



Escape Artist

**Recalling a YAF hero
— the unlikely,
liberating journey of
Phillip Abbot Luce.**

by Shawn Steel

Phillip Abbott Luce died quietly, of natural causes, in December 1998, in his native Springfield, Ohio. He had also lived quietly, at least as far as the wide world could tell, for many years before his death, but his life was not always so. To my generation of '60s-era Young Americans for Freedom, Phillip Abbott Luce was a hero: a former radical who had twice traveled illegally to Cuba under the auspices of the pro-Red Chinese Progressive Labor Party, who had been indicted and who testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee as a result, and who awoke from his communist daze in 1965 to be born again as an author, lecturer, and organizer against his lost faith. Like many others who later broke with the god of leftism, Luce sought to take some good from his bad experience by telling the truth about it. In *The New Left*, his first post-communist book, published in

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1966, he wrote that he would “feel that the public exposure of my own political aberrations has resulted in something worthwhile” if he succeeded in keeping “one young person from wasting the time that I did in the Communist movement.”

Phillip Luce's beginnings appear somewhat uncertain. According to the Ohio Department of Health, he turned 63 on his last birthday before he died, having been born October 17, 1935. But three of his books say he was born three years later, in 1938. “Young people feel that anyone over thirty is an enemy,” he wrote in *The New Left*, so perhaps the birth dates in the books (published between '65 and '68) were hedged to keep him within the age limits of his audience's trust. That would have been fitting in a way — a parting indulgence in characteristic New Left irresponsibility about facts in particular and reality in general. The ease with which the left falls into self-delusion and into deceiving others is a recurring theme in Luce's post-communist writing. Another is the left's gross irresponsibility in stirring up trouble, as when it calmly casts whole, huge categories of people — anyone over 30, for instance — as “enemies.”

These are the elements that combined, finally, to drive Luce out of communism: at last he saw that the left's super-charged determination to act, to make things happen, especially to tear things down, alongside its blasé unconcern for reality — for the actual context or consequences of its frantic destructiveness — cannot be reconciled with one's own humanity. He began his break when he discovered he “had be-

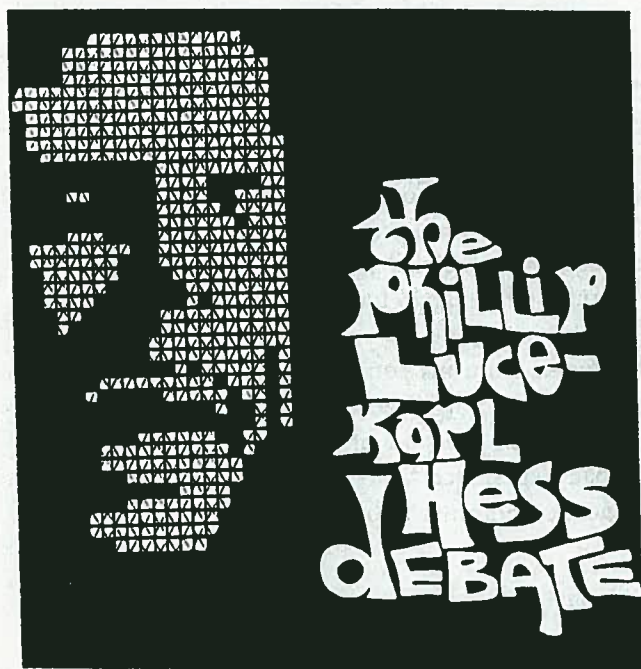
come part of a leadership [in the Progressive Labor Party] actively involving a number of young persons, some of them personal friends, in a series of plans in which the participants had no idea of the consequences.” Specifically, Luce found himself among people setting others up for personal disaster, encouraging and facilitating them, for instance, in skipping bail on a federal indictment, going “underground” as fugitives, secretly holding and moving guns in New York City, and fomenting riots, all as part of bringing on an “armed insurrection” that would lead to a new American civil war.

I discovered that I had deluded myself into believing that this world held the answer to the future and that Communism was basically humanitarian in its approach to politics. No one duped me into joining, and the struggle to see through my folly has been a great personal struggle. You don't discover early some morning that everything you believe in, and perhaps have staked your life on, is a myth. The act of breaking with Communism was the most difficult one of my life.

Phillip Abbott Luce, a child of “middle-class Republican parents,” grew up in the Midwest where, he said, “I led the usual childhood. Graduation from high school led me to college at Miami University of Ohio, where I ran track” — not, he commented, what, at first glance, would appear to be an ideal background for “any role in an American Communist organization.”

But he left school, partly, he wrote, as a result of trouble with the administration over publishing an off-campus humor magazine. He traveled south, where his radicalization began after he resumed his education at Mississippi State University. It was the mid-1950s, and Luce had an off-campus job in a print shop that happened to be owned by the treasurer of the Mississippi White Citizens Councils. He learned enough about the Councils' racist doings to get himself kicked off the campus newspaper for attacking them in his weekly political news columns, where he also blasted the Mississippi Legislature. He returned to Ohio in 1958, devoting his Master's thesis at Ohio State University to a study of the Mississippi Councils from 1954 to 1958. “The civil rights struggle was in full bloom,” he wrote. “Picketing, sit-ins, boycotts, and freedom rides all captured the imagination of many young American students.” His Mississippi activities had automatically placed him in the forefront of the “radical left.”

But it was not communist ideology *per se* that at-



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Jerry Clyde Rubin

Clown Prince of the Diaper Set

by Phillip Abbott Luce



To Do It! or not to Do It! is a more pregnant question than you might assume. Do It! is some kind of book published by one of our larger capitalist presses (Simon and Schuster) and written by Jerry Clyde Rubin. Rubin, in case you're a hermit, is one of the Chicago Seven and a darling of the political diaper set. He has the hairy ability to epitomize most of the fears of middle America.

It is too easy to simply discount Do It! either because of the character of the author or the nihilism he espouses. Jerry may be a political malaprop but his book shows some mastery of the medium technique argued by McLuhan. In fact, Do It! and Woodstock Nation by Jerry's compatriot Abbie Hoffman very effectively utilize graphics and varied type styles to capture the would-be readers' attention.

The publishers plug on the back of the paperback edition of Do It! calmly states that: "This book will become a Molotov cocktail in your hands, Jerry Rubin has written The Communist Manifesto of our era. Do It! is a Declaration of War between the generations — calling on kids to leave their homes, burn down their schools and create a new society upon the ashes of the old." If that rhetoric isn't enough to make you rush down to your local

bookstore then it should at least make you wonder what they are smoking at Simon and Schuster.

Do It! is dedicated to "Nancy, Dope, Color TV, and Violent Revolution!" The author admonishes his audience to "read this book stoned!" — not a bad idea; then it might make sense.

In the whole of Do It! I probably receive as much note as anyone — except of course Jerry. Why this hatred, this spleen letting? What is on Rubin's mind that makes him nervous when I'm around?

This naturally leads me to a story: last year Jolly Jerry came out to California on a speaking tour. The local YAF people at Long Beach State called me to relate the news. Having nothing better to do, my wife and I drove up to Long Beach from La Jolla in order to witness the appearance of Rubin in Southern California.

Rubin gave his then usual rap about the state and how we should tear it down with humor and violence. There he was replete with Indian head band, crossed bandoleers, war paint, and Yippie. He was a clown talking to middle-class white radical students and urging them to destroy the system by painting the buildings red. And they dug it and they all laughed and shouted and kept their seats. Then Jerry told them how evil

capitalism was by saying "private property is pure shit." And everyone would giggle and think it was cute to hate property 'cause Jerry said it was "in" to hate property. And there was some good rapport between Rubin and the audience although most of them were too apathetic to even be psyched-out by the shock technique of calling Ronnie Reagan a "M----- F-----."

Oh, it was all very classy and quite the thing that day at Long Beach. And when it was all over Jerry and some big body-guard type walked over to the bookstore and started rapping with some of the local radicals. Then it all just sort-of happened.

My wife and I were walking with a friend, Dana Rohrabacher, who had just come back from a wild trip in Czechoslovakia, and we walked over to Jerry and his buddy. Dana, being a marvelous free spirit, immediately began to butt into the conversation and after a short time we all were face-to-face. Jerry didn't recognize me at first and so my wife said to him: "Hey, Jerry, I really dug your speech." And, he in turn went into his little song-and-dance routine that signified that he was about to pick up a chick. So he said something like: "Yea, wow. Why don't we go to bed?" And she said:

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Phillip Abbott Luce discussing 20th century tyranny at Arizona State University

tracted him. He was reading a lot of Marxist literature but, as he later wrote, "while I was drawn to Marxism as an intellectual concept, I was really emotionally involved in a general rebellion." In this Luce echoed many of his fellow "leftists." He described his generation of college students as widely diverse, but united in a general "feeling of frustration with American society all are rebelling against some facet of the complexity, the indifference, and what they feel to be the neurotic ways of American life."

At the time, the liberal media reported this rebelliousness as a broad repudiation of America's political and social institutions and traditional way of life. But, as Luce viewed what was happening from the inside, for most of those involved, the rebellion was not directed against the clear ideas on which our nation was founded and which guided its first century and a half. On the contrary, what a lot of "the kids" were fed up with was the smug vacuity known as liberalism that had largely replaced our founding ideas in post-war America: an intellectually empty, conformist materialism hypocritically posing as history's greatest flowering of both reason and moral sensibility. As Bill Buckley summed it up: "Liberals often talk about hearing other points of view, but are usually sur-

prised to find there *are* other points of view."

"Heaven forbid," Luce wrote in *The New Left*, "that a young person may decide to take a position other than the prevailing middle-of-the-road liberalism, whether on fluoridation or on foreign aid In this country, when one voices strong political viewpoints, he is automatically labeled a zealot, a Communist, or a McCarthyite. The era of the 1960s is the era of the nullification of politics." It was an era of intellectual confusion and timidity in which "most parents pose as liberals, but often act like social conservatives and feel it's better to remain quiet than to involve yourself." The "kids" reaction was often to take this empty "ism" to its logical, absurd conclusion, as if to say: OK, you want vacuity, we'll show you the real thing. "Pot, *Kama Sutra* sex, bennies, and bra-less females," Luce wrote, "also are expressions of alienation from traditional society." And also, there was Communism, seeming to offer an outlet that, in stark contrast to liberalism, possessed a clear moral purpose and a firm assurance about its actions and objectives.

After receiving his Master's degree, Luce began to participate in the activities of the Communist Party, which he considered "the only organization of any radical significance around." Soon, however, he found he had fled one set of stultifying conformities for an-

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"No, but I did like that part about private property being pure shit." And Jerry got into it and said: "Yea, well property is shit and after the revolution we will divide everything up. Like there won't be anything private. My shirt will be your shirt and my car will be your car. And it will be like one big commune."

And everybody standing around could dig on that because it sounded pretty far out — and the boys always dig the idea of

sharing the girls — so Barbra went on "That's a fantastic Indian head band you have on Jerry."

Retort: "Yea. It was given to me by a friend."

Barbra: "Why don't you give it to me?"

Jerry: "Huh?"

Barbra: "You said that private property was shit so why won't you give me your head band?"

Well, Jooly Jerry looked like he had just dropped ten million micrograms of LSD and blurted out: "But it's my head band."

Yes, Jerry it is your head band.

And my head band is my head band and that is called private property.

Jerry would like to be an anarchist but he doesn't have the education. Jerry would like to be a revolutionary but the revolutionaries have moved on. Jerry would love to be an idol of the media but has reached the point of over-kill when he sees a camera. All we can hope is that someday, in some way, Jerry will find a way to Do It! without further inflicting himself upon us.

post-World War II conservative movement in America. YAF was intended to provide a conservative alternative to Students for a Democratic Society — SDS, a group of leftist radicals about as devoted to democracy as were their heroes in North Vietnam. Luce became a special YAF field representative for organizing anti-New Left resistance on college campuses. He spoke at hundreds of them throughout the United States debating his former allies. He appeared frequently on radio and television, published five books, and wrote many widely-read articles exposing the left. One of Luce's friends recently recalled the time: "His debates with radical leaders like Tom Hayden and Jerry Rubin were legendary. He pulled no punches. He was flamboyant, usually dressed in denim, smoking cigars. He brought crowds to their feet. His writing style was dynamic. His first-hand accounts of real communism could not be countered by the radical leaders of the day. He knew who they were, he knew their tactics. He was fierce, unyielding and determined in his battle to crush their socialist propaganda."

But, for all that, in many ways Luce remained a man traveling alone. No major figure joined him from the left, which remained dominant on campus until the end of the Vietnam War. His long hair, Viking-style mustache, and counter-culture clothing set him apart, to put it mildly, from other YAF speakers. A friend who came to know him well in the 1970s described Luce as more poet than

political activist. I vividly recall a 1967 trip with Phil to the Whisky on Sunset Strip where he introduced me to the "Doors." Luce's Bohemian soul, as much after Communism as before it, defined his personality. His political activity came as a by-product of it. Although he was a darling of YAF's conservative activists, he always remained something of an outsider.

After the war, campus political organizing became more difficult, and both YAF's and the left's influence and activity waned. Luce continued to develop anti-Communist programs outside the United States, but he was largely forgotten. When he died, only a short notice was circulated among his former friends. His death certificate lists his "usual occupation" as "Political Aide" and his "kind of business" as "U.S. Government." Along with the rest of us, Phil had the great good fortune to live to see the fall of the Soviet's Evil Empire.

In *The New Left*, Luce noted the cost of breaking with the left by quoting the words of another ex-communist, Hede Massing: "You have lost your first set of friends when you leave the fold. Then, when your battle of conscience has been fought and won, and you go out into the open, you have lost your second set of friends. Now you are alone." Luce commented: "You are alone, but not isolated." He devoted himself from that point on to drawing together the forces of resistance to Communism to defend the country that he finally, through a long, painful ordeal, had come to know and love.

other. In the fall of 1961, he moved to New York and attempted to go to work on a moribund Communist Party monthly literary magazine called *Mainstream*. He joined other young writers there in an effort to infuse new ideas and youthful energy into the publication. The group set up a meeting to discuss their plans with American Communist Party head Gus Hall in Hall's top-floor office at Party headquarters in New York.

"Hall's office had the warmth of a barren, unheated attic," Luce recalled. "Empty bookcases lined the walls, and except for a conglomeration of mixed chairs and a desk, the only ornamentation was a blackboard. This blackboard was utilized by the 'comrades' whenever they wanted to mention someone's name without its being recorded by the FBI A personification of paranoia! Such blackboards, I later discovered, adorn all of the cubbyhole offices at the CPUSA. Hall's appearance was as stark as the physical layout. As he leaned back in his chair, his feet on the desk, he constantly fingered a clothespin and certainly resembled Captain Queeg a lot more than Lenin." Hall, of course, vetoed any notion of new ideas or youthful exuberance for *Mainstream*.

But Luce moved on to become editor of *Rights*, the house organ of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, a group founded in 1951 by "old radicals" Corliss Lamont, I.F. Stone, and others. Clark Foreman, its director, Luce wrote, was "always too independent to join the CPUSA." Luce thought Foreman was "probably the only 'old' radical who understood and sympathized with the frustration and impatience of the young radicals." Luce credited his own "need for independence, which Clark helped instill in me" with leading him later to break with Communism.

In 1963, Luce led 58 fellow radicals on his first illegal trip to Cuba. When he returned, he was indicted and subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. "We literally swaggered into the hearing room," Luce wrote, "determined to give the Committee a bad time. When asked my name, I sarcastically replied, 'Phillip Abbott Luce, as in Henry and Clare Boothe.'" A fine joke, effectively conveying the contempt he felt for an established order he had not yet made any serious effort to understand. "I joined Progressive Labor," Luce wrote, "because I had a vision of the future and a hatred for the present." The "vision," apparently, consisted of little more than vindicating and appeasing the hatred. "I felt that perhaps a united Communist venture could oust the present government. I

overlooked all that I knew of the history of the Communist movement, the purges, etc., and held to a belief that Progressive Labor was really interested in individual freedom and the betterment of the people."

He finally looked honestly at Communism when the "vision" moved outside his imagination and began shaping the real world he and his fellow radicals inhabited. In 1964, his Communist superiors asked him to "go underground," to become a fugitive, and to help incite violence. Luce refused, and looked back later at that step as his first toward a formal exit from Communism. He wrote that he refused partly out of concern for his friends in the movement. He recalled one in particular, whom he called "Frank," who was never "familiar with the theories of Marxism-Leninism," who had "joined the Communist set because his friends were members, because it gave him a somewhat self-fulfilling role, and because it was the 'cool' thing to do During the time I knew him, he was lied to, used, and constantly put upon, because he was considered a valuable tool. His youth may well allow him to 'grow out' of the movement. One of the people for whom I left PL was Frank; I could not take the responsibility for inciting illegal acts which might involve him without his knowledge and for which he would certainly suffer." Luce also, unlike many leftists, never felt alienated from his parents. After his break, he wrote that he had tried unsuccessfully "through the years" to keep his "political radicalization" from touching them, knowing they would be hurt by it. "The only thing I would ever try to redo in my political past would be to spare them, if that were possible, the blight of having had me as a 'Communist son.'"

After leaving and denouncing the left, Phillip Luce was subject to the routine torrent of abuse from former friends and colleagues. "Borrowing a chapter from the Nazis," he wrote, "they believe that the more often a lie is repeated, the more people are prone to accept it as truth. Nothing is too scandalous for them, and I am constantly amazed at the fact that at one time I was a close associate of people capable of such deceitful behavior." But he also knew he had been one of them in this regard, admitting that he had systematically deceived himself in overlooking "all that I knew of the history of the Communist movement, the purges, etc."

Luce's escape from communism led him to Young Americans for Freedom, the organization Bill Buckley had founded with other members of the burgeoning