

# on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

SPECIAL POLITICAL ISSUE





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A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

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## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

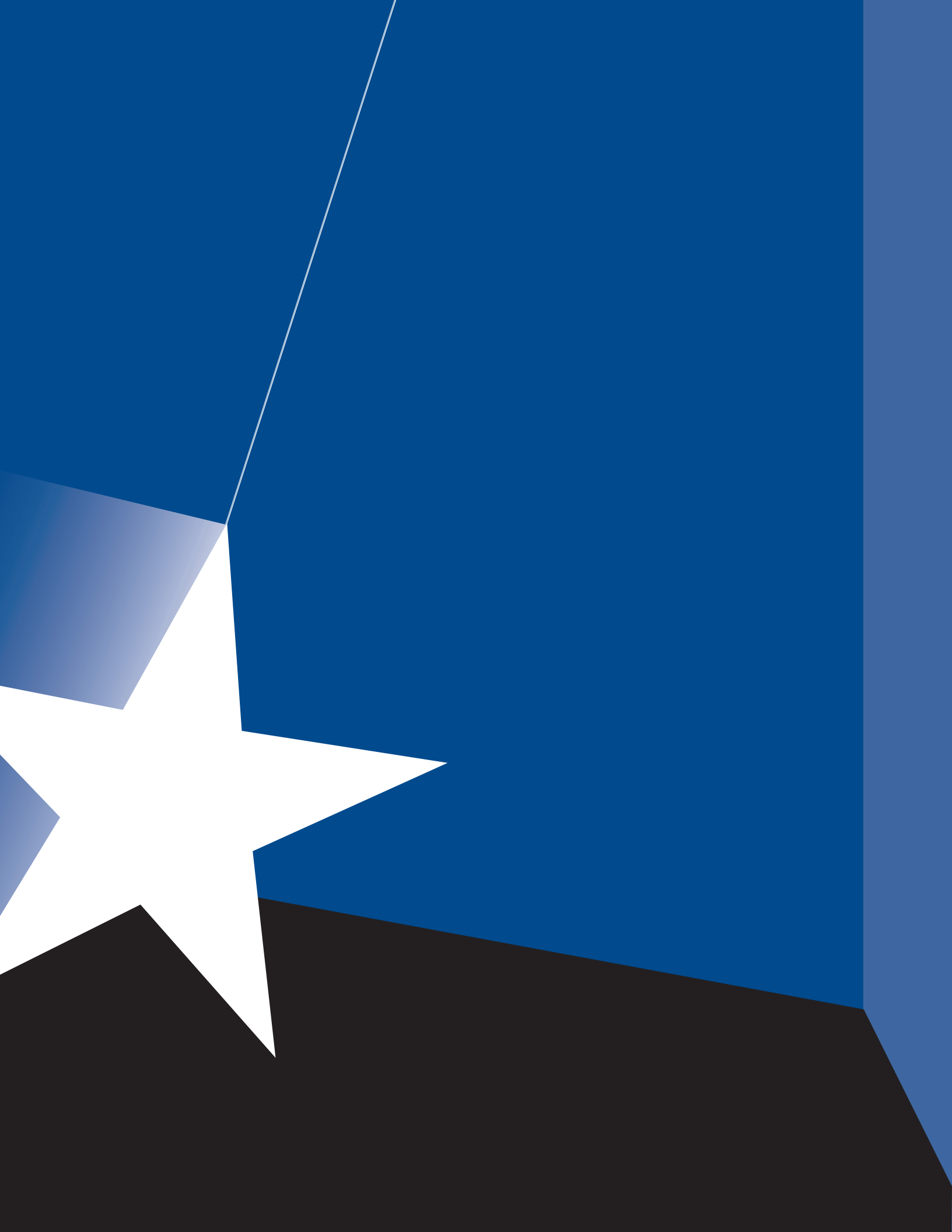
Lyndon Johnson once said, “If one morning I walked on top of the water across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read: PRESIDENT CAN’T SWIM.”

The question of whether it’s possible to have truly objective reporting has been debated as long as events have been reported. But there is also a place for reporting that is unapologetically personal. And in that kind of reporting—commentary—the writer’s voice has a chance to be clearly heard.

In this, our second pre-election issue since the 2004 presidential election, we are publishing political essays by Guild members with no attempt at objectivity. And as was the case in 2004, the pieces in this issue reflect the point of view of each writer and not necessarily of the Writers Guild.

We are very grateful to David Levine for allowing us to feature caricatures from his upcoming collection of drawings, *American Presidents by David Levine*, which will be published by Phantographics in November 2008 with an introduction by Bill Moyers and Michael Winship. Reprints of the images are available at: [davidlevineart.com](http://davidlevineart.com).

—Arlene Hellerman







*This piece was originally published on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times on April 23, 2008.*

IT WAS THE YEAR OF YEARS, the year of craziness, the year of fire, blood and death. I had just turned 21, and I was as crazy as everyone else.

There were half a million American soldiers in Vietnam, Martin Luther King had just been assassinated, cities were burning across America, and the world seemed headed for an apocalyptic breakdown.

Being crazy struck me as a perfectly sane response to the hand I had been dealt—the hand that all young men had been dealt in 1968. The instant I graduated from college, I would be drafted to fight in a war I despised to the depths of my being, and because I had already made up my mind to refuse to fight in that war, I knew that my future held only two options: prison or exile.

I was not a violent person. Looking back on those days now, I see myself as a quiet, bookish young man, struggling to teach myself how to become a writer, immersed in my courses in literature and philosophy at Columbia. I had marched in demonstrations against the war, but I was not an active member of any political organization on campus. I felt sympathetic to the aims of S.D.S. (one of several radical student groups, but by no means the most radical), and yet I never attended its meetings and not once had I handed out a broadside or leaflet. I wanted to read my books, write my poems and drink with my friends at the West End bar.

Forty years ago today, a protest rally was held on the Columbia campus. The issue had nothing to do with the war, but rather a gymnasium the university was about to build in Morningside Park. The park was public property, and because Columbia intended to create a separate entrance for the local residents (mostly black), the building plan was deemed to be both unjust and racist. I was in accord with this assessment, but I didn't attend the rally because of the gym.

I went because I was crazy, crazy with the poison of Vietnam in my lungs, and the many hundreds of students who gathered around the sundial in the center of campus that afternoon were not there to protest the construction of the gym so much as to vent their craziness, to lash out at something, anything, and since we were all students at Columbia, why not throw bricks at Columbia, since it was engaged in lucrative research projects for military contractors and thus was contributing to the war effort in Vietnam?

Speech followed tempestuous speech, the enraged crowd roared with approval, and then someone suggested that we all go to the construction site and tear down the chain-link fence that had been erected to keep out trespassers. The crowd thought that was an excellent idea, and so off it went, a throng of crazy, shouting students charging off the Columbia campus toward Morningside Park. Much to my astonishment, I was with them. What had

happened to the gentle boy who planned to spend the rest of his life sitting alone in a room writing books? He was helping to tear down the fence. He tugged and pulled and pushed along with several dozen others and, truth be told, found much satisfaction in this crazy, destructive act.

After the outburst in the park, campus buildings were stormed, occupied and held for a week. I wound up in Mathematics Hall and stayed for the duration of the sit-in. The students of Columbia were on strike. As we calmly held our meetings indoors, the campus was roiling with belligerent shouting matches and slugfests as those for and against the strike went at one another with abandon. By the night of April 30, the Columbia administration had had enough, and the police were called in. A bloody riot ensued. Along with more than 700 other people, I was arrested—pulled by my hair to the police van by one officer as another officer stomped on my hand with his boot. But no regrets. I was proud to have done my bit for the cause. Both crazy and proud.

What did we accomplish? Not much of anything. It's true that the gymnasium project was scrapped, but the real issue was Vietnam, and the war dragged on for seven more horrible years. You can't change government policy by attacking a private institution. When French students erupted in May of that year of years, they were directly confronting the national government—because their universities were public, under the control of the Ministry of Education, and what they did initiated changes in French life. We at Columbia were powerless, and our little revolution was no more than a symbolic gesture. But symbolic gestures are not empty gestures, and given the nature of those times, we did what we could.

I hesitate to draw any comparisons with the present—and therefore will not end this memory-piece with the word “Iraq.” I am 61 now, but my thinking has not changed much since that year of fire and blood, and as I sit alone in this room with a pen in my hand, I realize that I am still crazy, perhaps crazier than ever.★

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Paul Auster is a novelist, screenwriter and director. His latest film, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, was released in 2007. His 14th novel, *Man in the Dark*, has just been published by Henry Holt.





## Spade a Spade

I SPENT TWO SUMMER WEEKS working on a screenplay at an artists' retreat in Virginia. One afternoon I took a hike with a talented Jewish poet, a native New Yorker replanted in the South for two decades. The day after our stroll she brought two friends to dinner at the colony, her local hairdresser and his longtime companion, and invited me to dine at their table. I sat between the poet and the hairdresser whom I'll call "Harry." He and his partner, both Southerners, had a softness to them, in their language, their laughter—something in that sub-Mason-Dixon hospitality. (I am not being condescending; I grew up under that banner too, barely—Appalachian Maryland.) I am in conversation with Harry, and we're lovely polite, shooting the gentle breeze when apropos of nothing he asks what's my ethnicity.

Oh God.

"Black." And quickly I move on, or back, to music or whatever we were discussing before. Except Harry isn't finished.

"But you can't be *all* black."

"Both my parents were black, all my grandparents were black." (Which is as far back as I know.) "I'm black."

"But there has to be... I mean you're so *light*, there *has* to be white."  
Why won't he let it go?

"Well, *slave rape*."

This triggers a ruffling of his shoulders, a nonsensical muttering and the unstated question: Why did she have to go *there*? A sense that it was my defensiveness that had suddenly made the conversation uncomfortable, though clearly *I* had been uncomfortable since ethnicity was mentioned. It's not at all that I refuse to discuss race. But when the conversation is about one topic, and then suddenly *shifts* to race, I know the person with whom I've been conversing was not hearing a word I said, was instead planning the moment to execute his/her agenda, leaving me completely unprepared. Slave rape. No, I *didn't* want to go there, but he had pushed me in an attempt to get the response *he* wanted about *my* genealogy, and then refused to let go, so determined that he was not even aware he had stumbled into dangerous waters: The Truth.

Now Harry declares that he had met Obama years ago and praises Barack for not being ashamed to claim his biracial heritage. I stare at him. Harry goes on to talk about how when his high school was desegregated (busing), he didn't like the idea. This is followed by some recent more enlightened view on integration but it's hard for me to hear anymore.

Weeks before, *not* in the South, I sat on a panel commenting on a play reading. The work was adroit and droll, challenging stereotypes about a specific ethnic group though at times, I feared, slipping into stereotyping in the process: It's a fine line. The audience of about 50, virtually all white, raved about the piece. When I offered gentle questions about the ethnic portrayals, people (not the playwright, who was quite open) became disturbed and defensive. The only other two persons of color in the room, as far as I could tell, were a young Native American playwright/actress and a black woman from South Africa. Finally they spoke, also expressing an uneasiness about aspects of the work. At this point one of the other panelists, a white, well-pedigreed academic, stated that the fact that the play made "a few people uncomfortable" should by no means be considered a criticism of the work.

True. But in this case he knew, *everyone* in the room knew who those "few people" were, though no one would acknowledge it.

"Well," ventured I into the lion's den, "the only people who were uncomfortable were the people of color."

Tension! Why did she have to go *there*? Much consideration has always been given the angry black man or woman—considerably less to the reality that in our era of 21<sup>st</sup> century subtle racism, we people of color who enter the room having left behind our verbal boxing gloves always run the risk of seeming a safe patsy with whom white liberals might tease the boundaries. If we are offended—worse, if we then call a spade a spade ("particularly," as James Baldwin wrote, "if the spade is white"), then *we* have broken the rules, *we* have caused the offense. Like something I heard a journalist say at the time of the 2006 Israeli bombing of Lebanon: The news begins when Arabs strike *back*.

Which brings me (finally) to the election. Two summers ago, as the missiles began falling on Beirut, I was astonished at the lightning speed by which Senator Clinton offered her support to Israel. Before being erroneously pegged Muslim (Heaven forbid!), Obama seemed to have had a more reasonable record than Hillary regarding the Middle East. This mattered when I ultimately decided to support Obama.

And the fact that he's black.

I said it! Racial pride, and the incredible notion that America actually might have a president sans an Anglo-Saxon name. And the faint hope that he may revert back to his more broad-minded days once in office. (Another issue: Before the campaign Obama voted progressively regarding Cuba, and it is my long-shot prayer that this will be the presidential Obama rather than the one whose May '08 speech referred to "Cuban elections that are anything but free or fair"—irritating the still-open wound after two consecutive American presidential elections decided by states that had brazenly disenfranchised black voters.)

Anyway, at this point it's Barack or Bomb-bomb-bomb-Iran McCain, right?

Contrary to this brief meditation on contemporary understated bigotry, the campaign has demonstrated that American prejudice has not all been banished to the subtext. How about the outspoken refusal of some of our countrymen and women to support a black president?



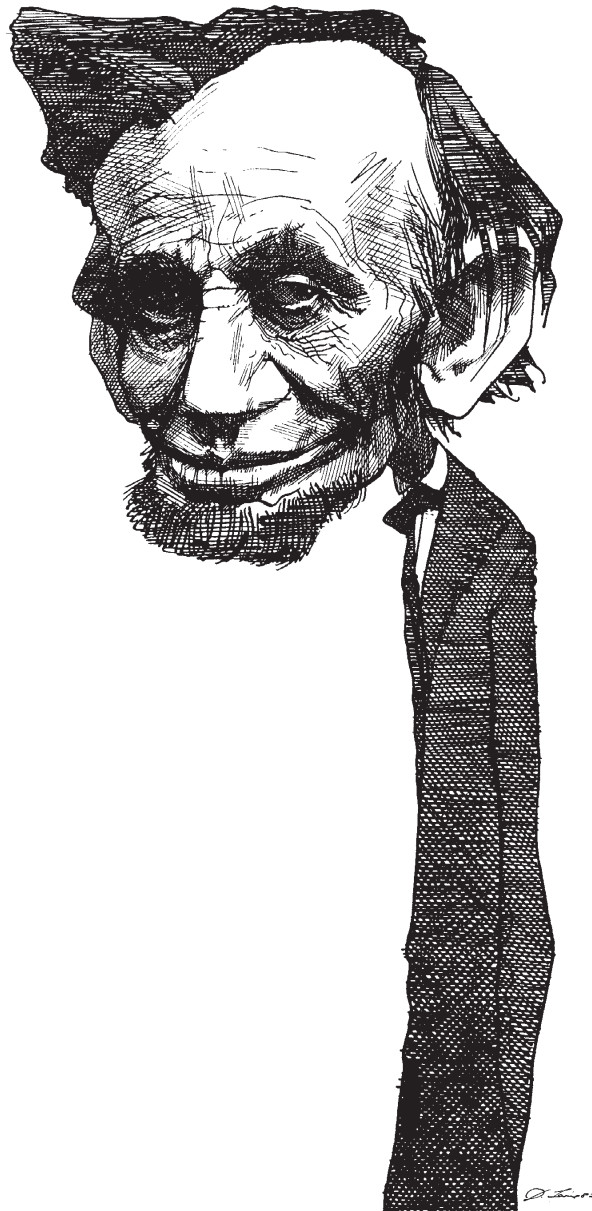
And while such a viewpoint was sweepingly condemned by the media, there was exponentially less censure of the numerous creative forms of misogyny flung at Clinton (“Bros Before Hos” T-shirts, etc.).

It bears mentioning: The Iowa caucuses did stun me, and I did do my little whoop-ti-do dance—*the possibility!* But even then Obama was not my favorite. The word itself has become cliché, I’m just waiting for someone to make good on its promise: change.

We’ll get there one day, President Kucinich. ★

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Kia Corthron is a playwright who has written for *The Wire* and *The Jury*.





I WASN'T VERY AWARE OF POLITICS GROWING UP. As a child I was interested in books, theater, movies, actors and actresses. I was rather oblivious to events in the world. And my parents weren't too focused on them either.

Both sides of my family happily voted for Eisenhower. And though we were Catholic, they all voted for Nixon, not for Kennedy. Nixon's anti-Communist stance comforted them.

So except for thinking about the Communists some and being afraid the world might come to an end between the Cuban Missile Crisis and Barry Goldwater, I mostly didn't think of politics.

That eventually changed when I started to think about the Vietnam War. Given that I'm a baby boomer and was eligible for the draft, this is unsurprising. But more surprisingly, it also had to do with a shift in my Catholic faith.

My junior year in high school I befriended a sweet and eccentric friend named Beriau (who always insisted on wearing a beret, and was picked on mercilessly because of it).

Beriau told me he thought Christ was a pacifist. Most Catholics don't believe this, and I spouted back at him the standard stuff. The Catholic Church had always allowed wars as long as they were "just wars" (fought for the "right" reasons). Plus, logic said one had to defend oneself.

But the more Beriau made me look at things Christ said in the New Testament—"resist not the evildoer," "turn the other cheek," "blessed are the peacemakers," "love thine enemy"—the more I began to think he was right. I still do actually.

So for this period of my life, I started to view myself as a pacifist. And the one famous pacifist in the world was Martin Luther King. Famous not only for his work in civil rights, but also as one of the few major voices against the Vietnam War.

Why did my generation question war, and my parents' didn't?

Part of the answer is World War II. Pacifism aside, it was one of the more necessary wars. Hitler was taking over countries. And the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor. So it was understandable that my parents' generation embraced the necessity of that war. And fought bravely.

I do have a theory, for what it's worth, why my generation challenged the Vietnam War. And, crossing generational lines, why at least 50 percent of Americans (and I hope more) oppose our present Iraq folly and/or feel it was not worth it.

And that is the Nuremberg trials. Which took place before I was born.

I think the average American didn't follow the trials much, except for the headlines—but one part of it entered the popular culture: So many of the German people, when faced with the horrible things they did, said, "We were just obeying orders." Or, as we tended to hear it, "Ve vere just obeying awders."

And all of us somehow understood from that phrase that they were full of it, and that there were some orders you just didn't obey. You're sending people into ovens to be gassed, and you simply say, "Well they told me to"???

And I swear the first time I heard "Ve vere just obeying awders," it was in a cartoon. Like a stupid thing Bugs Bunny said, or Daffy Duck or something. I got from the accent it was German, and I got from the cartoon context that it was a bullshit excuse. (Does anyone else remember this phrase being said in cartoons? I'd love to know if my semi-memory is correct.)

And once you take that in as a child, you can't just *obey* everything. So if suddenly you're asked to go to a small country where lots of people are being killed and you might be killed too, you think, well, what is the reason for this? Why am I being sent? "Shut up and support your country, the president knows more than you," you're told.

But "there are some orders you don't obey" had entered the consciousness, so just obeying didn't cut it anymore.

Why are we in Vietnam, we kept asking skeptically.

The quick answer was always, we're fighting the Communists. And if we don't stop it there, there's this... well, "domino theory" and just one country after another would fall to communism. Domino, domino, domino.

But that was just a theory, wasn't it? I had a theory above about the Nuremberg trials, but I didn't ask anybody to go to war for it. I'm not big on going to war based on a theory.

In any case, I had become a pacifist. I couldn't quite figure out what I would've done in World War II, but I sort of tabled that issue. I felt we were in a wrong-headed war, and we were supporting a corrupt government. And I wasn't going to go. And I also connected it to my Christian belief: I believed Christ intended us to refrain from war. I loathed Cardinal Spellman, who was one of the power brokers defending the war.

I didn't go to my senior prom but took a girl friend to see *Zorba the Greek* in New York City, and afterward we went to the Catholic Worker soup kitchen for some sort of gathering. This was the group begun by the famous Catholic socialist Dorothy Day. I was heady with my religious belief. Gosh, I was idealistic.

In August of 1967 I went to a peace march in Manhattan. I marched with friends, including Beriau and a few of the younger priests from my high school. It was a gorgeous day. There was no violence. People leaned out of windows cheering us. People—a lot of people—thought the war was wrong, and they wanted it over.

That September was my freshman year at Harvard. I had a scholarship that covered my tuition, but I cleaned bathrooms as part of my work study to pay for my room and board. I felt extremely proletarian.

I discovered my scholarship came from the National Defense Fund. I went to the financial aid office and told them I couldn't in good conscience accept funds from the government.

The person smiled and said he understood, and promptly changed my scholarship to some other non-government fund. (Later in the spring I received word my scholarship was now a Jack Lemmon scholarship, meaning it came from that Harvard alum actor. More than nice. I got to thank him personally a few years later.)

What would I have done if I couldn't have just so easily switched my scholarship? It was kind of an easy gesture, wasn't it? Because Harvard was very well hung, sorry, I mean, so well endowed.

Late high school and early college were the height of idealism for me, and optimism as well.

I felt the growing peace movement would stop the war. Senator Eugene McCarthy came out against the war and planned to run for president. And on March 31, 1968, when Johnson announced he would not run for a second term, those of us who had protested the war were ecstatic. We felt we had at least partially caused this.

Then five days later, on April 4, Martin Luther King was assassinated. Then on June 5, Robert Kennedy was assassinated. I was cleaning bathrooms, again, in some prolonged Harvard cleanup session when I heard the news from another student "cleaner." I thought he must be making a sick joke. I turned on the TV and saw he wasn't. The times had become toxic and despairing.

The Democratic nomination went to Hubert Humphrey, who pledged to continue Johnson's Vietnam War policies. Richard Nixon was the other candidate. They both seemed horrendous to me.

My optimism, and my religious belief, started to unravel for various personal reasons (growing up in an alcoholic family, blah, blah) and also maybe because I had the impatience of youth. I couldn't believe we came so close to stopping the war, and we ended up with Humphrey and Nixon.

I did go to one more peace rally, it was the march on the Pentagon in October 1968. Unlike the New York one that was joyful and sunlit, this was dark, cold; there were no buildings nearby, and no cheering crowds. It was just a gesture, and the media always underestimated our numbers.

I dropped out of politics, I stopped believing in just about everything for a while. I do feel I was kind of spoiled, angered that the war didn't end when I (and others) commanded it to. And the alcoholic morass I grew up around led me to believe that nothing ever worked out—stopping a war, stopping a parent's drinking, solving any problem at all.

I got out of my depression at the end of college. My play *Beyond Therapy* to the contrary, I found therapy helpful. It was free at Harvard if you passed the initial “is he or she crazy enough” interview. And I did! And senior year I went back to writing plays (which I had done in high school but had stopped). My new writing style was very dark, though comic.

The war did end. Although I continued to vote, I didn’t pay much attention to politics until the early 1980s when my play *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* started to be protested by conservative groups who wanted to shut it down. It was based on my own thoughts on my own religion, and many people liked it, so I was not too fond of the people who wanted to close it. And their aggressive actions and picketing—copying the antiwar movement, actually—was an early sprouting of the Culture Wars. After a certain point, I realized I was reading the front page of the newspaper before the theater page. I became engaged again.

But that’s for another essay.★

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Christopher Durang is a playwright, television and screenwriter. His plays include *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (for which he also wrote the Showtime adaptation), the recently revived *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* at the Roundabout Theatre and *Miss Witherspoon*, which was a 2005 Pulitzer finalist. This spring the Public Theater will present his new play *Why Torture is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them*.







## Peace M.E. Back Together

FOR THE LAST 18 MONTHS, I'VE BEEN TRAVELING back and forth to Amman, Jordan, to consult and train producers and reporters at Jordan's first independent, non-government television station, Al Ghad TV—ATV for short. It will be a 24-hour family channel, with news comprising 40 percent of the programming.

On one of my trips, I strolled through a flea market and came across a rather '60s-looking T-shirt that had a colorful peace symbol with the words PEACE M.E. BACK TOGETHER: M.E. meant the Middle East. My first reaction to the shirt? Clever but nearly impossible. After all, in the 41 years since the Six-Day War, there have been many peace plans. While it's true that some efforts have been successful, the core conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has not been settled and, today, seems further away than ever from resolution.

Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama was in Jordan while I was there and he, like all politicians, Republican and Democratic, promised, if elected, he would be actively involved in the peace process. The rather cynical and government-controlled newspaper reported that "Jordanians were not satisfied with the amount of time he devoted to the Israeli-Palestinian issue."

The first thing you learn when reporting any story in the Middle East is that it always comes back to the core conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It's always a struggle for balance: Both sides can, have and will find fault with the way the news media reports the conflict.

I first went to Jordan in 1994 as an associate producer of a 60 *Minutes* segment on the then-Palestinian spokeswoman, Hanan Ashrawi. It was right after the 1993 peace agreement known as the Oslo Accords. My memories of Amman back then are of a very closed society: few hotels, few restaurants, very few tourists and no satellite television from around the world (which some might say was a good thing). It was definitely not a country where a woman could walk on the streets alone.

Thirteen years later when I arrived in Amman in April 2007, the first thing that I saw was a gargantuan Kentucky Fried Chicken. An equally huge Burger King and McDonald's loomed nearby. While fascination with fast food may have peaked in America, the tiny country of Jordan is besieged with fast-food mania—and to quote an American McDonald's commercial, Jordanians are "lovin' it." That's not to say that there aren't good restaurants in Jordan; the country today is



**Peace M.E. Back Together**

a mix of many cultures and nationalities, a destination for businesspeople and tourists. And yes, women—both Jordanian women and visitors from the West—can go out and walk in the streets alone. Their presence in the streets may not be huge (which may have more to do with the lack of sidewalks and safe crosswalks), but women are there.

The road to an “independent” television station has been a bumpy one to say the least. The television station that I worked with, Al Ghad TV, was scheduled to go on the air in August 2007. To date, the channel has yet to launch, but many of the journalists I worked with and trained are still working there every day. They’re waiting for the Jordanian government to give them the green light and the proper paperwork. I suspect this paperwork will never arrive.

Having said that, I do actually believe that ATV will launch, but it will be anything but independent. As the independent Lebanese website Menassat.com observed: “In [Jordan’s] tightly controlled media landscape where government watchdogs have almost total control of what people see and hear, ATV has effectively been shut down before ever seeing the light of day.” In fact, a July 21 front-page article in the government-run *Jordan Times* was headlined “Press Freedom Situation Last Year, Acceptable.” The piece was a survey of reporters, editors and managers conducted by the Higher Media Council in Jordan. It concluded that the working media in Jordan—all government controlled—enjoyed a 52.3 percent level of freedom: a level the pollsters deemed “*acceptable*.”

When training and working with many journalists in Jordan, I heard this word “*acceptable*” a lot. It’s “*acceptable*” for reporters and producers to take information only from a government official and not to interview people affected by a situation. It’s “*acceptable*” to never mention the name of a company that a whistle-blower has alleged is adding to an environmental disaster and not confront the company with the tough questions. It’s “*acceptable*” to remove pictures from a story that might offend some people, rather than show them and let the audience decide. Jordanian journalists justify why it’s “*acceptable*” to not do in-depth reporting of honor killings. As one senior producer at ATV told me: “That’s like those crimes you have in America all the time where a husband kills a wife for cheating.” I pointed out (to little avail) that the United States has no law like Part 340 of the Jordan penal code, which states: “He who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery and kills, wounds, or injures one of them, is exempted from any penalty.”

The journalists I trained are up against a strong machine that wants complete control of what they say and do. In Jordan, the government owns most of the shares in the daily newspapers and has full control over Jordanian radio and television stations. So if reporters and producers do not practice self-censorship, the government would surely impose it on them.

Will Jordanian news become more objective some day? Will peace someday come to the Middle East? These questions still resonate for me back in the U.S. I think about how in this world of YouTube and the globalization of everything—including the media—what a shock it must be for Jordanian journalists to see a 60 *Minutes* report or the nightly news (which does air live via satellite at 2 a.m. Jordan local time) from the U.S. Ultimately this

trip (and all my trips to the region) have served as a reminder for me to share with my fellow newsgatherers in the U.S., who labor under even tighter budgets and with fewer staff, to appreciate and use wisely the freedoms we do enjoy.★

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Barbara Dury is a documentary writer and producer who worked at CBS News *60 Minutes* for over 20 years. Since February 2007 she has worked as a Senior Media Consultant in Amman, Jordan. Her *60 Minutes* work has been awarded a DuPont/Columbia Journalism award, an Emmy Award, an American Women in Radio and Television Award and numerous Writers Guild Award nominations. She is currently writing a book on broadcast journalism.





*This piece is excerpted from a forthcoming memoir.*

## The Warrior Liberal

LIBERAL. It was not a bad word in the '50s and '60s, not yet the L word, not yet rejected for its scary image, succeeded by more favored words, "middle of the road" or "moderate." As I write this in 2008, liberals have come to favor the word "progressive," a delicious irony if you've been around as long as I have.

When I was a boy in the '40s, liberals reviled "progressive." They thought it meant "fellow traveler." But communism died back in 1989. Fellow travelers had no Communists to fellow travel with. Socialism soon followed communism into the grave. Since the Soviet Union was no longer a threat to scare voters away, it wasn't effective politics to label someone a Communist or a Socialist anymore, it only made sense for phrasemakers on the right to find a new term of fear: "liberal."

Now, liberals had long hated Communists and Communists had long hated liberals, but no matter. In the '40s and '50s, the political party that was formed in New York to combat Communist and fellow traveling influences in city and state politics called itself the Liberal Party, but no matter.

The ADA, the Americans for Democratic Action, was organized back in the '40s by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., James Wechsler and other well-known anti-Communist liberals to fight the influence of Communists and fellow travelers in the Democratic Party. But no matter.

Conservatives under attack deny and retaliate, liberals under attack defend and retreat. Jimmy Wechsler, the liberal editor of the then-liberal *New York Post*, was intent on proving that his liberal anti-communism was not to be confused with liberals who were soft on communism. He did not wish to compromise his paper's strong opposition to Senator Joe McCarthy, so he testified before the McCarthy committee. And just to prove that he was pure of heart, he named names. Wechsler had been a member of the YCL, the Young Communist League, when he was a student at Columbia back in the '30s. He gave McCarthy some of the names of his fellow members. He gave McCarthy the name of Murray Kempton, the *Post*'s legendary liberal columnist. As Murray noted to me with regret some years later, "Jimmy didn't know me in the YCL. The only reason he knew I was in the YCL was long after we both had quit, I told him." The liberal Wechsler offered up his friend and colleague Kempton because he wanted to prove to McCarthy and company, people who couldn't have cared less, that he was an anti-Communist.

So under attack by the Reagan right, liberals stopped calling themselves liberals, and soon thereafter stopped having the politics of liberals. The pure-cleaner term they prefer now, "progressive," in the late '40s was taken up by the left wing of the Democratic party: Fellow

travelers and Communists who ran former Vice President Henry Wallace for president in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket. In life there is nothing but irony.

Isolationists who campaigned to keep America out of World War II up till minutes after Pearl Harbor were not bothered by the names liberals or Democrats called them. Call them fascists, and it didn't faze them. Call them reactionary, they didn't see it as a problem. On the right, they don't care what anyone who is not on the right calls them. They are concerned only with the opinions of people who think as they do.

Liberals, on the other hand, anguish over the opinions of people who don't like them. Liberals fret over the image stuck on them by enemies on the right. They wish to be thought well of. Often enough, being thought well of takes priority over principle. Eventually principles lose weight as principles, they are scaled back to attitudes: Almost any position can be modified in the search for agreement and agreeableness.

Called soft on communism, liberals quieted down about witch hunts and loyalty oaths. Called eggheads, they dumbed themselves down. Displays of wit were repressed as too highbrow, humor had no place in governance. Accused of cowardice in the Cold War, liberals began appraising countries to invade.

Vietnam was a liberal war. The Republican, Eisenhower, refused to be sucked in. But Eisenhower was a general, a war hero, he didn't have to prove his manhood. John F. Kennedy, although a war hero, was unfortunately a liberal Democrat. He had to prove his manhood.

In addition, JFK had screwed up royally in his first year in office with the Bay of Pigs operation, trying to overthrow Fidel Castro's Communist government in Cuba with a gang of Cuban émigrés who couldn't shoot straight. Kennedy couldn't afford to let the Russians think that he was incompetent and inconsequential, which they might well conclude after the Bay of Pigs. The Soviets might move on Berlin because of Kennedy's perceived weakness. Before they could make such a move, JFK moved on Vietnam. It made a Cold War sort of sense. Confronting the Soviets over Berlin could lead to World War III. But by using Vietnam as a Berlin surrogate, by substituting a small war that we thought we could handle, we could sidestep the ultimate showdown.

Vietnam, however, turned into a small war that we could not handle. And the more we could not handle it, the more men, the more ordnance, the more deadly the engagement. It undermined the administrations of three presidents, and proved to be a mistake we have yet to recover from.

Yet as much of a disaster as the war proved itself to be, Kennedy could not get out and Johnson, after him, could not get out. To cut and run was not an option for Democrats because it would make them open to attacks from the real enemy: Republicans.

But once the Republicans took power and tried escalation themselves—and found, with Nixon, that it didn't work—what did they do? They cut and ran. Exactly the same thing Ronald Reagan did in Lebanon. Reagan and Jerry Ford, they cut and ran. But no one



was going to accuse them of cowardice because Republicans were not about to attack a president of their own party. Cutting and running is only criticized when it is done by Democrats. The American electorate does not question the manhood of Republicans, they can cut and run without a downside. Not so, Democrats.

Unlike Democrats, Republicans are seen as real men. John Kerry who fought in Vietnam was not a real man; Dick Cheney who shot his best friend on a hunting trip and saw no reason to apologize, was a real man. It made no difference that the Democrat was a war hero and the Republican was a draft dodger. Image is all, and real men don't apologize. Republicans own the real man image.

But for god's sake George W. Bush is married to a librarian! His vice president is married to a novelist, and one of her novels is an erotic novel! And they have a daughter who is a lesbian!

If Bush and Cheney were Democrats, it would have ended their careers. But they're not, they're Republicans. So it didn't matter that this Republican candidate married to a bookish woman picked a draft dodger with a wife who wrote erotic novels and a lesbian daughter for a vice president. They were given a pass. To conservative and evangelical voters, "values" was only an issue when it was the values of Democrats.★

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*The Warrior Liberal* is excerpted from Jules Feiffer's forthcoming memoir *Backing into Forward*. His most recent book is *Explainers*, a compilation of his first 10 years as a *Village Voice* cartoonist. He is presently at work with composer/lyricist Andrew Lippa on a musical adaptation of his children's novel *The Man in the Ceiling* to be produced on Broadway by Disney.





I HAD A DREAM THE OTHER NIGHT that someone called from the Obama campaign asking me to make a documentary to help get his man elected. Suffused with the kind of pleasure that comes with the sleepy satisfaction of a wish, I said yes. And then I opened my eyes to the bright light of morning and saw at once the problem my dream had shrugged off: I don't respond well to propaganda films.

No matter how effective, no matter how well crafted, there's something about ideological filmmaking that rankles me. I instinctively fight back when I feel I'm being manipulated. Keats once said that he disliked poems that had a "palpable design" on the reader. He was averse, he said, to having his pocket picked—a pretty fair description of what I feel when I watch Michael Moore at work.

Making a documentary should be like sailing out on a voyage of discovery, where the wind blows as it will and it's best not to try too hard to steer a steady course. A propaganda film knows precisely where it's going: It's always hard on the rudder, full steam ahead. There may be carefully honed craftsmanship, but there are few surprises, and little of the free, unfettered spirit of art.

An artist is open to experience; a propagandist is serving a cause. An artist observes the world around him and lets it change him; a propagandist wants to change the world. Nevertheless, if there's any truth in dreams, I guess I do want to change the world, or at least see Barack Obama in the White House.

Perhaps the conflict between my sleeping wish and my waking reluctance is actually a back-handed tribute to the power of propaganda filmmaking. It's not a bad idea to remember that when Woodrow Wilson saw *Birth of A Nation*—the first film ever screened in the White House—he said it was "history written with lightning." Griffith's film degrades African-Americans and makes heroes out of the Ku Klux Klan, but Wilson was swept away.

There's the danger. I very much want to see Obama in the White House. But the power of film can be hijacked to serve any cause. What Obama's media people can do, McCain's can do just as well. Is this how we ought to conduct our democracy?

For a long time, I wondered why the Athenians, the people who invented democracy, valued the study of rhetoric. I agreed with Plato who, though he was an Athenian, characterized rhetoricians as lying tricksters whose oratory made "the worse seem the better cause"—until I realized that Plato was a master rhetorician himself. While Plato depicted his teacher Socrates as a philosopher who pursued the truth with disinterested passion, he portrayed Socrates' enemies, the Sophists, as skilled rhetoricians who mangled the truth to advance their cause.

In fact, the Greeks expected every citizen to participate in the democratic process, and rhetoric was a way of thinking about an issue, reaching a conclusion and constructing an

argument to support it. They invented an entire discipline to foster lively debate in the public arena, and in an era before the written word was a widespread medium of persuasion, oratory became a weapon of engagement.

Today, we have inherited their skills and put them to compelling use in a medium with far greater reach and explosive power: We harness language to images, sounds and music, and make films of enormous persuasive force. Today, as Woodrow Wilson reminds us, we have at our disposal a medium as dangerous as lightning.

Politics is struggle, and to succeed, we use what weapons we have. Film is one of them. But must we resort to lies? With open eyes, I can fantasize that I am making a film to serve Obama's campaign: I tell his operatives that the most effective propaganda has its foundation in fact, and I contend that the Swift boat advertisements were lies that did their damage only because the response was slow, ineffective and irresolute. Propaganda can be the servant of a good cause, I continue to argue, and it doesn't need to lie. It may not have the consoling or revelatory power of art, but that is not its purpose. Propaganda is a call to action, and if it spurs people to make the right choices, that is more than enough.

Perhaps I really am dreaming, but at least I am no longer conflicted. If the call ever comes, I would make Obama his documentary simply by trying to tell the truth. ★

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David Grubin writes, produces and directs documentaries. He has been nominated six times for Writers Guild Awards, and won four. His film *The Trials of J. Robert Oppenheimer* will air on PBS *American Experience* in January 2009.





## A Corner in Harlem

THERE WAS A TIME when the political pulse of Harlem indicated the heartbeat of black America. 125<sup>th</sup> Street is famous for the Apollo Theater and its demanding audiences that have made and broken many entertainers. The corner of 125<sup>th</sup> and Seventh Avenue is equally famous as the rallying ground for political leaders and cultural heroes. If Harlem is the unofficial black capital of the world, then 125<sup>th</sup> Street is Harlem's combination of the Washington Mall and the Vatican's St. Peter's Square. Everything that has been culturally and politically significant has been witnessed or celebrated there.

Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell (in whose honor the Boulevard has been renamed) and Malcolm X have all turned the intersection into a street corner pulpit for social change. For decades, Saturday afternoons were a time for Harlemites to gather on "the corner"—sometimes by the dozens, sometimes by the thousands. From prophets to Panthers, from visionaries to crazies, this was an active spot for black people to get new information, bold opinions and a damn good show.

It's the corner that black people swarmed to celebrate Joe Louis regaining his title by knocking out Max Schmeling in 1938. It's the corner that black people crowded to see Fidel Castro when he and the Cuban delegation chose to stay in the Hotel Theresa (125<sup>th</sup> and Seventh) rather than the presidential suite downtown at the Waldorf. It's the corner that black people gathered in tears and rage after Malcolm X (who had his headquarters in the Theresa) and Dr. King were assassinated. Muhammad Ali stood on the corner in the '70s stopping traffic and drawing a huge crowd. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison and came to New York in 1992, he spoke on a stage erected on the corner to a crowd of 20,000.

Muhammad Ali, Mandela, Fidel, Malcolm, Dr. King and Angela Davis knew how to excite the Harlem crowd. They had the strut but also had "the struff"—the ability to make a real connection with the grassroots folks of Harlem who came out to see them. They inspired hope and the courage to fight the "powers that be," also known on 125<sup>th</sup> and Seventh as "the government," "the power structure," "the devil," "the pigs" or more universally, "the man."

Over the last eight years 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard has gotten quiet. President Bill Clinton set up offices down the street after he left the White House but seldom comes to Harlem. There is an occasional preacher or activist hawking bibles or self-published books to passersby, but the only crowd that gathers is when two or three teenagers coincidentally stop to Bluetooth numbers between their smart phones. High-priced condos have gone up in Harlem, crime has gone down and the grassroots folks who are left in the buildings and brownstones that avoided gentrification are, like most of America, just trying to survive.

Harlem is still predominately black and poor and has accepted the million-dollar condos and brownstones that have morphed around them with a shrug and a “I should have bought one of these buildings when I had a chance.” The truth is they never had a chance. To a poor family a \$50,000 brownstone is just as out of reach as a \$2 million brownstone. Some talk about the time when city-owned Harlem buildings were on sale for \$1. Yes, \$1—plus tens of thousands of dollars in back taxes. So the grassroots Harlem residents feel, like many Americans, that opportunity has passed them by and that they have no one to blame except themselves.

With no one left on the corner to challenge “the man,” to incite the grassroots to hope and inspire them to activism, the grassroots now just come to the street to look for bargains and maybe a bootleg DVD of films they can’t afford to take their families to see. The street vendors are also selling posters of the heroes and leaders who once spoke on 125<sup>th</sup>—most dead, all part of another time when smart, strong and charismatic people actually cared about grassroots folks.

Then on November 30, 2007 a black presidential hopeful named Barack Obama came to Harlem to speak at the Apollo. It was an upstart move. Hillary Clinton was the popular senator from New York and the undisputed front runner. Bill Clinton had an office down the block and the black political establishment was solidly behind Hillary. Yet, the \$50 Obama-at-the-Apollo tickets sold out within hours and the waiting lines extended around the block like a James Brown concert. Okay, it wasn’t the grassroots crowd, but young professional Harlem was out in force. And even though Obama didn’t make an appearance on the corner, 125<sup>th</sup> and Seventh was packed with community folks caught up in the excitement. The grassroots began to talk about excitement and hope in ways that had been long absent.

Many things that are now American mainstream and commercial started out as movements. The Che Guevara, peace sign and Black Power T-shirts selling in boutiques used to really represent change as opposed to fashion. Soon after Obama came to the Apollo, T-shirts and posters hit 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Black teens who had worn Tupac were now rocking Obama. More importantly, they were listening to and quoting him. Eighteen- through 30-year-olds who had never cared about voting now registered. Harlem families actually sat down together and watched the debates. Over the course of the primaries the seemingly impossible began to happen as Obama began to win. Grassroots folks in Harlem began to ask the same question with hopeful eyes and trembling hearts, “What if he loses?” Or worse, “What if they do to him what they did to the Kennedys, Malcolm and Dr. King?” There is no answer except to believe, fight and carry on—but for now believe, and celebrate that for the first time in years a movement-like feeling of hope and activism has energized the youth and the grassroots across the country.

On the last night of the Democratic convention I found myself on 125<sup>th</sup> and Seventh Avenue hailing a cab to get to my apartment a few blocks away. It seemed like everyone in Harlem was rushing to get to a TV to see Senator Obama’s speech. It was like Super Bowl night with people picking up pizza and take-out food, and having guests come by. Many Harlem clubs and restaurants and bars were hosting viewing parties. As I stood on the corner, everyone who passed—young, old, professional and unemployed—asked the same



question: “Are you watching Obama’s speech tonight?” Thousands gathered in Times Square to watch the speech on the jumbo screen. What an amazing night. Imagine if there had been a giant screen on that special corner in Harlem. ★

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Jamal Joseph is a writer, director and producer. He is the Chair of Columbia University’s Graduate Film Division, and is currently writing a film about his experiences as a teenager with the Black Panther Party for Focus Features. Joseph and his youth group, Impact, were nominated for an Academy Award for their song, “Raise it Up” in the film *August Rush*.





WHEN I WAS EIGHT, my family moved into a neighborhood of new subdivisions created from the sprawling estate of a deceased magnate. An actual Italianate palazzo had been torn down to make way for the new houses. Sometimes my three brothers and I would find broken pieces of pillars washed up on the beach. They seemed evidence of a bygone era of untold and probably ill-gotten wealth—wealth that was just not appropriate in the new day and age.

I always assumed that the rich titan of that estate had been a Republican, because everyone else in my new neighborhood was. My parents were the only Democrats except for one United Nations functionary further down the road. To the rest of the homeowners, we were an unruly element: intellectuals, stubborn and funky, whose conversation was incomprehensible owing to the obscene amounts of books we read.

They were elephants, we were donkeys. To the pachyderm, a donkey is a very minor nuisance.

Even more weirdo, we didn't have a television. But soon enough there arrived an occasion which warranted the renting of a TV: the presidential campaign. The incumbent Republican, Eisenhower, was running against Adlai Stevenson, whom my mother adored. (Forget that he's a long shot. It's his *mind*, stupid.) Mom became a dynamo within the local League of Women Voters and threw herself into the campaign.

She recruited us four kids to do field work. First we memorized Democratic songs off a 45 rpm record, and then she dropped us off at the railroad station to hand out pamphlets and sing. Just after dusk, the train from New York would pull in, spewing hordes of commuters (Republicans almost to a man) onto the platform, where they were leafleted and serenaded by a group of unkempt liberal brats.

At the top of our lungs we sang, to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas": "Oh, the Democratic Party is for you and you and *you*/It works for all the people, and not for just a few!" The other one we knew was "Adlai's Gonna Win This Time" to the melody of "Get Me To the Church On Time." We brayed our best like donkeys, though we were in the midst of a stampede and in danger of being trampled to death by elephants.

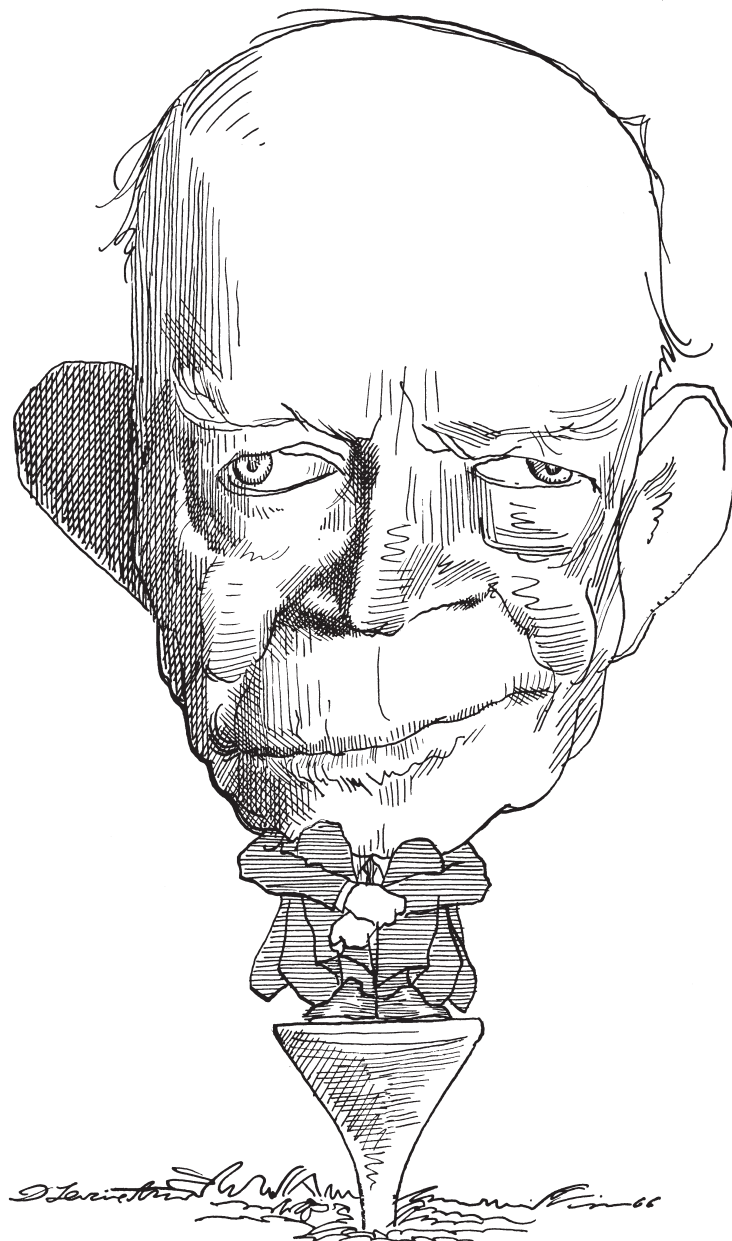
We stayed up until our bedtime to watch the returns. By morning, Eisenhower had won a resounding—no, deafening—victory. And the wonderful rented TV went away.

To say we kids were crushed by the election's outcome would be too mild. Myself, I never got over the fact that no matter how hard I yelled those songs at the train station, I had not changed a single mind. The wheel of politics continued its stolid crunching course without interruption. The whole event gave me a permanent sense of futility about electoral campaigns. (It also birthed my lifelong and passionate addiction to TV.)

For the first time, 2008 feels like a different kind of election to me. The foundation of politics-as-usual is cracking. The estate is breaking up. And maybe I will come upon broken pieces of pillars on the beach again. ★

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Sarah Kernochan is a screenwriter and filmmaker (her documentaries, *Marjoe* and *Thoth*, both won Academy Awards). She has recently completed a novel.





## Covering Political Events

MANY YEARS AGO in a skit on *Saturday Night Live*, Al Franken played a journalist covering a story overseas. Wearing a small satellite disk on his pith helmet, he was a one-man band: correspondent/camera crew/uplink operator. For those of us who labor in the field of electronic journalism, it was hilarious to think of one person doing all those jobs alone. Who knew that in 2008 Franken would be making a serious run for the U.S. Senate from his home state of Minnesota, and the one-man band concept would become a practical reality?

In 2007 when the candidates were just throwing their hats into the ring for their parties' nominations, ABC News nominated its own team of off-air reporters/producers to follow them. Each off-air was equipped with a backpack of gear: a computer with an AVID edit package, a digital video camera and a pocket personal computer.

Some were assigned to the perceived front-running candidates: Romney, McCain, Giuliani, Clinton, Obama, Edwards. Others were tasked with following a group of candidates believed to have a lesser chance of capturing the nominations. ABC's Zach Wolf was the off-air assigned to Jim Gilmore (who dropped out before the first votes were even cast), Tom Tancredo, Duncan Hunter and Ron Paul. Because these candidates didn't have the financial resources to mount extensive campaigns, Zach was able to spread his attention among them, at times even riding in the car with Ron Paul to campaign events.

If camera crews were not assigned to the candidates—as was frequently the case in the early days of the campaign—Zach would shoot a rally or press conference with his DV camera. Then, using his computer with the edit package, he could pull a video clip or two and send a piece via e-mail to a shared video file in New York where producers from different shows could use it.

In addition to providing video clips, Zach would also write short pieces on what his candidate said or did during the course of the day. These were posted on an internal ABC News e-mail system and would arrive to hundreds of people simultaneously. With a click of his mouse, Zach would reach all show platforms for ABC News: television, radio, ABCNews.com and ABC News Now (24-hour digital channel). If he had information to share with his fellow off-air reporters, he would use a separate off-air distribution list that allowed him to reach the reporters covering other candidates with word of the latest political dirt being dished. Thanks to air cards, information could be shared almost instantaneously via e-mail. And of course, the off-airs kept in touch with the ABC News political desk or, after hours, the assignment desk.

Radio journalists now have the ability to file reports directly from their laptop computers via wireless communication while they are on the campaign trail. They have audio editing programs so they can record speeches, edit them and then file pieces—all while riding on press buses. And they can simultaneously keep up with e-mail via BlackBerries or iPhones.

News coverage of the conventions has also evolved. In 1976, the television networks provided live coverage of the conventions and local stations didn't do their own live reporting. In 1988, there was an explosion of broadcast uplink trucks, and most local TV stations invested in them. With an uplink truck, a local station could shoot a signal at a satellite and downlink that signal at their local station. Local TV stations, now able to do their own live coverage, flooded the conventions.

CNN made its first appearance at a political convention in 1980. Nineteen years later, MSNBC and Fox debuted on the convention scene. As the cable news organizations provided nonstop coverage of the conventions, the broadcast networks pulled back their coverage to one or two hours in prime time. (Since the primary system had already delivered the nominees, the conventions were stripped of drama. That made the decision to scale back coverage an easier call.) ABC's Peter Jennings was the first network anchor to work live from the convention floor for prime-time coverage, abandoning the traditional skybox anchor location.

In 2000, independent internet companies showed up at the conventions, camped out in their own Internet Alley; several perched their operations in skyboxes. Many of those internet operations were out of business four years later. By 2004, most of the internet presence was through existing media outlets, but bloggers made their first appearances.

Thanks to the internet, there is a blurring of the traditional roles of print versus broadcast journalists. Now print reporters also shoot video for their newspapers' websites, while television news correspondents also write blogs for their networks' websites. As technology has advanced, it has changed the way campaigns are covered and how the campaigns interact with an expanding array of media options. In short, it's not your granddad's way of getting political news anymore.★

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Rusty Lutz is an assignment editor for ABC News Radio. He has been working in the Washington news market for 40 years.







HERE'S THE THING ABOUT KEEPING UP WITH CURRENT EVENTS. When an item first appears in the news you must make a snap decision: Will it turn into a daily front-page story that everybody's talking about, or will it end up being filler, buried under an article about Guam opening up its motor vehicle tax records to the public? So many times, I make the wrong call. Take the Mideast. I was sure it would blow over. Enron? I skipped right over the headline, assuming it was about a football play or a new kind of fabric.

And then, not long ago, there was that problem with Fannie Mae. Well, whatever she'd done wrong with her candy, I thought, that was strictly her affair. Ms. Mae, I had a feeling, was going to be the Y2K of 2008. No way was I going to waste my time on something that would go nowhere. I decided instead to wow my friends by learning all I could about an event I knew would become really big: Hurricane Bertha.

The next thing I knew—or rather, *didn't* know—the housing crisis got worse, and it had not a whit to do, it seemed, with my lack of closet space. There wasn't just Fannie Mae to confuse me, there was Freddie Mac, too. I was pretty sure Fannie Farmer wasn't involved, but of course, I'd be the last to know. And don't ask me to explain subprime mortgages, by the way, because I'm waiting for them to talk about prime mortgages before I read up on it all.

Major news stories get complicated fast (except for snowstorms), and the window of opportunity for grasping the rudiments slams shut in a blink. Sure, you can consult Wikipedia at any time, but if you miss those crucial first days, you're never going to catch up. It's like missing the first few weeks of kindergarten. If you never learn blocks, you're going to have a tough time in graduate school—not to mention with the letter “B” in first grade.

This happened to me many years ago when the mess in Yugoslavia began. Could a country with such pretty beaches ever become a problem? My best thinking said not a chance. I never did get anything straight over there in the Balkans. And sorry, but maps only made it worse. I kept looking for the Cross County Parkway. So now, there's Georgia. “It's reminiscent of Kosovo,” the pundits say. Oh, really? Thanks a lot.

How do you determine if a news germ is going to blossom? 1) If it involves a name you've never heard of or can't pronounce, glance at the headlines every day, at least. 2) Beware of coups. They have a lot of initials. And how do you pick which side to root for? It's been so easy with George Bush in office. If he is for it, you are against it. 3) If someone denies something, you can be sure that he did it, and he did that other thing, too. The more prominent the person is, the more he did it. 4) Is the story boring? Then pay attention!

Recently, I made vacation plans to go to a country that shall go unnamed (because I can't remember what it's currently called). Last week, on the bottom of page A22, next to an article about the restructuring of the Albanian fellmongery industry, there was a squib reporting that some people in the country I was planning to visit were staging a protest.

Yesterday, the U.S. State Department issued a warning that American tourists should stay away. My friends and relatives have urged me to cancel my trip. “Nobody can figure out what’s going on there,” they said. “Exactly,” I said, zipping up my suitcase. “And there is only one way to get to the bottom of it.”★

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Patricia Marx is a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, screenwriter and novelist. Her novel, *Him Her Him Again The End of Him*, published by Scribner, is a finalist for the Thurber Prize. Her next children’s book, *Dot in Larryland*, illustrated by Roz Chast, will be published in December 2008 by Bloomsbury.





MY POLITICS IN FILM CLASS at the University of Pittsburgh was taught by Professor Marcia Landy, a Marxist, who encouraged us to look beyond the surface of a film to its subtext. We analyzed overtly political films like *The Battle of Algiers* and *Potemkin*. But one day Professor Landy challenged us with a question: “Is there a political subtext to *Star Wars*?”

The classroom fell into silence, which soon turned into hostile grumbling. “*Star Wars*?” someone muttered, “It’s a fantasy. What is she *talking* about?”

But I had been prepared for the question during a semester of independent study with Landy. Along with Eisenstein, Stanley Kauffmann and Buñuel, my first film teacher taught me that politics is not restricted to campaigns and elections; it is the subtext of life, the consequences of decisions made by every citizen, especially artists.

My hand shot into the air. “The movie makes war look fun, like some kind of pinball game,” I offered.

“What’s wrong with that?” a classmate asked.

I was on a roll. “It encourages people to go to war. Or, at least, it discourages them from questioning war.”

“It’s a movie!” someone protested, “It’s not political!”

When I responded with, “*Everything* is political,” the classroom exploded. It was the first time I’d been booed. I remember one exasperated coed—dressed in the *de rigueur* turtle-neck sweater of the 1970s—slapping her hands on her desk and asking, “What’s *wrong* with him?”

Within weeks of that classroom episode, I joined the Gay and Lesbian Student Union and boycotted orange juice in reaction to Anita Bryant’s homophobic crusade. I embraced the costume of a gay rights advocate in that era: single hoop earring, cowboy boots and red bandana tied around my neck. But officially, I remained in the closet to my parents. I wasn’t ready to cross that potentially dramatic bridge. Once, on a weekend visit, I betrayed my beliefs and accepted my mother’s offer of orange juice.

In 1993, I appeared on *Nightline* with my mentor, Jonathan Demme, to talk about our film, *Philadelphia*. Ted Koppel’s first question to me was, “Are you gay?”

I answered truthfully: “Yes, I am.”

I didn’t have to worry about my family’s reaction. This episode of *Nightline* had been taped in advance, slated for broadcast when the film opened. I had time to prepare my folks for my public coming out or, if I lost courage, distract them somehow. In the end, I opted for

distraction. On the night of the broadcast, I booked a 9:30 p.m. dinner reservation for my entire family, making sure we finished dessert well past midnight.

Several weeks later, I found a videotape in the closet of my old bedroom. The cassette was marked, “Ron on *Nightline*.” Apparently, some helpful neighbor had taped the show, undoing my clever subterfuge. My parents had, I presumed, watched the interview—including the affirmation of my homosexuality—and hidden the tape in the closet on a high shelf, like a borrowed copy of porn. I didn’t tell them I’d found the tape and they never mentioned it.

For the next several years we continued to deny the subtext of my life. We didn’t speak about the sudden absence of my long-term “roommate,” or the sudden arrival—and equally sudden disappearance—of a hunk without a green card that I referred to as my “protégé.” While I traveled around the country, speaking on college campuses about AIDS and gay civil rights, I held my personal life off limits to my family. I flaunted my political beliefs to anonymous audiences in classrooms and auditoriums, while keeping those beliefs out of the relationships I had with the two people in the world I loved most.

During the last month of my father’s life, when he’d retreated to a nursing home, I introduced him to my new “friend,” James. As we were saying goodbye, James, who knows intuitively how to solve unsolvable problems, grasped my father’s hand and said, “Ron means a lot to me.”

My father surprised both of us by pulling James toward him and kissing him on the cheek. I wept in the corridor outside my father’s room, grateful that the truth had finally been spoken, even so obliquely.

This year, while researching a script for HBO, I’ve been privileged to spend time with wounded Iraq war veterans. When I’m with them, it’s easy to see how politics intrudes upon people’s lives. The missing limbs and lifelong psychiatric diagnoses are the consequences of political decisions made in the rush to war.

One soldier, who I’ll call Justin, connected the adrenalin rush of combat to the pleasure of playing his favorite video game, *25 To Life*. He explained that he’d been drawn to an Army recruiter’s office at the age of 15, eager for combat.

Sitting in Justin’s room, with the poster of *Saw* staring at me from the wall, I listened to Justin describe the day his sergeant stepped on an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) and was blown, literally, to bits. Justin’s squad was given the task of collecting the pieces of their sergeant—bones, joints and scraps of skin—a gruesome job that took several hours to complete. Justin suffers from a severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder. He is plagued by nightmares, finds it impossible to sleep and panics in ordinary situations. The movies and video games that drew him to his recruiter’s office offer no comfort now; simulated mayhem is no substitute for the real thing. He finds peace when he gets a tattoo, as the genuine physical pain of the needle perforating his skin allows his mind to rest.

Today, writing Justin’s story, I remember my Marxist professor with her oversized glasses

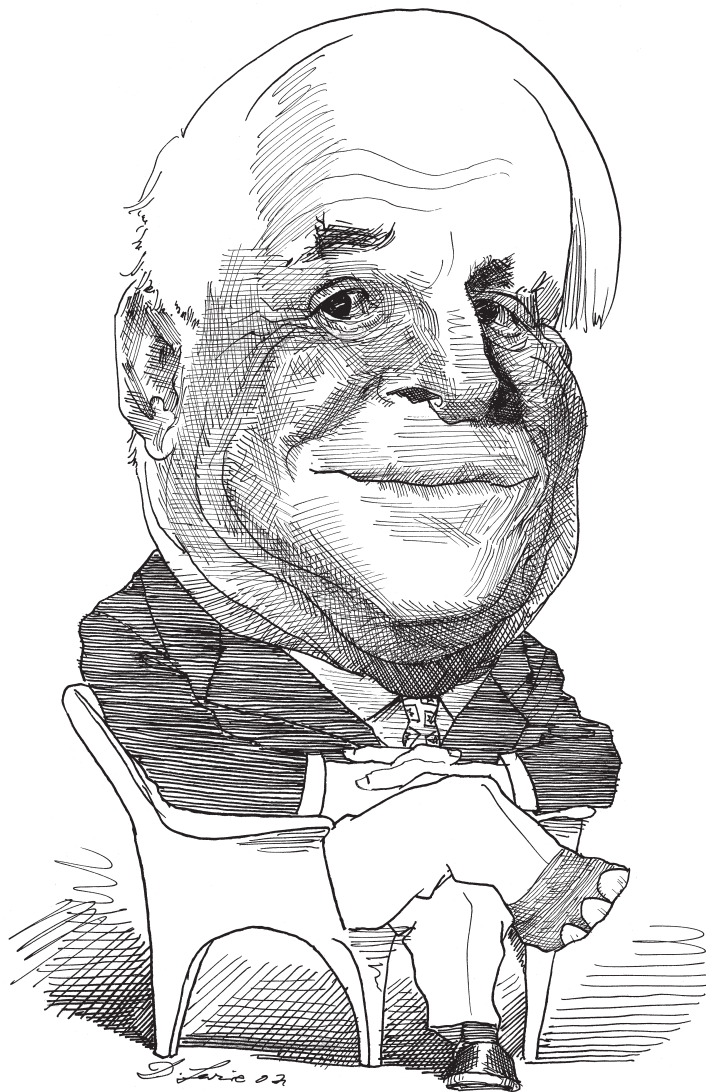
and blunt haircut, and wonder if there's a connection between the level of violence in the product we call entertainment and the escalating militarization of the culture in which we live. Is the entertainment business—*my* business—priming young people to be the next generation of warriors?

I can hear the shouting and the booing. “They’re just movies! Just games! What’s *wrong* with him?”

And I can hear my professor’s answer. Everything is political. Orange juice, movies, games. Even a father’s kiss. ★

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Ron Nyswaner is a screenwriter whose credits include *Philadelphia*, *Soldier’s Girl* and *The Painted Veil*. He’s currently working on *Walter Reed* for HBO. He is the author of *Blue Days*, *Black Nights: A Memoir*, published by Alyson Books in 2004.







A WOMAN IS PRESIDENT. She is smart, cunning, controversial and determined. The military is run by an equally capable leader, a man who sometimes has had problems with Madame President but who comes to deeply respect her. The star fighter pilot of the air force is a woman. The vice president is a man. Women and men share power at all levels in society and the military. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But no one *ever* says or even thinks, "She can't do it because she's a woman."

Is this America in the near future? Come on, get real. It's *Battlestar Galactica*, a post-apocalyptic dystopian fantasy on the SciFi Channel. I'm in love with the Cylons. I'm also in love with the politics. My friend Melissa calls it "post-gendered." She's right; the dudes behind *Battlestar Galactica* have fiercely imagined a world beyond gender bias. And guess what: People still have a lot of sex in a post-gendered universe, and all of it is hot.

The women I know all wish we lived in a post-gendered universe. We know we don't live there now. We know that there still isn't a level playing field and that boys clubs are running the government and the media and most of the major industries and unions in this country. We know that incompetent men are regularly hired or promoted over much more competent women, because of a very real and very unjust gender bias which continues to be embraced by the American power structure. We think that during the primaries Barack Obama was kind of given a walk, and Hillary Clinton was subjected to a lot of sexist sneering about her clothes, her cleavage and her cackle. It bugged us that so many members of the press felt free to call her a bitch and a witch.

It also bugged us that the media kept denying they were doing it. My new favorite headache-inducing mantra is "supposed media bias." *Supposed*? No wait, there's a better one: "Hillary Harridans." Apparently that means anyone who's still distressed at the way Hillary was treated by the press is just angry, fat and can't get a boyfriend. So where's the word for white male leaders who pretend to be enlightened by appointing girls with little or no experience to positions of power? The point being what, that gender is so overwhelming no one can see past it? People got fooled into thinking Hillary wasn't as great as she is because she's a woman, so... maybe no one will notice how bad Palin is, because of the same thing?

And why? Why is the reality of gender bias something we can't even discuss? In my experience, when this stuff comes up at dinner parties, the general scenario plays out something like this: 1. Several women articulate how biased this whole culture is and we're sick of it—and by the way, how come there are no decent movies for women to go to anymore? Huh? 2. The men don't really think there's a problem, and Hillary made a lot of mistakes and that was the real issue. 3. The rest of the women become conspicuously silent, seemingly fearful of being even associated with this conversation. 4. Everyone expresses support for Obama, who really is a great candidate, and it's wonderful and historic that the Democrats nominated an African-American, and then we rush onto the next subject, actively trying to erase the icky feeling floating around that any woman who

wants to even discuss gender bias in the culture is a whiner, a dirty feminist and probably a lesbian, too.

There are of course a lot of people who really don't think there's a problem. Mostly these people are men, and Maureen Dowd. We will put the issue of Maureen Dowd aside and consider why even the most evolved men don't quite get what women are talking about here. When Don Imus said that hideous thing about those girl basketball players, every woman I know was immediately shocked and disgusted. The guys? It took a little longer, and then mostly I heard a lot of excuses for Don. "He's really a good guy." "He's an entertainer." (That nasty line was *entertaining*?) "It's not fair to hold him responsible for stuff the hip-hop guys say all the time." And the story that was floating around back then was that the powers that be at CBS were actually not inclined to fire Don until the women who worked there expressed their dismay.

But this isn't about Don Imus; this is about numbers, and the numbers don't lie. The percentages are bad. Women are not rising to power in America. Very few women end up running corporations or television shows, directing movies, making partner, serving in the Senate. That either means a. Women are genetically inferior to men in all ways, not just upper body strength; or b. The deck is stacked, and somebody's cheating.

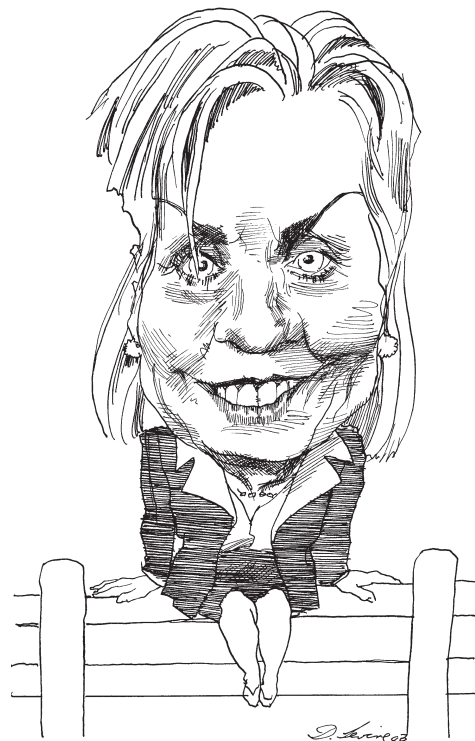
#### CHEATING.

I actually hope that story about CBS is true, because what it tells me is that power systems can, in fact, be changed from within. We all know in our hearts that this country and this world are facing horrific challenges in the coming decades, and it is a little nerve-wracking to think that there are still so many men (and Maureen Dowd) who believe we can meet those challenges while simultaneously discriminating against half the human race. Whether or not you liked Hillary Clinton, her candidacy pointed to some irrefutable truths: Women in fact *are* capable of running the world or a corporation or a television show, and gender bias is the small-minded expression of backward-looking idiots. A post-gendered America is not just a profoundly fair vision, it is an historic necessity.

Listen, if you want to get a sense of what it might look like, watch *Battlestar Galactica*. It's really good. And in a post-gendered universe, against ridiculous odds, the human race has half a chance. ★

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Theresa Rebeck's plays include *Mauritius*, *The Scene*, *Spike Heels*, *Our House* and *The Understudy*. TV and film credits include *Brooklyn Bridge*, HBO's *Dream On*, *Criminal Intent* and *NYPD Blue*, for which she won the Writers Guild, Edgar and Peabody Awards. Her first novel, *Three Girls and Their Brother*, was published by Shayne Areheart/Random House this spring.





## Only in America

THIS PAST SUMMER was the first time in my life that I ever visited Spain. And it was my good fortune that my port of entry was the city of Barcelona, easily one of the most beautiful cities in Europe—graceful architecture spanning centuries, tree-lined streets, wide boulevards, museums, galleries, fine restaurants, vast plazas and numerous parks—all bathed in the kind of golden sunshine we Americans generally associate with Southern California.

Back home, America was mired in a deteriorated economy, exacerbated by a seemingly endless two-front war. There was anger and apprehension. For many of us life had taken on an insecurity about the future that seemed to cast a cloud across the landscape. The pundits prattled on about it daily.

It took being overseas, in a country like Spain, to drive home for me how much the roiling undercurrent of anger in American life had affected me and so many others. In Spain, there is unemployment, a shaky economy very much buffeted by the declining markets in the U.S. and the effects of globalization on its workforce. They also have their own problems with rising immigration, illegal aliens and terrorist attacks on their native soil. And yet, the people I saw in Barcelona walked their streets with their heads held high, backs straight and with a sense of confidence. In themselves? In the future? Hard to say, but it was there. It was always there. I was reminded of the faces of grownups I used to see as a child in the America of the 1950s.

It isn't easy being the world's only superpower: taking it upon ourselves to regime change, global warm and use 25 percent of the world's resources while only being three percent of the total number of human beings on the planet—all in the name of freedom, justice and the American Way. And when the price exacted for that is the blood and lives of our young men and women in uniform, our country's dying urban centers and crumbling infrastructure, jobs lost to globalization and a sense that those who have don't give a damn about those who have not—well, small wonder then that the mood on Main Street doesn't quite match the confident mood on Las Ramblas in Barcelona.

My wife, Valerie, always likes to say that being overseas never fails to drive home to her just how much of an American she really is. We may have our faults, but there is something about us as a people, a strength and a special yearning that never seems to leave us. I thought about that as I noticed another side of Spain in Barcelona: The immigrants from South America, Cuba, North Africa and Central Africa were the people doing much of the menial labor that many Spaniards had long since moved up and away from. After witnessing several small encounters between native-born Spaniards and the immigrants who lived there, no matter how successful they might become—if at all—they would never be seen as real Spaniards. They would always be on the outside, even if they became citizens. Would the same circumstance apply to their children who might be born in Spain? Looking at what

France, Britain and Germany, among others, were going through with their immigrant populations, I had to wonder.

So I thought about Val's comment and about the uniqueness of America, and that special vision of our country held by others throughout the world. We are a nation *that absorbs* and burnishes, offering the opportunity to start over, to be reborn—sometimes whether one wants it, or not.

All of these thoughts were tossing about somewhere in the back of my mind one night as Val and I were walking toward a big plaza near the center of Barcelona. There weren't many people on the street where we were, so we were just a little nervous—our New York City antennae particularly tuned to sudden, unexpected movements or shapes in the dark. Suddenly, approaching from the opposite direction was a burly young man wearing an NBA replica jersey for the Memphis Grizzlies basketball team. My eyes immediately went to his hands. What was in them? Nothing, except a lunch bag. I relaxed a bit, but just a bit. The New York antennae was still at work. Just as quickly, the man's eyes seemed to light up and a huge grin cut across his face, revealing just how youthful and open he really was. "Are you from the States?" he asked in a thick accent that immediately told me he was not Spanish, but more likely from somewhere in Eastern Europe. Once assured of my American bona fides, he eagerly told me why he was wearing the Grizzlies jersey: one of his countrymen was a star on that team. And when he learned that I was from New Jersey, he said, "Oh, yes, New Jersey Nets." Another countryman plays for *that* team. He hoped one day to come to America to see them play. He thought he might like to see the American city that named itself after the old capitol of ancient Egypt.

We soon parted company, going our separate ways, when suddenly he turned, raised a clenched fist and, with that broad, youthful smile on his face, shouted, "Obama!" Then he turned and continued down the street, a jaunty bounce in his step.

And that's when those thoughts of the uniqueness of being an American that had been rumbling around the back of my mind came roaring to the front. Here I was in a conversation about Memphis where 40 years ago Martin Luther King had been assassinated. And yet today, it is an integrated city where a professional basketball player from a former Communist country plays on a team dominated by millionaire black players who are descended from people who were once slaves, in a year in which the nation may in fact elect a person of mixed race president of the country.

Yea, man: only in America. ★

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Richard Wesley is a former Vice President of the Guild and three-time Council member. He is currently in Singapore where he is helping to establish the new Graduate Department of Writing for the Stage, Screen and Television at the NYU Tisch School of the Art's branch campus there.





## I Left My Feet at the Democratic National Convention

I'VE BEEN A POLITICAL JUNKIE since I was a kid in 1960, when the Kennedy/Nixon race split my family neatly in two. My dad and older brother were for Nixon, my mother and I favored JFK—but I still have a gold Nixon tie clip my father prized, with an engraved caricature of Tricky Dick that looks more like Bob Hope than the presidential incubus we all came to know and love.

I went to college in Washington, D.C., because I thought I'd like a career in politics—as a campaign operative, not as a candidate; I worked on several races and in the Capitol Hill offices of a couple of congressmen, a Republican and a Democrat, culminating in a staff job on George McGovern's presidential campaign. I learned that full-time campaigning was not a profession for me. But it did help lead to spending a lot of my writing career in journalism. I've been involved in coverage of seven presidents and many more candidates and incumbents on the local, state and national level. Despite that, I had never attended a national party convention. So this year I was determined to be in Denver for Barack Obama's official nomination.

### Saturday, August 23

The first person I see at the gate for my flight to Denver is octogenarian *New York Post* gossip columnist Cindy Adams. The next is Gabe Pressman from Channel 4, age 84, and naturalist Jim Fowler, 78, former host of *Wild Kingdom*. Suddenly, I have this *Twilight Zone*-like fantasy: This isn't a flight to Denver, but a plane headed for some faraway desert island where aging media people of diminished celebrity are left poolside to die. I will be their cabana boy. Noooooo!!!

When I get on board there are more reassuring faces; Anderson Cooper and Jeff Toobin from CNN, Les Crystal from *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*. No one wants to get off their cell phones or BlackBerries, but the flight crew finally persuades them that turning them off is the only way we'll ever be allowed off the ground.

At the Denver Airport, as we wait for our luggage, Jim Fowler looks at the surrounding madness and says to me, "Looks like there's going to be two zoos in town this week." *Wild Kingdom* has nothing on us.

### Sunday, August 24

Hotel rooms are at a premium. The AFL-CIO found a really cheap, residential suite motel that's clean and suits me fine, but it's about 25 miles from downtown Denver. Lots of the state delegations are in the same boat but I'm reassured that the motel is right next to the city's light rail service. It's only a 15- to 20-minute ride, I'm told, but as I get on board for the first time, I read that because of security, the stations closest to the action will be closed. We're all going to need comfortable shoes.

I pass tons of police and a John Denver impersonator as I go to the Sheraton hotel to pick up my credentials. From there, it's an easy walk to the Denver Convention Center, where a lot of convention-related events are being held. Hawkers of Obama



souvenirs ply the sidewalks, as do representatives of Planned Parenthood and NARAL versus various anti-abortion groups that have appeared with their usual grisly photographs. A black monster truck with tires the size of Ferris wheels slowly circles the block over and over, covered in anti-Obama slogans and probably getting about a quarter mile to the gallon.

Inside, a labor rally is being held, attended by several hundred delegates and other union folk. The meeting starts out strong but stretches on far too long. By the time it's over, two and a half hours after it began, two-thirds of the audience have vanished.

I wind up back at the Sheraton. The New York State delegation is headquartered there and I manage to get a press pass that admits me into two parties being thrown: a reception in honor of State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver that gradually segues into an "ice cream social" for Governor David Paterson. There's something odd yet reassuring and American about politicians savoring a bowl of Baskin-Robbins.

### Monday, August 25

Up painfully early because I want to be at the New York State delegation's breakfast and I have to make my 25-mile schlep on the train. Hillary Clinton's speaking at the breakfast and I've been told if I want a seat in the press section I'd better be there by 7:30 a.m.

I'm speaking with some other media folks when the actual delegation is let into the dining room, bursting through the doors as if they'd been shot out of a cannon. Stories of continued strife between Clinton and Obama have been the hot story of the convention so far and everyone wants to hear what Senator Clinton has to say.

She puts much of the rumormongering to rest with a barnburner of a short speech that presages her remarks at the convention podium the following night. "We weren't on the same side, but we are now," she says. She attacks McCain as well as Bush. My favorite line: "How many times can you yell at your television screen? How many times can you shout, 'I don't believe it!'" (Note, she is talking about the current administration and not the current series of *America's Next Top Model*.)

I stumble on a rare empty cab and take it to a restaurant where the Creative Coalition is hosting a brunch event and panel on the Employee Free Choice Act. WGAE Foundation President Tom Fontana is on the panel. After, I share a cab back downtown with a *Wall Street Journal* reporter and try to figure out the best way to the Pepsi Center.

Foot power's the only answer and I join the throng slowly working its way forward. Finally, we get to the first Secret Service barricades. Once past, there are many more blocks of open space to go. It is sunny, bright and hot. Many will burn today.

We stagger into white security tents where airport-style x-rays and magnetometers await. I have a bottle of water which they let me keep—after I take a big swig out of it to prove that it's not lethal. I think of faking a death spasm but this would be inconsiderate to the people behind me. On the other side of the tents, Democratic National Committee volunteers applaud and cheer as we emerge, as if we're runners who've just finished the New York City Marathon.

Everyone pants and sweats their way into the Pepsi Center. Once in the arena, folks mill around the perimeter, sporadically stuck behind scrums surrounding such luminaries as Senator John Kerry and Newark Mayor Cory Booker. To one side, David Letterman's stage manager Biff Henderson is interviewing Dennis Kucinich; to another *The Daily Show*'s John Oliver and Jason Jones are deliberately and successfully provoking

an elderly, right-wing radio talk show host. It's all a little bizarre and I'm developing a slight case of pop culture sensory overload.

### Tuesday, August 26

This just in: My feet are killing me. There's too much going on; too many events and too little time. I get to the Ritz-Carlton to hook up with a videographer. I'm helping her try to crash a brunch honoring Vernon Jordan, the former Clinton advisor and D.C. wheeler-dealer. He's being feted by his law firm, Akin Gump, one of the most influential lobbying establishments in Washington. The guest list is a *Who's Who* of political clout. As many have observed, the Democratic and Republican conventions are the Super Bowl of schmooze—a perfect setting in which corporations and other special interests can bend an ear and an elbow in preparation for the arm-twisting that will take place back in Washington later on.

I move on to a forum on the economy at the Denver Convention Center, and then back to the Pepsi Center to meet WGAE lobbyist Margaret Cone, who's working as a volunteer at the podium for the Democratic National Committee. She has offered to take me and a couple of other folks backstage.

Hillary and Chelsea Clinton are rehearsing their speeches for that evening. We wait until they finish, briefly exchange greetings with them, then climb to the podium and tour other parts of the arena.

At which point, rushing to return our podium passes, I trip over an undressed cable and land on my ass. Helped up, I keep going, thinking I can walk this off. I go back into town for another meeting with the videographer, after which my ankle is getting painful. I hobble back to the light rail and make it to the motel....

Damn! That's the end for me. The next morning my ankle has swollen to the size of a football and I can barely walk. Friends get me to an urgent-care facility where a badly sprained ankle is announced. I stay in Denver, hoping that each of the two remaining days there will be sufficient improvement so that I can get back into the thick of it. As George H. W. Bush/Dana Carvey would say, not gonna happen.

So I wind up watching Bill and Hillary and Joe Biden and finally Obama himself from the motel bed and that was the end of my first convention.

It reminded me of the time I asked one of my elderly great aunts in Texas if she had seen Halley's Comet back in 1910. "Oh yes," she said, then paused. "From a distance." ★

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Michael Winship is president of the Writers Guild of America, East, and senior writer of *Bill Moyers Journal* on PBS. His weekly column appears in a hundred daily newspapers and on progressive websites around the country.

