

Letter from England: Journalism, Democracy, and American Popular Sentiment

This lecture is dedicated to Joan Didion

It is a signal honour to be giving this lecture amidst the enviable grace and unshakable settledness of a noble university. This honour is the greater and my own feelings of diminutiveness and effrontery for my being an Englishman – an Englishman, for sure, visiting old friends and a much-loved place, and in any case preceded and accompanied by innumerable and more distinguished countrymen – the more marked for my being also a guest, and therefore someone who would do well to mind his Ps and Qs, tread watchfully, and keep his criticisms to himself.

Behind my absurdly ambitious title, however, is a question vaguer and more flagrant, one which flouts the canon of good manners I have just invoked. That question is partly caught in the titles of a clutch of books which has coincided and thickened the feeling so many of my friends have expressed since the phantoms of hatred were released into the coming emptiness on September 11th, 2001. Those titles include, among many others on the state of the union, Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?*;¹ Anatol Lieven's *America Right or Wrong*;² Paul Klugman's *The Great Unravelling*.³ In the fifty-odd months since we felt the hideous strength of the atrocity, the conviction has grown that something is going badly wrong in and with America. The beloved republic had saved the world from Fascism between December 1941 and August 1945; had rescued Europe from starvation and bankruptcy in 1947; had been confident and correct in establishing NATO in 1949; and, however much it had bruised the world with its errors in Indo-China or Central and South America or in its own inner cities, it had done more, far more than any old Empire, for liberty and liberalism, for the terrific exhilarations of the good consumer life, for the grand emancipations of information technology, for the promise of happiness held out so long and so unfalteringly by Hollywood. Yet these giant achievements and their legacy seem to so many devout Americophiles like myself, to be driving the top-heavy old bus of a country, wobblingly and judderingly, off the road and into the badlands.

¹ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How conservatives won the heart of America*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004.

² Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: an anatomy of America nationalism*. London: Harper Collins, 2004.

³ Paul Kingman, *The Great Unravelling: losing our way in the new century*. New York: W W Norton, 2003.

At this point I must, parenthetically, provide enough biographical detail to justify these extreme generalities. I am particularly anxious to remain untouched by the repellent and reflex anti-Americanism in the habits of mind of some quarters of the British Labour Party of which I have been a member since, 45 years ago, I was a student at Cambridge, England. Still more I would wish to avoid and if possible to abuse the parallel anti-Americanism so strong and foetid in British intellectual life, the lowest point of which was reached in the special issue pages of the *London Review of Books* on October 4th 2001, when the lady Professor of Classics at my Alma Mater wrote of a “feeling that, however tactfully you dress it up, the United States had it coming”.⁴ Far and away the most important intellectual institution in my life has been Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study, where, as it happens, I have spent the most fulfilling times of my own intellectual life but which embodies, of course, on a far larger fresco of human significance than the merely personal, the finest and most enduring of the principles of moral and rational inquiry into the way the world is *and* the way it ought to be, themselves so solidly constitutive of the best of America.

Even to murmur the name of those principles of inquiry is to be faced, bluntly and disobligingly, by the extent to which scholarly trust in their currency has been so deeply corroded. This in turn reminds us of the extent to which university debate on the good society has, insofar as it is still conducted at all, become severed from the conversation of the culture, in part by its fracturing into segmentary discourses of an intensely specialised kind, in part because of a formal marking off of these separate discourses as mutually incommensurable and untranslatable.

Some such tendency, perhaps inevitable in the fierce competitions of contemporary academic life, then hands itself over in abject surrender to the all-dominant systematisations of the knowledge industry and its moral economy. This is familiar to us all as managerialism and although all scholars deride its unspeakable but, alas, widely spoken gibberish and mendacities, the methodology involved pervades our lives and builds into a coherent habitation the ideology of bureaucratic authority.

I cannot prevent myself at this juncture quoting a recent circular at a big, rich (by British standards) and successful university – without attribution since my source doesn’t want to be

⁴ Mary Beard, *LRB*, 4 October 2001, p20.

fired – which went out to ‘module managers’ (otherwise course tutors) for improvements in their efficiency.

The review group met twice to evaluate L&T processes, roles and responsibilities within the centre, faculties and schools and to consider the role of Pro Deans L&T. This was followed by a focused away day, to discuss proposals and further define recommendations. A final meeting was then held to agree the recommendations set out in this document.

Discussions highlighted a number of key issues which needed to be addressed including the lack of clarity with regard to roles and responsibilities (for example: who should assess and approve the strategic case and financial viability of programmes and how should this be achieved); a need for greater strategic and market focus to programme development; the need for an overall strategic and market review of both individual programmes and wider programme portfolios; the importance of ensuring that market research and positioning are carried out at the appropriate stages during programme development; the importance of a clearly defined and understood role for school Directors of L&T as well as for the Pro Dean for L&T.

Three key dimensions are put forward:

Strategic: alignment with the strategic objectives of the University

Academic and Student Experience: academic strength and coherence; student experience

Market Viability: market positioning and demand; availability of resources; costing and pricing; risk assessment

It’s easy to lean on the solidarity of one’s right-minded audience and wait for laughs. For this is an idiolect in which not only is it impossible to tell the difference between truth and lies, it is also one incapable of distinguishing between what is serious and what is trivial. It is nonetheless potent and pervasive for it satisfies the requirements of management for knowledge which is causal and personally blank: that is to say, in the human sciences today, knowledge is increasingly divorced from persons, their commitments and their personal dedications.⁵ The function of the human sciences is therapeutic: to ensure the management and distribution of ignorance and knowledge, and to dictate the symbolic control of feelings and thought as shaped and held within the social structures of institutionalised market rationality. Insofar as the old and inner commitment to knowledge still obtains, it is confined by the impermeable boundaries of specialised discourse, and inaudible as a consequence in

⁵ I borrow much at this point from Basil Bernstein, *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, especially chapter 5.

the conversation of élite culture. That conversation, as never before, is dominated by money, and depersonalised knowledge is its currency.

The knowledge required by management comprises the distinct, non-evaluative variables of social scientific method, and these must be transferable and transmissible without dispute. Decisions, in other words, are formally ordained. They are not judgements; they do not admit strong evaluations, nor the conflicts these entail.

II

This opening characterisation of an ideology now victorious in university as in political and productive life is intended to name and limn a monstrous Nobodaddy of our time. Like all ideologies, managerialism disclaims its ideological workings and pretends its common-sensible and scientific status.

As such, it models society in its own image. But, of course, also like all other ideologies, it is constantly torn open by sharp facts and mere events which, forever denying conflict within its own systems in order to accommodate and overcome conflict outside (the ‘march of globalisation’), the managers revise and suppress in order to vindicate their claims to productive efficiency.

It is thus and thus that democracy and capitalism have written their new treaty since 1989 and that amazing opening of a new era. The management of assent has pushed to the outer limits all the plausible versions of dissidence, rendering them ineffectual either because of their sheer unintelligibility (for example, literary and philosophic theory) or because of utter irrelevance (for example, the dying spasms of socialism). The new inflammability of old nationalism, in the USA and worldwide, has sorted happily enough with the treaty between democracy and capitalism for it has directed attention, above all by way of its press and political television, towards such self-confirming, morally vacuous qualities as national pride, patriotic fervour, chauvinism, political independence; its public relations officers are the hooligans and tosspots of ‘heritage’, ritualism, and of a willed blindness towards the lived experience of other people.

I approach my imperial theme: the connection between the idea of a university and the active presence of an intelligent national press. In 1918, speaking in Munich, Max Weber⁶ gave one of his grandest and most comprehensive lectures on contemporary society. 'Politics as a vocation' was written as his country ground slowly and terribly towards defeat in a four-year war which left the supposedly victorious nations, in Europe at least, in no better case than the defeated. Politics had failed utterly in its business to bring reason and reconciliation to nations in a condition of high disagreement and dudgeon. Once the politicians had allowed things to drive themselves over the edge into warfare, they had proved even less courageous and imaginative in allowing matters to become worse and worse, betraying the trust of millions doing the fighting and about to die, and stoking the self-righteous hatreds of patriots and militarists who were safe at home and could go on living.

As Weber spoke, revolution had taken place in Russia and was inconclusive in Germany. Yet he addressed the condition of politics with an impressive calm as well as authority. He announced the advent of a new social part to play, that of professional politician, and he weighed up the differences between the different versions of such a figure, among them the boss-figure, the *condottiere*, the public-spirited, class-interested wealthy man, and those people passionate for politics whose very propertylessness put them outside the pull of self-interestedness in the economic order of things.

Democracy itself teaches every politician, in each of these guises, to be a demagogue, and each must therefore be at least a sufficient orator; the practice of politics in 1918, yet more so throughout the rest of the century, was formalised as an endless succession and exchange of *speeches*: speeches written before they were spoken, spoken in order to be summarised, analysed, criticised by journalists, that other section of the political class without whom the clamour of speechifying under bright lights and in order to do and win the deals cannot be carried on.

The conductors of this endless relaying, broadcasting, negotiating and (in a strict sense) posturing are the political journalists. Weber salutes their entry on to the stage of modern politics in these words:

⁶ Max Weber, 'Politics as a vocation' in *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*, ed and intro H H Gerth and C Wright Mills. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948.

In common with all demagogues and, by the way, with the lawyer and the artist, the journalist shares the fate of lacking a fixed social classification. The journalist belongs to a sort of pariah caste, which is always estimated by 'society' in terms of its ethically lowest representative. Hence the strangest notions about journalists and their work are abroad.

It remains true that journalists have no very settled place in the social structure. A handful – attain celebrity and the colossal rewards that celebrity had won for itself by the century's end. Mostly, however, journalism is the name of a profession celebrated less for celebrity and more for a unique mixture of raffishness and glamour, drunkenness and the kind of knowledge usually classified as being on the inside, cynicism and the caustic freedoms it confers, recklessness, discretion, strange working hours, even stranger friends, courage and cowardice.

Yet Weber goes on to say, lightly but firmly, that

A really good journalistic accomplishment requires at least as much 'genius' as any scholarly accomplishment, especially because of the necessity of producing at once and on order ... It is almost never acknowledged that the responsibility of the journalist is far greater, and that the sense of responsibility of every honourable journalist is, on the average, not a bit lower than that of the scholar, but rather, as the war has shown, higher. This is because, in the very nature of the case, irresponsible journalistic accomplishments and their often terrible effects are remembered.

It is a striking tribute as well as a quite new formulation of this novel social role, set to become at once magnetically attractive and repulsive to four generations of young men and (after 1970 or so) one generation of young women.

Its leading figures, even now, look miles away from the anaesthetic conventions of the manager. Naturally, we know much about the tyrannical vagaries of the abominable Press Lords, from the Great Caliph, William Randolph Hearst, via Colonel Robert Rutherford McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune*, Lords Northcliffe and Rothermere in Britain, to William Paley of CBS, Rupert Murdoch of everywhere. But caprice and impulsiveness have hardened since the 1960s; rulers of media empires, fewer and fewer as democracy itself attenuates, have become indifferent to *anything* but money and power. For owners, and the corporation logo into which their faces melt, are trying, with a mad exultation, to win control over a

headlong, headless juggernaut. Their industry is the manufacture of news, and like academic knowledge-makers, they not only need the complicity of political power, they seek also to render the knowledge they purvey (the news) routinely amenable to the smoothnesses of production and distribution. Capitalism no doubt has demanded a closer fit with democracy; its complex management cannot afford too many contradictions in the system.

All this is not to say that the free circulation of opinions has become inhibited; rather, that those opinions shall cover, with a brave show of competition, only that 360 degree circle of opinions approved in a strange digestive passage through the ruminative stomachs of the political rulers, the owners of media, and their reflux interpreters, the commentators.

A different history made, some 60 years ago, for an unrecognisably different fit between the management of production and the recalcitrance of democratic values. One way of bringing out the difference is to turn up the journalism of Martha Gellhorn as she arrived at Dachau in May 1945 and spoke at length to a prisoner doctor, six feet tall and weighing less than a hundred pounds, about the “unusual” medical experiments by the Nazis: “They wished to see how long an aviator could go without oxygen, how high in the sky ... so they had a closed car from which they pumped the oxygen. It is a quick death,” he said. “It does not take more than about fifteen minutes, but it is a hard death”.

After a few little anecdotes like that, Gellhorn goes on:

We have all seen a great deal now; we have seen too many wars and too much violent dying; we have seen hospitals, bloody and messy as butcher shops; we have seen the dead like bundles lying on all the roads of half the earth. But nowhere was there anything like this. Nothing about war was ever as insanely wicked as these starved and outraged, naked, nameless dead. Behind one pile of dead lay the clothed healthy bodies of the German soldiers who had been found in this camp. They were shot at once when the American Army entered. And for the first time anywhere one could look at a dead man with gladness.⁷

She can write as beautifully as she does because of her confidence in the exact match between her prose, her feelings and the facts, and between all those and her readership in *Collier's* magazine.

⁷ Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, p184.

It was easier to live in and with the fit between democracy and just warfare. By the time we reach the tale dramatised in that excellent recent film, *Goodnight and Good Luck*, Ed Murrow and Fred Friendly had to advertise at their own expense the two programmes they had made about the shameful licence to bully citizens in public granted to Senator Joseph R McCarthy. They cost Murrow and Friendly fifteen hundred dollars twice at 1953 rates, CBS being slightly troubled that resisting the senator's robust anti-Communism might cost them audience share.

It didn't, as it happened, and Murrow spoke his coda at the end of one programme in terms which address with wonderful piercingness the present, and painfully remind us how hard it is to speak now in the same accents, calmly warning the people to mind their history well, and to guard as their common good, and not the technical mystery of lawyers, the unmistakable precepts of their great Constitution.

We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. We must remember always that accusation is not proof and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law. We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men, nor from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate, and to defend causes that were for the moment unpopular.⁸

It is no accident that the leading figures of the spectacle-making industry themselves become stars of society. They offer to mirror us to ourselves; we accept the offer and appoint them to celebrity. This is plainly apparent from the earliest days of Hollywood. But Hollywood (in its self-image) was 'non-political'; it has never understood that its non-politicality is a fraud.

The politics of the present is charged with envy, cast by publicity, and impelled by attribution. This does not mean that its principal actors are all frauds and its audience all gulls. People watch the action more or less sardonically, more or less complicitly, because that is what there is. To be chosen by publicity is acknowledged to be a random business, hope feeds envy, one may be chosen oneself. No one can be indifferent to celebrity. The energies which impel the show are ours; we attribute importance to the leading actors. Without us the show cannot go on.

⁸ Norman Finkelstein, *With Heroic Truth: the life of Edward R Murrow*. New York: Clarion Books, 1997, p11.

There are signs in the day-to-day conduct of Ed Murrow's journalism that he understood these things, but saw it as his avocation to transcend his own celebrity by turning people's gaze away from himself towards the content of political action.

Murrow took for granted that congruence of his moral vision with that of his people. But what was granted had its limits. He warned but never cajoled, and his good manners (politeness being a deep matter in politics), shared with his audience, bound him and them in a common understanding.

Television debate is the context not the text of politics. In 1968 immediately after his escape from the Siege of Hue, Walter Cronkite bore his famous witness to his own belief that it was time the United States withdrew from Vietnam. He was able, in his one departure on-screen from the iron principle that the television anchorman keep any dissenting opinion to himself, to fold his listeners into the comity of reason, and turn controversy into good sense.

I said: 'To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion ... It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out, then, will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honourable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.'⁹

No less famously, Lyndon Johnson heard him out, switched off the set, and said to his staff who were present, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America". Middle America, nearly forty years later, is more likely to resonate to Rush Limbaugh or Bill O'Reilly than to the vacant airwave once occupied by Cronkite.

III

Something has happened to America and the voices of its journalists ... something has gone wrong with the polity itself ... No journalist today could find and speak from so calmly that seat in the grand circle which is also a stance struck on the stage. The best journalists of today – briefly exemplified in a moment – still make appeal to the imaginary support of the

⁹ Walter Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997, pp257-8.

first person plural, but the force of that ‘we’ is spent. What Tom Wolfe, along with his unremitting condescension, dubbed “the new journalism”,¹⁰ turned out to be the reporter’s tale from the lower depths, making no call upon the force of ‘we’, seeking rather – as Norman Mailer so finely put it in *The Armies of the Night* – to turn history into a novel.

In these new circumstances, alike in Europe and North America, where the *grand récit* of democratic advance and equal economic progress has broken up, the rare journalist with the canonical attributes of moral conscience, literary ambition and public standing is conduit for two currents, both irresistible, flowing through her or him. The first is the appetite and energy for the story, the second the high tension of political solidarity.

And yet, outside the crazed certainties of evangelical or neo-conservative phone-in radio, nobody can tell what the story is, nor make out, in the moral murk of the day, whereabouts a decent solidarity may be made to stick. The heroic journalist (what his or her managers at Associated Press now call their “consultant analysts”) must live within, and record as best they may, the *rivenness* of political action, the radically divergent potentials of its ordinary condition. “Follow the money”, Deep Throat told Woodward and Bernstein, but if you do, as the hapless inadequacy of the reports from New Orleans showed last September, you walk into the hard ruthlessness and unimaginative indifference of a new, international ruling class, and its confidential euphemists, the PAs. After such a collision, as Joan Didion tells us, all the journalist-artist can do is take the shock but take it obliquely; let the images work by the violence of their juxtaposition, sure – polished dining tables set with cut glass and damask napkins alongside a corpse-dump in Salvador; for the rest, skip on solidarity, even on indignation, affect detachment, the necessary affectations, as she almost puts it herself, “of living a life in which the major cost was memory”.¹¹ We all learn a style at these edges, where we can say what we like to ourselves, standing on some street corner of our minds, while in front of us people we may think of as the enemy do what they do on behalf of the daily triumph of the pig and the rat.

Joan Didion is the name to honour for turning this familiar kind of personal desolation at the facts of political life into a style. It may not be much of a help, but it’s what she can incomparably do with what life has done to her.

¹⁰ In his anthology of that name edited with E W Johnson, London: Picador, 1975.

¹¹ Joan Didion, *Democracy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984, p70.

Desolation mingled with a brief contemptuousness is the style she brings to politicians and their sycophants. This is not to say that she puts on any of the glad populist rags of the familiar mountebanks of faith, who feed off politicians with the thrills of damnation. In a lecture given at the New York Public Library, she spoke at once affectingly and bitingly of audiences she had addressed, who had proved quicker than her to recognise

... that even then, within days after the planes hit, there was a good deal of opportunistic ground being seized under cover of the clearly urgent need for increased security. These people recognised even then, with flames still visible in lower Manhattan, that the words ‘bipartisanship’ and ‘national unity’ had come to mean acquiescence to the administration’s preceding agenda – the imperative for further tax cuts, the necessity for Arctic drilling, the systematic elimination of union protection, even the funding for the missile shield – as if we had somehow missed noticing the recent demonstrations of how limited, given a few box cutters and the willingness to die, superior technology can be.¹²

It is a prevalent theme in the unaccompanied suites she has been writing for years about her country. In her scornfully titled and savagely written essays, ‘Political pornography’ (the best-selling author of which proves to be, no less, Bob Woodward) and ‘Vichy Washington’,¹³ she sets out an informal and clinching anthropology of contemporary political journalism. She presents it as a form of socially ratified mindlessness, the rehearsal of slogans of opinion which are so endlessly repeated that they become believed. Hence, a few years ago, the ‘disconnect’ (the local cant term) between what the satanic versifiers of Washington journalism had certified as the just fate of President Clinton and the general public tolerance of what Didion calls “the familiar predatory sexuality of the provincial adolescent” as identified in high school.

What all the prating about the ‘disconnect’, the high moral frenzy into which leading commentators, named and quoted by Didion, worked themselves up, utterly obscured was that there had been an attempt, planned and pursued, to unseat the President by informal *coup d’etat*. This was the story journalists should have told; it was widely discussed as plausible, and it was brushed aside.

¹² Joan Didion, ‘Fixed opinions on the hinge of history’, *New York Review of Books*, 16 January 2003.

¹³ First appearing in the *New York Review*, reprinted in her *Political Fictions*. New York: Vintage, 2001.

Less than a decade later, Didion finds the polity in even more marked deterioration. After 9/11, there might have been a moment, as copies of the *Quran* and books on American foreign policy were sold so copiously, when “political leadership, intelligentsia and media” might have enabled the democracy to undertake the serious deliberations which Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson stipulate for its health. But the moment vanished, as Didion tells us, in all the frightful nonsense about ‘moral clarity’ and ‘resolve’, and the supposition that mere repetition (“I’ve said in speech after speech,” as the President put it) makes the case.

For the case has indeed been made by and for those who count. All that is then needed is the unargued confirmation of the appropriate columnists in and out of the *Situation Room*, the hospitable offices of *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and the regimental buglers at *New Republic*, *Weekly Standard*, *Commentary* and the *National Interest*.

Didion splits her journalism between a sardonic chronicling of national self-deception in the Press and on TV, and the terrible tales she brings back from historical actuality in Miami or Central Park or California. The gap between the two it would be the duty of a virtuous polity to close. That it stretches wider is perhaps explained but not excused by a bare paragraph in Didion’s self-concealing sort-of-autobiographical return to California in 2003:

As recently as 1993, eighty-two thousand acres in California were still planted in alfalfa, a low-value crop requiring more water than was then used in the households of all thirty million Californians. Almost a million and a half acres were planted in cotton, the state’s second largest consumer of water, a crop subsidized directly by the federal government. Four hundred thousand acres were planted in rice, the cultivation of which involves submerging the fields under six inches of water from mid-April until the August harvest, months during which, in California, no rail falls. The 1.6 million acre feet of water this required (an acre foot is roughly 326,000 gallons) was made available, even in drought years, for what amounted to a nominal subsidized price by the California State Water Project and the Central Valley Project, an agency of the federal government, which, through the commodity-support program of the Department of Agriculture, also subsidized the crop itself. Ninety percent of this California rice was glutinous medium-grain Japonica, a type not popular in the United States but favored in both Japan and Korea, each of which banned the import of Californian rice. These are the kinds of contradictions on which Californians have tended to founder when they try to think about the place they come from.¹⁴

¹⁴ Joan Didion, *Where I Was From*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003, pp25-6.

Didion's voice, dry, barely inflected, painfully matter-of-fact, brimming with nameless feelings, is representative enough. She often says 'we'. But she is as lonely as a poet, as 'the Man Against the Sky', as 'The Palm at the End of the Mind'.

She cannot tell us what to do on behalf of the beloved Republic. She doesn't know. No more does Seymour Hersh, second of my moral examples in the trade.¹⁵ He is as ready a choice as Didion, both veterans. Hersh has long had unrivalled connections in Washington. His work at this end of his mighty, almost forty-year career has been to report all that he can find out of what his government knows and does about the Middle East, sometimes with government complicity, sometimes not. The *New Yorker*, hospitable as ever to the best political journalism around, leaves him to spread himself over 2,500 words, and Hersh sounds out the shakiness of the royal foundations below the factious power of the house of King Fahd. At the same time, Hersh logs the arrogant unpreparedness of all those enjoined to secure the nation's security, and the nervousness and indecision with which the nation's generals and their legalistic henchmen were so painfully learning to fight the new kind of sporadic war. Hersh's conclusions are bleakly pessimistic; he discharges a first duty of the journalist; finding little for our comfort, he discovers what we could not possibly discover for ourselves, and tells us what it is. He is faithful to his science, which is the history of the present.

Hersh ends his first volume of reports on Iraq grimly but confidently. He has no place in his idiom for the first person phrase; it's not part of his job. He just says:

As of this writing in August 2004, the Bush administration continues to wage war in Iraq by means that ensure it cannot win.¹⁶

He has amply acknowledged the inability of American intelligence to find and fix insurgent cadres which had readily enlarged themselves from three to fifteen, without losing the ability to strike at will. He is sombre about Washington's wilful isolationism, its blindness to the failure with which it is rotten, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, let alone Palestine and Israel. He concludes that "words have no meaning for this President beyond the immediate moment, and

¹⁵ The relevant pieces are collected as Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: the road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

¹⁶ Hersh (2004) pp364, 367.

so he believes that his mere utterance of the phrases [denying torture, acclaiming success] makes them real”.¹⁶

The implications of what Hersh searches out and reports concentrate strictly on the doings of government and its agenda. The duties he discharges, however, are as ready a medicine for the polity as Didion’s observation of the same gaps between the people, their rulers and their official interpreters. Hersh assumes an audience, Didion hopes for one. Either way, there’s not much to bet on. They’ve both seen a lot.

If you have seen a lot, perhaps anger at human inanity and incredulity at the arrogance and mendacity of power have habitually been mitigated. The third short allegory I take largely from the pages of the *New York Review* and the contributions of Mark Danner. Given the time, I would add to this excursus an extended tribute to the life’s work of Victor Navasky,¹⁷ above all for the many years of, first, his editorship and, subsequently, his occupation of the office of publisher at the head of that indomitable weekly, *The Nation*. It would be a celebration of journalistic work shaped into a life and given its beautiful shapeliness by the lived virtues of its author, Navasky himself. Thinking aloud about what has gone wrong with America, one sees a remedy and a reassurance to hand, which is Navasky’s biography. Like I F Stone, one of his friends and heroes, Navasky’s embodiment of Jefferson and egalitarianism represents a golden, glowing thread in the tapestry of American political journalism.

It glows, as it does, however, by being earthed in the known, small vein of radical culture. Its tiny, sweet voice is inaudible below the megaphones. The heteroglossiac voice of the great *New York Review of Books* is more piercing even if, however much it implores the power elite, it has not yet succeeded in calling the nation back to its great principles.

Nonetheless, both in the USA and across the globe, the *New York Review* speaks in an always plain, always good, sometimes beautiful prose, its quality assured by the faultless ear and high principles of Robert Silvers and his colleagues, of what is best in the American inheritance.

These latter abstractions – ‘principle’, ‘inheritance’, even ‘American’ as noun or adjective – are become terms filthy with dishonest use. So it is a pleasure and a terror to find them kept

¹⁷ Victor Navasky, *A Matter of Opinion*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005.

clean and shining by the *Review*'s scrupulous attention to context and studied diminution of volume.

In such company, Mark Danner's journalism across the last four or five years is exceptional in its coolness with extremely overheated materials, in particular the dreadful reports from Abu Ghraib prison, its bitter juices (quoted from a young Iraqi: "I always knew the Americans would bring electricity back to Baghdad. I just never thought they'd be shooting it up my ass"¹⁸); its tensed incredulity (faced by a detail in General George R Fay's report on Abu Ghraib about a computer screensaver with an image of "naked detainees stacked in a pyramid").

Danner notes, as Chomsky did in the pages of the *Review* forty years ago, the dreadful damage done to political language itself – 'enhanced interrogation techniques' meaning torture and so forth – as well as the much stranger elocutionary spasms of the President when with insolent self-confidence he dispatches the certainties of shaming and disgraceful conduct 'on his watch' with flat and irrelevant assertion. (He is replying to a rather blunt question from a *Financial Times* reporter).

President Bush. Look, I'm going to say it one more time. Maybe I can be more clear. The instruction went out to our people to adhere to law. That ought to comfort you. We're a nation of law. We adhere to laws. We have laws on the books. You might look at these laws and that might provide comfort for you.

Danner is left, as so many Americans are left as they contemplate their country, with a mixture of horrified anger and deep apprehension. These are not ingredients out of which one can make strong, popular and democratic journalism.

IV

There is certainly any amount of strong and popular journalism about. Rush Limbaugh's show – "I have a talent on loan from God. Rush Limbaugh. A man. A legend. A way of life"¹⁹ - according to *Media Week* generates well over a billion dollars annually in revenue

¹⁸ Mark Danner, 'Abu Ghraib: the hidden story', *New York Review of Books*, 7 October 2004.

¹⁹ Quoted by Michael Massing, 'The end of laws?' *New York Review*, 1 December 2005.

and is carried by hundreds of local stations. His weekly audience is fourteen million. Around him the macabre dance led by Gordon Liddy, Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly at Fox News and their cable show *Hannity and Colmes*, Matt Drudge, pays its delirious homage to the health of America, its wholesome values, its upright carriage and righteous prosecution of the war on terror, its only blemish the rich, craven and perfidious liberals.

The relation of this hysteria to the everyday experience and domestic significance of 260 million Americans is fractured, occasional, probably superficial. Journalists and historians write perforce of the mood of a country, but it is an unrewarding and inaccurate business. The British intellectual Raymond Williams used to write of predominant "structures of feeling"²⁰ in given cultures at given moments, and this admits of greater precision, but he readily conceded that the evidence can only be documentary, and that one cannot judge lives according only to what people read, watch or listen to.

Yet we have to try; try to grasp and hold sufficient of the entity that America undoubtedly is, constant and visible from Bullhead City to Amherst, from Billings, Montana to Fayetteville. Whether the foreigner travels by air or car, wherever one arrives, it is still overwhelmingly and without qualification, America one arrives in. And America, with the directness and simplicity Henry James saw as her charm and her weakness, translates immediately out of all one sees on the awful television, on Main Street, in shanty town or through the gates of the gated community, into these following grim social statistics.

American chief executives are paid, on average, 475 times the average income of their employees. The comparative figures are 24 in Britain and 15 in France.²¹ 45 million Americans lack any health insurance. The USA stands twenty-sixth in the international table of infant mortality. America has eight prisoners in jail for every one European, and executes as many of them as China and Saudi Arabia. The paid annual holidays of its workers varies between four and ten days, as compared with twenty-five in France and twenty-seven in Germany (meanwhile French workers, demonstration marches and Senator Miller notwithstanding, produce more per hour than American ones). Finally, twenty per cent of Americans live in poverty as compared with five per cent of the British,²² and the world-menacing rough beast of US debt now stands at \$3.3 billion dollars and is enlarging daily.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, pp64-88.

²¹ Figures from Robin Blackburn, *Banking on Death or Investing in Life: the history and future of pensions*. London: Verso, 2002, Table 3.2.

These figures are quoted with no relish. They may presage a new-old and rival version of a superpower as emerging from the shapeless committees of the EU, but that is not the point. In themselves, they speak ill of democracy. Grotesque inequalities of wealth are the antinomy of democracy, as it has been the point of two-and-a-half centuries of democratic struggle and advance to contend.

It has been tellingly argued that democracy moves through a parabola, first of mounting development and then of decline.²³ The peak years of the parabola were those succeeding the vast confrontation between mid-twentieth century democracies and the totalitarian oppositions of Fascism and Stalinism. After that victory, citizenship on the part of a newly demobilised people was vigorously participative. Since that twenty-five year peak, the mass persuasion industry has come to its present omnipotent incarnation; pressure groups have replaced class politics as their class bases dissolve and reform in unpredictable ways; liberal criticism is liberally administered, especially by broadsheet newspapers, but has only shadowy party political allegiance; above all, the radical individualisation of persons and their transfiguration into monad consumers, isolated intelligences, retrainable workers-for-as-long-as-the-job-lasts, disposable or temporary spouses, lovers, parents, friends, has turned politics into a non-democratic because non-communal form of life. In such a society there can be no discussion of the common good, because there is no communal forum for envisioning it.

Certainly there is ample objection to the various versions of this state of affairs, and widespread agreement that such is the case. The American churches, the universities, countless and admirable kinds of social movement actively seek to reconstitute little local centres of civil society. But every connotation of the mass tendencies of feeling and identity is antipathetic to all such activities, and riding this tidal wave of history is the key *social* role (strongly and socially defined as it is) of the *individual*, everywhere obstructing the remaking of civility in anything like the old terms.

In these circumstances, politics becomes merely the arena in which to claim rights and allocate blame, and politicians alternate between the hollowed-out character of the celebrity

²² Figures taken assortedly from *Social Trends 2002*, London: HMSO, 2003; Tony Judt 'Europe vs America', *NYR*, 10 February 2005; *Comparative Social Statistics in the European Union*, Paris: OECD, 2004.

²³ By Colin Crouch, in *Coping with Post-Democracy: Fabian Ideas 527*, London: Fabian Society, 2000.

and a useful but short-lived part on stage as scapegoat. When once a victim leaves the scene, his (and it mostly is *his*) errors or misdemeanours are thought of as ab- or re-solved.

However little a people may want to be distracted from their private pleasures and worship, they have allowed themselves to slide a debilitatingly long way down the other side of the democratic parabola. At such a point, oligarchic rule must supervene and the tubers of what E P Thompson once called (of Mrs Thatcher's rule) "vegetable Fascism" begin to flourish. There is a familiar charge list of its beginnings. It comprises the steady and shameless march of partisanship into the legislature, the promulgation of tax cuts for the benefit of the super-rich, the attack on the welfare insurance of the poorer classes, the pawning of a future without American savings to whichever foreign banks, mostly Chinese, will hold dollars of increasingly doubtful value, and, most reckless of all, there is the utter disregard of the terrible menace of a natural world finally turning against the piratical extraction of its resources and the poisoning of its atmosphere. These shocking irresponsibilities are however held off on the part of most of us by an understandable sense of the individual's immeasurable *distance* from signs of the times ('what can I do?'), a helplessness compounded by the historical curiosity of the sentiments as formed under contemporary capitalism.

One instance of this holding of political things at a distance serves to underline Mark Danner's incredulity at what distanced politics will tolerate. In a remarkable trawling of a series of public websites,²⁴ Ed Harriman has discovered,²⁵ to pick almost at random, that:

- i) \$1.5 billion dollars in \$100 bills were handed over to a branch of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq by the UN Oil for Food Programme. There is no record of its disbursement.
- ii) A further \$8.8 billion passed through new Iraqi ministries while Paul Bremer was in charge. It is unaccounted for.
- iii) The Halliburton Corporation was grossly overpaid for the gasoline it was importing into Iraq from Kuwait. US forces paid \$1.57, Iraqi civilians \$2.64.
- iv) A Halliburton subsidiary charged the Airborne \$73 million for caravans when the army could have built barracks for half the price. It charged \$88 million for meals never served to US troops. To date, the subsidiary has been paid \$10 billion for its quartermastering in Iraq.

²⁴ US House of Representatives Government Reform Committee Minority Office - link: www.democrats.reform.house.gov. US General Accountability Office – link: www.gao.gov. Defense Contract Audit Agency – link: www.dcaa.mil. International Advisory and Monitoring Board – link: www.iamb.info. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction – link: www.sigir.mil.

²⁵ 'Where has all the money gone?' *London Review of Books*, 7 July 2005.

- v) US agents in the field handed out cash with which to buy construction contracts from Iraqi companies and win local support. They were under no orders as to their accountability. One agent's account was overstated by \$2.8 million. \$23 million was given to another agent, only \$6.3 million of which was accounted for. Two others, handing in their paperwork on the way to the airport, never accounted for \$750,000 each.

These astonishing accounts of unaccounted and unaccountable acts of piracy are there for public access (and accessible, I should add, in a manner quite unthinkable in the secretiveness of the British state). Even in the cautiously optimistic examples of deliberative democracy praised by Guttmann and Thompson, this kind of topic, indeed (as they acknowledge) almost any decision by the present administration, may be circuitously or untruthfully justified, but is persisted in anyway. The puzzle is to explain this perfunctoriness and the public ratification or indifference which permits it. I fear that I can only attempt this perfunctorily in the remaining time.

V

The explanation lies somewhere in that social theory of the 'civil affections' which has lain pretty well unrevised since David Hume wrote his *Dissertation on the Passions* (Kant being mostly concerned to achieve victory over them). In Hume's day, the passions, whether 'calm' (Hume's word) or agitated, are figured out *after* their advent. They are abruptly present, and unlike ideas or sensations, represent nothing else.²⁶ They direct reason, in virtue of their irresistible force as motives, to make judgements and compel action. In the social order of Hume's 18th century, all passions are reciprocal. Each class solicited the seemingly passions of its immediate rivals, whether above or below them. Thus, pride exacted humility, condescension won gratitude, while wild enthusiasm made men and women into crackpots – or as Hume himself puts it in *The History of England*, "fifth monarchy men, Anabaptists, antinomians, the very dregs of the fanatics ... all fanatics being consecrated by their own fond imaginations ..."²⁷

²⁶ I have been much helped here by Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

²⁷ David Hume, *History of England*, vol V. London, 1830, p357.

The Romantics bade goodbye to all that. Wordsworth's 'impulse from a vernal mood' or the self-subjugating and ardent blaze of passion which sweeps through Verdi's *La Traviata* were their own vindication; the fire of feeling was the thing to live off and for.

The history²⁸ of the feelings from the second half of the 19th century up to the present is, at least in Europe and North America, a narrative directed by what Norbert Elias calls, in his great classic, the civilising process, and more recently what Philip Rieff in *his* classic calls "the triumph of the therapeutic".

Hume's passions have been transfigured into modern feelings. They no longer provide motives for which reason seeks reasons issuing in action. They become what Henry James, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Jean Renoir II, Billy Wilder, Saul Bellow (to name some hostages) helped turn them into. They become "a patterned regularity of dispositional and occurrent feeling, judgement and action."²⁹

Different rationalities inhabit and are contrived out of contrasting historical moments. Our own rationalities are critically limited by the acutely limited space available for meaningful political and physical action. This constriction is hard to bear alongside an American cultural narrative of a more or less Humean kind in which passions should direct righteous action, the wonderful, stirring righteousness of John Ford and John Sturges. Hence the powerful vacuity of those banners at President Bush's campaign meetings in 2004 – 'Strength!' 'Leadership!' 'Character!' 'Integrity!' To call these ideological is to prefer the sociology of sanctimony to the metaphysics of meaning. Knowledge about the flaky composition of the President's character gave way to the necessity, as Clifford Geertz so all-inclusively has it, of "bridging the emotional gap between things as they are and as one would have them be".³⁰ Geertz goes on to argue that America would not be the America it is "without the existence of popular symbols charged with the emotions of a pervasive social predicament", and then, flatly,

The function of ideology is to make an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly grasped.³⁰

²⁸ I follow here Alistair McIntyre 'Practical Rationalities as Social Structures', *Irish Philosophical Journal*, 4, 1, 1987, reprinted in *A MacIntyre Reader*, Kelvin Knight (ed). Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1998.

²⁹

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, 'Ideology as a cultural system', *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Hutchinson, 1975, pp205, 219.

The President has brought this off, by way of the ceaseless, intelligent pedagogy of his court necromancers, by being himself persuaded. A bare majority of his electorate, a third of his people endorse the same belief because their own feelings of uncertainty about the world are held by them not in common and in relation to a common weal or good, but in their social identity as precious individuals. Unable to attach such intransitive and catchall slogans as 'Liberty', 'values' or 'moral clarity' to meaningful judgement and its corollary action, they see no alternative to sheltering whatever little flames of significance flare up in their souls and which must, for life's sake, be kept alight. They then fasten them not to procedures of rational inquiry, but to the emblems which best settle in the matrix of their feelings.

This may lead to an American Fascism, as Philip Roth and Richard Rorty, in their different ways, both speculate.³¹ It may only be diverted by natural or economic cataclysm, greater by far than Hurricane Katrina or the Great Depression. Perhaps in no more than a rhetorical trick of conclusion, I prefer to put my faith in Stanley Cavell's Emersonian reminder³² that the ordinariness of life is its salvation; that Americans have always trusted domesticity over politics; that the thing to remember about the sublime is its humanness; that the magnificence of the constitution is its power of restitution; that, in a homily about journalism addressed to professors and students, the only commendable philosophy is the minute, unfinishable investigation of our world as made by own words. It's not much to bet on, but it's all I can think of just now.

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³¹ Rorty in the London *New Statesman*, eight years ago: 'The American road to Fascism', 8 May 1998. Roth in his new novel, *The Plot Against America*. Cape: London, 2004.

³² In *This New yet Unapproachable America*. Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989.