant.) Anyway, when in San Francisco he felt able to

venture the following:

**W**hen everybody started wearing the Afros, it was hard on a lot of older men who were losing their hair. They would grow it long on the sides anyway and they would end up looking like that super-Tom on the Uncle Ben Rice box, or Bozo the Clown.

O.K., fair enough, even if grammatically dubious. Then:

*There were Spanish and Oriental dudes who washed their hair every day with Borax to make it fluff up and sit out.*

Maybe. Finally:

*Whites didn't have too much fear of the Mexican-American, the Chicano. The notion was that he was small, placid, slow, no particular physical threat—until he grew his hair Afro-style, talked like a blood or otherwise managed to seem "black" enough to raise hell. Then it was a different story.*

Remember, Wolfe is making this leap (from one unkind and random observation to a whole theory in three stages) in order to show that the poverty program is an incitement to gang solidarity. You could get the impression that Wolfe believes the welfare bureaucracy to be one great philanthropist. You could even get the impression that Wolfe prefers his poor to be, if anything, *deserv-*

*ing*, singing hymns for a dose of soup.

As for racial caricatures, make up your own mind. Wolfe relies on them a good deal, which I think to be a sign of laziness rather than prejudice. In "Radical Chic," for instance, he remarks three times that "moderate" blacks can be distinguished by their habit of wearing suits three sizes too big. If you can laugh at that, you are easily amused.

In 1966, according to a story Wolfe is very fond of telling about himself, he participated in a symposium at Princeton. The other panelists were droning on about such topics as government repression and Gestapo tactics by the police. Nettled by the prevailing solemnity, Wolfe broke in to say: "What are you talking about? We're in the middle of a . . . Happiness Explosion!" If anybody else had made this inane remark about the '60s, he or she would have become the target of Wolfe's unsparing scorn. And he cannot even have meant it himself. He didn't like the decade—he couldn't have written "Radical Chic" otherwise, or deplored the tendency of the American press to undermine the war effort. It was simply his itch to be contrary, to be the performing flea, to say the unconventional thing and to attract attention. "Happiness Explosion" was not one of the quips he made that was destined to become a household term.

For Wolfe, the present time is the real Happiness Explosion. At last, the quality types are in power and all the tiresome old progressive jargon is being junked. Welfare officials don't exactly grovel to the poor these days. Black misery and discontent are scarcely in fashion. The history of the Vietnam War is being rewritten and recast nearer to the heart's desire. Youth is more and more reverting to conformity and careerism (or to unemployment). What could be more agreeable than this joyous counterrevolution, celebrated in a score of vapid *Style* sections? The only thing is, it doesn't give Wolfe much to be satirical about. Amid the dash and glitter of Ronnie's new America, Wolfe looks less like a performing flea than a rather moth-eaten court jester. The court jester whose time has come.

*Christopher Hitchens is the Washington correspondent for The Nation and a regular contributor to the London Spectator. His last article for Mother Jones was "Anthony Wedgwood Benn" (Nov. '81).*



"This downward trend in the economy is balanced by this upward trend conceived by our graphic art department."