

## Nullity in New Orleans

Garry Wills remarked that the best parallel to Dan Quayle is not Tom Eagleton, dropped from the McGovern ticket in 1972 because he had once been treated for depression by electrotherapy, but Barry Goldwater's partner on the presidential trail in 1964, a nonentity called William Miller. No better illustration of the matchless cynicism, self-delusion and stupidity of George Bush and his strategists can be found than the choice of Quayle, starting with the idea that his "good looks" might corral women voters, and his youth the boomers. "He has about as much charm as an old Kotex box," snarled one long-distance telephone operator when quizzed on Quayle's allure.

The Quaylestorm first arose around his use of wealth and influence to join the National Guard, thus injecting a class issue into the campaign with an urgency Jesse Jackson might envy. But there's hardly a facet of his background and political career that does not call for as unsparing scrutiny. Here is no whimsical apparition of the ultraright, but the genetic, intellectual and financial consequence of a long-term conservative project. The Pulliam newspaper chain, of which Quayle is an heir, first nourished, through the *Arizona Republic*, the political career of Barry Goldwater. Close to the family was the Indiana family of the Mannions, *pere et fils*. The elder Mannion was a founder of the John Birch Society and the son's confirmation as federal judge was managed on the Senate floor by young Dan. No more servile a functionary of the Defense Department can be found on Capitol Hill.

A Pacifica reporter asked Quayle in his first disastrous press conference about his involvement in contragate, given his employment of fair-haired boy Rob Owen as an aide. (Owen, you may recall, was a mule for contra slush money, spoke frankly of contra leaders' low moral worth and read out to the Iran-contra committee a dreadful poem he had addressed to Oliver North.) Quayle replied tautly that the question was "off-base." But in fact his office was just such a crossroads of contra conspiracy. In Volume One of the Iran-contra source documents published by Congress (that I had occasion to cite in this column some months ago on the topic of NBC's flackery of the contras), Jack Terrell describes in a memoir how he went to Quayle's Senate office to discuss his plans to be a contra mercenary with another Quayle staff person, Joel Lisker. Absurdly, Lisker subsequently became a senior staffer on the Iran-contra committee.

## The Return of the Repressed

Quayle's tarnished credentials as a man prepared to live up to his own vile militarist ideals somewhat threw into the shadows George Bush's credentials as a war hero. The seed of this reputation was planted with the allegedly glorious circumstances of his behavior when shot down by Japanese gunfire while on a bombing run in his Grumman Avenger in September 1944. I examined the contradictions in Bush's various accounts in this space just under a year ago. Two weeks ago Chester Mierzejewski finally broke a 44-year silence in an excellent report by Alan Borg and Allen Wolper in the *New York Post*. Mierzejewski was a tail gun-

ner and spotter in a plane flying directly ahead of Bush. He saw Bush's plane being hit, probably in the engine. He says—contrary to Bush's account—that Bush's plane was "never on fire" and that "no smoke came out of his cockpit when he opened his canopy to bail out."

Mierzejewski was the best friend of one of Bush's crewmen, and says now, "I think he could have saved those lives, if they were alive. I don't know that they were, but at least they had a chance if he had attempted a water landing." And he insists that the plane looked in good enough shape for this to be done. In other words, as President Reagan likes to quote his imaginary Purple Heart recipient (though in fact the line came from an old war movie), maybe they should have ridden that one down together.

## Our Fallen Friend

Appropriately enough, Bush took the opportunity in his introduction of Dan Quayle to the world to mourn the passage of his friend Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, president of Pakistan, whose life came blessedly to an end in an air crash in mid-August.

Two things stood out immediately in U.S. media coverage of Zia's death. First, the story was being treated as an Afghanistan issue, with correspondents and reporters spending much time pondering the impact of the good general's death on the mujahedin and debating whether any potential successor will prove to be as unwavering in supporting the rebels. The lead in the *Wall Street Journal* article by Frederick Kempe on August 18 was typical: Zia's death, Kempe wrote, raised "concerns about the political stability of Washington's steadiest ally in southwest Asia and possibly threaten[ed] that country's support for the anti-Soviet resistance." Over at the networks, meanwhile, one "strategic studies expert" after another was dragged on to explain what Zia's demise meant in geopolitical terms.

Secondly, and obviously, the eulogies being delivered about the dictator, from government officials and the press, were wholly unjustified. In one of the more grotesque comments, Secretary of State Shultz called Zia "a great fighter for democracy." As we have seen, George Bush, in a comment to be expected from the man who toasted Ferdinand Marcos' love for "democracy," said Zia was "a friend of mine" and that "Pakistan and the U.S. have a very special relationship, and the loss of Gen. Zia is a great tragedy." Dukakis was equally reverential, saying he was "very saddened" and noting that the dictator was "very, very much involved with us in our effort to support the Afghanistan resistance."

These comments are perhaps understandable, as they come from representatives of the country that has been Zia's chief sponsor since he seized power in 1977. The Carter administration cut off military aid in 1979, after Zia refused to allow international inspection of Pakistan's nuclear program. Aid was resumed after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and soared during the Reagan years, with the current six-year package of \$4 billion (\$611 million this year) making Pakistan the fourth largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world and its army the seventh biggest in the world.

# ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn

The U.S. press followed the official line, portraying Zia as a man leading Pakistan toward "democracy" and lamenting the loss of a key U.S. ally. A *New York Times* editorial, awash with cliches, said that Zia was "certain it was his mission to impose unity on a fractious nation." The writer also said the general was "an effective, pragmatic bargainer" in the world of diplomacy and then weightily pondered the "post-Zia era." The *Washington Post* headlined a front-page article by John Goshko, "U.S. Sees a Continuing Transition to Democracy." Goshko implied that the Reagan administration's primary concern in Pakistan was the return of civilian rule, writing that tension between the two countries could arise if Zia's death "causes Pakistan's military leaders to halt the transition to democracy and revert to toughened repression."

Actually, this fabled "transition" to democracy was visible only to U.S. officials and reporters, as Zia arbitrarily dismissed the largely civilian government of Prime Minister Mohammed Khan Junejo on May 29 after it attempted to impinge on the military's power. He dissolved the lower house of the national assembly and the four state legislatures as well, which left the Senate as the only functioning governing body. In order to portray this action as a step toward democracy, Zia called for new parliamentary elections and said he had only acted because Junejo's government had failed to maintain law and order and enact Islamic

law.

Despite the fact that Zia has been promising a return of civilian rule from the very first days of his dictatorship, this explanation was largely swallowed by the media. The *New York Times* actually ran an editorial on June 1 endorsing Zia's dismissal of Junejo, saying that there might be real "substance in the steps he has just taken, sacking his prime minister and dissolving the National Assembly for alleged corruption, indifference to growing lawlessness and delay in transforming Pakistan into an Islamic society." The writer also said there were "encouraging signs that Gen. Zia means to let political parties play a role in the voting now due within 90 days." The *Times* must have been crushed when, shortly thereafter, Zia decreed that elections would be held in November, well outside of the 90-day limit called for by the constitution, and then again in July, when he made it clear that candidates would not be allowed to run as representatives of political parties, apparently unaware of the "encouraging signs" the *Times* had seen.

The truth is that Zia's action had little to do with "growing lawlessness" and a lot to do with his unpopularity with Junejo's government. Thus, he dismissed the government, as any self-respecting dictator would do. Zia's problems with Junejo were twofold. First, he felt that the prime minister had been too anxious to reach an accord on Afghanistan. In addition to a withdrawal of Soviet troops, Zia wanted some sort of internal settlement that would have given the mujahedin some share of power, and he felt that tack had not been sufficiently

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## Jennifer Stone unturned from her always critical task

By David Volpendesta

**W**HEN HER VOICE COMES OVER the airwaves, full-bodied and resonant, Jennifer Stone casts a spell that immediately sparks the intellect and enlivens the emotions. Not only does the movie and TV critic for KPFA (a listener-sponsored Berkeley, Calif., radio station) possess one of the most unique voices in radio, her insights into the secular religion of celluloid are as trenchant and revealing as they are heretical to her mainstream counterparts, most of whom lack her invigorating humor and the ability to situate cinema in an artistic, historical and socio-political context.

The self-effacing Stone, however, does not regard herself as any high priestess of celluloid. She's unimpressed with most of contemporary film criticism which, as she says in her new book, *Mind Over Media* (Cayuse Press, P.O. Box 9086, Berke-

ley, CA 94709), "is reduced to a sort of bitchcraft, tucked into gossip columns in the trash section of tabloids. Or worse, it becomes elitist, what Noel Coward called 'piss elegant,' confined to the state-of-the-art esoterica published in journals read only in film schools."

As she sat in the KPFA Literature and Drama office discussing her book and conceptions of cinema,

### RADIO

Stone was quick to point out that one of the basic tenets of her critical perspective is rooted in a disdain for the authoritarian and the sado-masochistic images that have become the common leitmotifs for all human relationships in the '80s. Reflecting on how these images of dominance and submission have saturated the collective mind via film, she remarked: "We have to get away from this death of the heart stuff and get back to being human

beings again."

**All over the map:** In addition to her role as film critic, Stone is also a published novelist, an actress, journalist, school teacher, mother, playwright, short-story writer, poet and essayist. Always unpredictable, Stone's next book, *Stone's Throw* (North Atlantic Books) will be a collection of literary criticism.

The one predictable thing about her is that her weekly radio show, *Mind Over Media*, is always provocative. "I came to KPFA in 1982," she said. "I was doing a piece for *Grassroots* on Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian Marxist who had been imprisoned by Sadat under Egyptian law No. 96, the law 'for the protection of values from shame.' She wrote a book called *The Hidden Face of Eve* in which she suggested that it was not good for women's physical and mental health to have their genitals cut off... I was on the air asking people to write letters to get her out of jail. She was eventually released."

As a feminist and self-described "mythomaniac," one of Stone's great critical strengths is her ability to reveal and explicate film's subtextual language. Oliver Stone's *Platoon* is a film whose cleverly occulted message she finds particularly disgusting.

"The megalomacho medal of dishonor is not hard to award these days," she writes, "as filmmakers slip deeper and deeper into the mire of mythology, leading a new generation

### To Berkeley film critic Jennifer Stone, the popular arts are a vehicle for detecting and articulating future social and political trends.

of young men to the slaughter. Only one on-air television critic noticed the real message of *Platoon*. Anne Taylor Fleming did a special report on the *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*, standing all the while in a military graveyard backed by a field of white crosses. Of course, one feminist film critic crying in the wilderness didn't stop the picture from winning an Academy Award."

**Left-wing magic:** Although film directors whose images are drenched in testosterone incite her ire, Stone, who studied acting with the legendary Uta Hagen, is not only delightfully dramatic—and always spontaneously willing to dissolve her own masks—she's also enamored of actors and their art. "One of the rules of the actor's craft is to be as a child again," she writes in *Mind Over Media*. "Actor/priest was originally the same job. The theater is left-wing magic and theology is right-wing magic."

A Berkeley-styled revolutionary in the '60s, Stone's fascination with the magic of cinema and the arts is directly related to her contempt for artifice and one of film's most insidious perversions, pornography. "Pornography is about slavery," she writes in *Mind Over Media*. "Erotica is now esoteric. It is most often the property of the elite... Misogyny is the death of the heart."

One of the ways Stone keeps her own heart alive is by being honest about who she is. Always careful to sketch in the parameters of her own personal reality in relationship to whatever film she's reviewing, she refuses to let her role as critic mask the true nature of her feelings and perceptions.

"*Shoot the Moon* chronicles the middle-class malaise which hit America in the '70s," she writes. "[Diane] Keaton and the kids are the last of their breed... [Albert] Finney is a writer who imagines, apparently,

that he can leave his wife and daughters and keep them, too. Basically he's a killer ape. Very spoiled and terminally arrogant. When his primordial violence explodes, the audience laughs from the shock. Not me. I've known males just like that one. You know, the ones who destroy what they cannot have."

The personal dimension that Stone brings to her criticism never becomes obtrusive, primarily because she does not become self-indulgent. Although she's passionately concerned with the internal life that shapes characters and artists, she does not lose sight of socio-political realities.

**Bigger pictures:** Moreover, in *Mind Over Media* she demonstrates a devastating view of the social function most critics fulfill. "In most circles, the critical faculty is suppressed, treated with suspicion, primarily because it interferes with consumerism. Consumerism is our national religion.... Our so-called critics must make their livings by accommodating the sleaze and soap opera which makes up the bulk of our popular art. Most of this material is tainted with a pornographic mind set, the mind set which believes that things and people can be had: cars, women, countries, the earth itself."

To Stone the popular arts are a vehicle for detecting future social and political trends. Captivated by classical literature and myth, both of which are constantly incorporated into her critiques, she strives to situate her subjects within their historical context.

In *Mind Over Media* she writes: "I am interested in the prosaic notion that film, like literature, is first of all historical, and tells the truth of our time in the same way Aristophanes' plays tell the truth of his day.... Marx told us that changes in the modes of production change history, and McLuhan told us that changes in the modes of communication change perception.... When I was growing up, the major mode of communication was print. Words. We made the words into pictures in our heads.... Words give us theories, concepts. Images are precepts, but powerful beyond words. They go right to the brain stem."

Part of Stone's work as a critic is to help to dissolve the hypnotic spell created by the images that initiate and perpetuate what she sees as contemporary society's all-pervading death wish. At the very least, her penetrating critiques help undermine the mindlessness of the homogenized mass media and provide an intellectual and emotional oxygen that helps sustain an often stifled culture of resistance. ■

**David Volpendesta** is co-editor of two forthcoming books: *Clamor of Innocence* (City Lights), a collection of Central American short stories, and *Homeless Not Helpless* (Canterbury Press).

Unpredictability is the one constant on Jennifer Stone's weekly radio show.



Jane Scherf