

► prosecuted for criticising American participation in the first world war. After the second world war, left-wingers were jailed for conspiring to teach or advocate communism. More recently, in December 2001, the then attorney-general, John Ashcroft, testified before the Senate that those who scare “peace-loving” Americans with “phantoms of lost liberty” were only aiding terrorists.

When the *New York Times* disclosed in 2005 that the president had, without a warrant, secretly ordered the wiretapping of Americans’ international telephone calls (in violation of a criminal statute), the newspaper’s journalists were threatened with prosecution for espionage. But by this time the national mood had moved on and the threats were never carried out.

How it all ballooned

As Anthony Lewis, who trained in law and is a veteran writer for the *New York Times*, demonstrates, the slowly expanding scope of the First Amendment was the result of the interaction of politicians’ thoughts, judges’ attitudes and public opinion. Although the Supreme Court first ruled that a state law violated the amendment in 1931, it was not until 1965 that a federal law was similarly overturned.

Until 1964, libel had been considered outside the protection of the constitution. But that year, in the case of *New York Times Co v Sullivan*, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that made it virtually impossible for a government official to prevail in a defamation action. Later the ruling was expanded to cover all public figures.

Mr Lewis does a remarkable job of presenting the history and scope of freedom of thought. He writes simply without oversimplifying. Unlike many journalists, he recognises that some press claims can be absurd and that the right to speak freely can be in conflict with equally basic rights, such as the right to privacy or to justice. For instance, he remains unpersuaded that there is any valid reason for requiring an actress to overcome the same obstacles as a politician if she sues for libel after having been subjected to a sensational and false newspaper report. What, asks Mr Lewis, do such obstacles placed in the path of a libelled actress have to do with the core value of the First Amendment: the right to criticise government officials?

He is unsympathetic to the position espoused by the *Washington Post*, which argued that a reporter who wrote about an eight-year-old heroin addict could withhold information from the police. And he argues that America should be able to punish speech that urges terrorist violence before an audience, some of whose members might act on the exhortation.

Mr Lewis has produced a concise and wise book. His conclusions are well worth pondering. ■

The Mafia in Naples

Gangsters go global

Gomorra: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples’ Organized Crime System. By Roberto Saviano. Translated by Virginia Jewiss. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 320 pages; \$25. Macmillan; £16.99

CONVENTIONAL wisdom has it that Italy’s economy is failing, in part because it cannot produce corporations big enough to compete internationally. “Gomorra” is a useful corrective to that view.

Roberto Saviano demonstrates that the Camorra, the Naples Mafia which provides the word-play for his book’s title, is doing just fine in the globalised economy. Once a web of mobsters whose most international activity was smuggling cigarettes, the Camorra eases uninspected Chinese goods into Europe and provides loans at usurious rates to the sweatshops that produce many of the elegant garments Italy sells abroad. It imports arms from eastern Europe and exports them to Basque guerrillas. Its various clans launder money through businesses scattered from Taiwan to Brno, from Miami Beach, Florida, to Five Dock, New South Wales.

Mr Saviano believes in smelling “the hot breath of reality”. By getting to the scene of killings before the police have a chance to clear away the gore, by riding his scooter for hours round the open-air drug supermarket in Secondigliano, even talking to young Camorra recruits, he has produced one of the most enthralling and disturbing books written on organised crime. He takes his readers to a world where teenage gangsters are inducted by being shot at in bulletproof vests; where the female bodyguards of a woman mobster wear sunglasses and t-shirts of the same yellow as Uma Thurman’s outfit in the film “Kill Bill”. He describes the “submarines”—so-called because of their invisibility—who run the Camorra’s extensive welfare system. And he records a telephone conversation in which two mobsters calmly discuss the date for a torture session.

It is as close to the Camorra as most readers will want to get. By going there himself, Mr Saviano has written a book that has so far sold 750,000 copies in Italy alone. He has also earned himself death threats and a round-the-clock police escort. Like a lot of young Italians (he is 28) brought up on an intellectual diet of Catholicism and Marxism, he sees liberalism as more of a threat than an opportunity. “The logic of criminal business coincides with the most aggressive neoliberalism,” he claims. But it doesn’t. Liberalism aspires



Bravo Saviano

to free competition; gangsters build cartels.

Occasionally, too, Mr Saviano’s passion can lead him to assertions that are more convenient than proven. He claims primacy for the Camorra among Italy’s five Mafias. Few policemen or prosecutors would concur; most believe that the Calabrian version is even more dangerous. The author’s style is a little rich for easy digestion and the translation is over-literal.

But the great value of “Gomorra” is to highlight two points: the power and wealth that southern Italy’s Mafias have accumulated in recent years, and the fact that their globalisation makes them an issue of concern for us all. His description of the effects of gang war on ordinary people (“Women stop wearing high heels—too hard to run in them”) is masterly. His final chapter, set in the apocalyptic wilderness of the Camorra’s smouldering waste dumps, is inspired—and prescient, as the garbage crisis in Naples unfolds. ■

American kids

In praise of nerds

Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them. By David Anderegg. Tarcher; 288 pages; \$24.95 and £17.99

“AND then, just to show them, I’ll sail to Ka-Troo, and bring back an It-Kutch, a Preep, and a Proo, a Nerke, a Nerd, and a Seersucker, too!” That typically nifty passage comes from Dr Seuss’s “If I Ran the Zoo”. The book was published in 1950 and contains the first use of the word “nerd”. How very unfortunate that Dr Seuss, whose verbal pyrotechnics have given so much pleasure to so many children, should also have given them, however innocently, the ghastly label “nerd”.

The precise meaning of the word (in its ►►