

EDITOR'S NOTE

Even in the best of times, intellectual independence is a fragile ideal. A fondness for open inquiry, a distrust of dualistic formulas, a capacity to combine aesthetic pleasure with a critical spirit—these habits of mind do not win wide acclaim in contemporary American society, either inside or outside the academy. That is one reason we have journals like *Raritan*: to provide a site for serious play in a utilitarian culture increasingly dominated by opaque professional jargon and portentous journalistic trivia. Such an aim is difficult enough to pursue under the most favorable circumstances, but the pursuit becomes even harder in times of political crisis.

“Crisis” is a seductive word, easily overused. Yet no thoughtful person would deny that the United States is now facing one of the most serious crises in its history—with profound implications for our safety, our civil liberties, and our moral authority in the eyes of the rest of the world. This crisis is a consequence of our government’s response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Rather than focusing on sustained retaliation against the terrorists who had actually attacked us, the Bush administration exacerbated the danger by fabricating an imminent threat from Iraq and launching a millenarian crusade to make the Middle East safe for “democracy”—a word that, in post-Reagan political discourse, had come to mean little more than unregulated markets and investment opportunities for foreign capital. Already we are seeing the catastrophic consequences of this crusade: the loss of life, the waste of resources, the corruption of our political debate through widespread acceptance of official deceit, and (as photos of Americans torturing Iraqis circulate worldwide) the exposure of the hypocrisy at the core of our providentialist creed.

Without assuming any ideological consensus among *Raritan*’s readers and contributors, I am convinced that it would be unthinkable for this magazine to ignore the current crisis. But the question remains: how does an independent quarterly respond to a political situation that is changing every day, even as its underlying significance unfolds more gradually? For this magazine, the answer in the most general sense is to

stick to its aim of encouraging intellectual independence and discriminating sympathy on the widest possible variety of topics. In the current climate of fear, apathy, and coercive national virtue, maintaining this magazine's traditional commitments is itself a political act. The necessity of skepticism has seldom been more apparent, as our government and mass media join in equating patriotism with uncritical support of current policy. The dangers of dualistic thinking are equally evident, as faith in America's exceptional virtue provokes a rigid belief in its unique depravity. Scripted ideological agendas leave little space for imaginative freedom. *Raritan* is committed to sustaining that space.

While the artistic imagination deserves protection from the claims of ideological correctness, the mess we are in demands careful, historically informed critique. The consequences of the Iraq crisis for democratic discourse, indeed for American culture as a whole, are likely to be deep and enduring. *Raritan* has already begun to engage them, and will continue to do so. Marina Warner's fictional meditation on the clash between utopian dreams of social transformation and personal attachments to place (Fall 2003), Robert Boyers's reflections on passive complicity in evil (Fall 2003), Richard White's interpretation of the changing geography of American empire (Winter 2004), Corey Robin's exploration of the misuses of fear in contemporary political rhetoric (Spring 2004), Shifra Sharlin's inquiry into Colin Powell's misappropriation of Thucydides (in the current issue), and my own (forthcoming) reconsideration of J. William Fulbright's *The Arrogance of Power* (1966)—all suggest the various ways this magazine will engage political issues without resorting to polemical simplification.

This ambition is consistent with my own background as a historian. Coming of age during the Vietnam War, I cut my intellectual teeth on the realist and anti-imperialist critiques of Wilsonian interventionism. From the perspective of such historians as George Kennan and William Appleman Williams, the messianic dream of spreading democracy to subject peoples was at best a rationale for moral arrogance, at worst a mere cloak for material interests. The most penetrating critics of the Vietnam War understood its defenders' tendency to muddle human and divine agendas. As Fulbright wrote, "power tends to

confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is peculiarly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God's favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations—to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own shining image." At the time, the Vietnam War was the most recent example of this mission at work in the world. Now we are engaged in another imperial adventure, as misbegotten as the last one, but with wider potential for disaster.

Leaving aside the Iraq war's corrosive impact on our relations with our allies and on our standing in the world, consider its effect on public talk. "Contractors" include not only builders of schools and hospitals, but also mercenaries—private soldiers for hire, many former Rangers or Seals with special training in intelligence gathering. "Prisoners" are detainees, most of whom have no criminal convictions and have been rounded up on the mere suspicion that they might hatch a terrorist plot or know someone who has. The "war on terrorism" is not a war, having never been declared by Congress, and terrorism itself is not a fit object of attack. It is a tactic deployed by specific (usually stateless) people with specific grievances that may or may not have political solutions (Palestinian nationalists, Irish republicans, Basque separatists, Islamic fundamentalists). We need to focus on specific terrorists and the threat they pose, not conduct a limitless campaign against "evil." We need to freshen the stale language of contemporary debate.

But that is not—and never will be—my whole agenda. While I intend to incorporate some political commentary in the pages of this journal, I am aware how necessary it is to sustain other modes of thought and feeling. *Raritan* remains committed to criticism in the largest sense, and also to beauty and pleasure—rejecting the fashionable assumption that "the personal is [always and only] political," recognizing that the aesthetic dimension of life constitutes a refuge and a resource for resistance against the deep utilitarianism of our dominant culture. With any luck, we will provide our readers with some lasting satisfaction, even in these dark times.

Jackson Lears
New Brunswick, New Jersey
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