

# BODY COUNTS AND THE KING'S DEER

BY FRANK M. BRYAN

His hands moved swiftly. The cuts were precise, clean: the knife, the blood, bright in the center of my flashlight's glow. In a yellow outer circle a midnight moth roamed innocent and free, while against the dimness of the beam's farthest influence the hemlocks of the swamp leaned against us like the great silent curtains of a darkened theater.

Later (remains rolled in the skin and stuffed under a stump, meat in the wash tub), he looked in my direction and turned the key of his 1961 Chevy. Etched in the soft green of the dash lights, his eyes agleam above a hard draw on his Lucky Strike, there came a quick nod toward the trunk, a shift of his cigarette to his teeth, a grin and the words, "The King's deer, Frankie. But this one's for us." F. Scott Fitzgerald would have loved it.

Twenty years have passed and so much has changed. What was a common event—the late night crack of a 30-30 as a farmer evened the score for his potato patch—has declined remarkably. So has "looking for deer," a pastime that gave so many Vermonters a summer evening's pleasure as we drove the back roads in the easy hours between chores and twilight. We've landed on the moon and built artificial hearts. My old friend and I have mellowed and here in Vermont the Fish and Wildlife Department is managing the deer herd.

What has not changed in the last pair of decades is the erosion of our democratic institutions. What do deer have to do with democracy? Plenty. For encased in this most basic, most "Vermont" of issues is the growing spectre of techno-imperialism.

Techno-imperialism is the expansion of specialization over decision-making. It is found everywhere. Mr. Goodwrench uses it when he tells you some very complicated device needs replacement in your car. Others say "Pay me now or pay me later." Its battle cry is "studies show." Techno-imperialists use their understanding of complex phenomena to force their way into the free territory of the mind. They thrive in a society where everyone knows more and more about less and less.

When things matter, information is a power. Suppose a surgeon says you need an operation. Yet every atom in you is suspicious. Get another opinion, most doctors advise. I say the Fish and Wildlife Department was wrong in once again permitting a doe season last fall. But where to get another opinion?

All the data have been gathered, analyzed, and reported by the same people whose livelihoods, indeed their psychic attachment to their very professional existence, depend on there being too many deer. It's like asking a homeward-bound fox how many chickens there were in the chicken house.

Last summer one of the Fish and Game Department's deer-management specialists was confronted in a public meeting by a proposal to reduce the number of doe to be "harvested" (their term) in the fall by 20 percent. Standing tall for the only organization paid to gather data on Vermont's deer herd, this young professional pronounced that those who wished to question his policy had an obligation to produce counter studies. There it was. A textbook example of techno-imperialism.

We elect legislators to do our decision-making for us. But over the past 20 years they have given that responsibility, slowly but surely, to the bureaucracies. And why? When the Speaker of the House several years ago was asked why he opposed a bill that would let the legislature have the final say on what Governor Snelling called the most important decision on energy Vermont would make during the remainder of the century, he said, "What do 180 legislators know about power lines anyway?"

Last year I was told by a member of the State Department of Education that the recent decision on minimum standards was the most important development in Vermont education in 20 years. When asked what the legislative input was, he said, "Next to nothing."

Education. Wildlife. Energy. The colonialization of the legislature by the bureaucracy continues. The agencies have a

nuclear weapon. It is called information monopoly. Can it be true that we have divested ourselves of decision-making on these matters? Indeed it is. Can we maintain our representative democracy when our law makers bow their heads to the tyranny of experts? Indeed we cannot.

I suppose I'm wrong about the deer. All the studies say I am. Still, there needs to be room for the counsel of the Vermont hunter I heard testify in 1979. His careful words, his quiet weathered features called forth the crisp truth of a November dawn. He said he'd been getting his buck regularly for 20 years until a few years earlier when, for the first time he didn't. "Year before last," he said, "I didn't see a buck. Last year I didn't even see a deer, buck or doe. I got no proof, but I'd say this is not the time to shoot off a bunch of doe." There is a difference between statistics and wisdom.

Consider these two statements:

"Every quantitative measure we have shows we are winning the war." (Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, 1962);

"The enemy has been defeated at every turn." (General William C. Westmoreland, 1968).

These people were not dummies. They were experts—experts that took the body counts themselves. On August 30, 1975, the day the Provisional Revolutionary Government announced "Saigon is liberated," I felt I'd been had. Did you?

"War," a very wise person once said, "is too important to be left up to the Generals."

Highway engineers like to build roads. Educators like to educate. Neither should control the information on which society's decision whether or not to do these things is based. We should do that through our elected representatives. The legislature is the heart of our democracy.

My old friend, a body and fender man that could dress a deer by flashlight, slap mosquitoes, keep an eye out for headlights, and never leave a trace of blood on his pants was right: They are not the King's deer. They belong to us. □