

Letters to the Editor that Were Never Published: (And Some Other Stuff)

Alex Caemmerer

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Alex Caemmerer Jr., a practicing psychiatrist since the early 1950s, claims to be “addicted to writing letters to the editor of the *New York Times*” about things going on in the United States. While some of those letters—and some to other publications—have been accepted and printed, he has a collection of “well over a hundred” that never were published. *Letters to the Editor That Were Never Published (And Some Other Stuff)* is his way of getting “them into print by other means.”

Letters to the Editor reveals some controversial points of view, but strong opinions are not all that the author offers here. Caemmerer backs up his opinions with his carefully considered arguments, and he offers ideas about fixing what he feels is wrong with America today. Even those who do not agree with what he proposes will respect him for thinking things through before putting pen to paper. His attention to detail and historical precedent is impressive.

Caemmerer is a delightful writer—erudite and witty in the driest, sharpest way. Some might call him cantankerous. Decidedly liberal, he tackles a range of subjects and he pulls no punches. He comes across as the type of person who would enjoy a good debate. But opponents should be well prepared; Caemmerer knows his facts and how to use them.

Letters to the Editor is cleanly divided into chapters by topic. Commenting on issues ranging from the efficacy of psychoanalysis to the use of psychotropic medications to treat depression, “the most underdiagnosed and undertreated condition in our society,” he offers an insider’s opinion on America’s psychological ills. To a nonprofessional, some of his arguments can be quite convincing.

Other chapters address issues of religion, sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy, homosexuality, causes of violence in American society, and more. Some readers will cheer Caemmerer’s comments and others will not. When he argues for individuals to exhibit better “inner control” and asserts that Americans’ “obsession with and zealotry to preserve personal freedom” has created some uniquely negative societal issues, he will surely face opposition from many. His may not convert a single religious conservative to his way of thinking, but he outlines his positions clearly and supports them well.

The biggest problem with *Letters to the Editor* has nothing to do with Caemmerer’s opinions, which are valid and beautifully expressed. The problem is that he has written numerous letters on the same subjects to a number of publications. Whether or not his readers agree, for example, with his interpretations of certain details in the Bible, they will find his opinions on the matter in letters to the *New York Times*, the *Record of Bergen County*, *New Jersey*, and Bill O’Reilly at Fox News. Repetition does not make his points stronger.

For those who agree with Caemmerer’s point of view, *Letters to the Editor* is an affirmation from a man who knows how to express himself. Others, swayed or not by his way of thinking, should, at the very least, give him credit for his ability to make a reasoned argument.

CHERYL M. HIBBARD (September 14, 2012)

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