A Neocon Offers the First Geopolitical Justification for the Iraq War—Finally

by Mel Goodman

Nearly five years after the invasion of Iraq, we still have no official explanation or authoritative analysis on the reasons for the Bush administration's decision to go to war, a decision many observers consider the most profligate in more than 200 years of American foreign policy. In December 2007, I had opportunity to debate one of the administration's leading neoconservative policymakers, David Wurmser. The informal “debate” with Wurmser was organized by the late Albert Berney and attended by nearly a dozen Evergreen members who meet to discuss world affairs. The objective was to gain some insight on why George Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld chose to go to war against Iraq rather than continue the successful containment policy. Wurmser's comments were far more revealing than any information offered thus far by Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld.

Before he left the Bush administration in November 2007, Wurmser held a series of high-level positions with three of the most enthusiastic supporters of the war: Cheney, Douglas Feith, and John Bolton. As a result, he attended a series of important policy meetings in the run-up to war in March 2003. In responding to my comments on the putative reasons for going to war (i.e., weapons of mass destruction and the links between Iraq and al Qaeda), Wurmser emphasized that there was never any discussion of WMD or terrorism as a reason for going to war.

Instead, Wurmser argued that the Bush administration believed there were significant geopolitical reasons for going to war and offered a fanciful explanation that broke totally new ground. Wurmser said that Cheney, Feith, and Bolton were convinced that U.S. containment of Saddam Hussein was failing and that the controls keeping him from expanding his regional influence were “dying.” As a result, the Iraqi leader was in position to exploit the region's rising anti-Americanism and was poised to “break out” from the sanctions strategy and no-fly zones to lead a “rogue coalition of nations to expel the United States from the region” and even to “wage war against the United States.” According to Wurmser, the failure of the United Nations, and

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of multilateralism in general, made a compelling case for U.S. intervention.

Wurmser added that there was a great deal of discussion of the so-called “freedom agenda” of such academics as professors Bernard Lewis of Princeton University and Fouad Ajami of The Johns Hopkins University; Lewis and Ajami introduced the notion of “democratizing” Iraq and eventually the entire Middle East. Democratization, he maintained, was in response to Saddam Hussein’s efforts to create a movement against the U.S. role in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Wurmser added that Lewis and Ajami had taken part in policy discussions at the Department of Defense and the Department of State, where there was a consensus on the use of force to advance “American interests and American power.”

Although Wurmser offered no evidence for the presence of WMD in Iraq, he argued that the intelligence community had made the case for Iraqi WMD and dismissed the efforts of thousands of U.S. analysts and technicians who found no evidence of WMD in Iraq. He totally dismissed such agencies and departments as the Energy Department, the State Department, and even the U.S. Air Force, which dissented from the CIA’s arguments in favor of WMD in Iraq, and he totally ignored the excellent intelligence collection from Iraqi and American sources that argued against the presence of WMD in Iraq. The WMD issue, he argued, “demands more study” because, at that time, such weapons were “still there or have [had] left the country” and, in any event, “were never fully accounted for.” He absolved the White House and the National Security Council from any responsibility by disingenuously blaming secretary of state Colin Powell and undersecretary of state Richard Armitage for developing the case for WMD. Finally, he emphasized that “no one was saying there were no WMD” in Iraq and that there was no intelligence collection that contended there were no WMD. Thus, as we approach the fifth anniversary of the start of the Iraq War, there is still no evidence to determine why it was necessary to go to war and no reason to believe that history will treat the war kindly. In fact, I think we now know that the reasons to go to war against Iraq had no foundation in strategic thinking or even common sense.

Bush’s description of Iraq as the center of the war against terrorism is, in fact, a self-fulfilling prophecy. The war itself and the U.S. occupation have created the motives and conditions for terrorist actions. The war in Iraq, moreover, has meant the abandonment of the campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al Qaeda, worsening security in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Now, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are training grounds and operational bases for jihadist terrorists. The creation of a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq has created the essential conditions for an eventual Iraq-Iran alliance, which will contribute to the overall instability in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Over the past five years the Bush administration’s war in Iraq has led to great losses of American blood and treasure, and there is every reason to believe that these losses will continue for the next five years. Bush’s war also has squandered America’s moral authority, with the United States now identified the world over with torture and abuse, secret prisons, extraordinary renditions, and ghost detainees.

Finally, Bush’s support for authoritarian governments throughout the region, particularly in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, makes a mockery of the president’s promotion abroad of democracy and human rights. His failure in Iraq will dominate his presidency and, just as Vietnam determined the legacy of presidents Johnson and Nixon, the Iraq War will determine the Bush legacy. Wurmser’s specious reasoning for the onset of war provides no genuine help in ameliorating this legacy or of understanding what the Bush administration was trying to achieve. And the stubborn persistence of the Bush administration and such neocons as Wurmser to continue the war only worsens all of the problems that it has created.

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Interdisciplinarity:
Melissa Hilbish in Profile

by Leight Johnson

I didn’t know what it meant either, but read on. The word in question (see title) appeared in an email from Melissa Hilbish, director of the Center for Liberal Arts (CLA), Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Johns Hopkins University. Interdisciplinarity is not in the American Heritage Dictionary, but you can figure it out from its context below. Let me quote:

“I took fencing in college and it brought me to the whole matter of interdisciplinarity and how things in education should connect to each other. So fencing moves (thrust, parry, riposte) mirrored a chapter title in the history of Bismarckian Diplomacy I was reading.”

From our exchange of emails and an interview, several things about Melissa emerged. …Melissa majored in American Studies at Stephens College in Missouri, and she earned her Ph.D. at the University of Maryland, College Park. Besides her job as CLA director — the CLA is the mother of the Master of Liberal Arts program, Odyssey, and OSHER at JHU (us) — she teaches American studies in the MLA program.

But don’t be put off by Melissa’s degrees and titles — she comes across as a nice, easy-going person, and they’re the best kind.

• She loves teaching, and wouldn’t consider taking a job that didn’t allow her to do it.
• Her hobbies include SCUBA diving on shipwrecks, and Tai Chi.
• She has a teenage son.
• Hilbish is her maiden name as well as her married one.
• She was never a member of the Dixie Chicks (that must have been another Melissa Hilbish.)

• Even though she’s a genuine Baby Boomer, she loves Glenn Miller and was a big fan of Gunsmoke — clearly she’s a person of good taste.

And she’s an intrepid interdisciplinarian.

Metamorphosis

by Janet Heller

My granddaughter Helena Taflin spent the first sixteen years of her life in Plano, Texas, where she finished her sophomore year, last May, as a straight-A student. The school she attended was a fascinating mix of students, many of whom were from India, Thailand, and Japan. Their fathers were scientists of all stripes and, as one can imagine, the students from overseas tended to be high achievers. Plano is the home of many hi-tech companies, including that of Ross Perot, which bring to the community information technology people from all over the world.

For economic reasons there were only a handful of Mexicans and blacks in my granddaughter’s school. But as in so many affluent neighborhoods in Dallas and surrounding areas, one sees Latinos everywhere working as gardeners, housekeepers, and construction workers. My son-in-law, for example, employed a crew of men from Guatemala as house painters. They were hardworking and dependable and like him, their boss, they did not have proper immigration documents.

My granddaughter led a sweet life in Plano. She studied hard, walked her dog, cared for her bird, tried out new recipes with her widower father. With friends she went to the movies, shopped, attended school events, and during vacations took off for Colorado or the Gulf Coast. Her life was basically problem-free with the only foreseeable dilemmas being how her teeth would look once her braces were off and where to apply to college.

In January last year, my son-in-law was apprehended by ICE, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement authorities. He was jailed for six weeks in a detention
center 200 miles west of Plano and subsequently deported. Although he was a responsible and successful businessman, a tax-paying resident of Texas for twenty-five years, and a single parent, he had been unable to obtain a green card due to an arrest on marijuana charges when he was 18 and in the Israeli army. The arrest record was later expunged, but remained, as do all arrests worldwide, on Interpol.

So, when my granddaughter applied for a driver’s license, her father’s license was run and the arrest showed up on his record. Despite the fact that his story and my arrival in Plano to care for Helena was published on the front page of the March 9 edition of The Dallas Morning News, engendering much interest and sympathy, ICE sent this fifty-year-old man back to Israel.

At this moment, father and daughter are living in a small town on the West Bank, some 45 minutes from Tel Aviv. The 60-odd houses that comprise Ale Zahav sit atop a rocky hill, at 1,000 feet, surrounded by barbed wire with lovely views across valleys and olive groves to other towns, some of which are Arab villages. Their chalet style house does not have central heating but is spacious and surrounded by fruit trees. Helena’s cousin, who is her age, lives next door. The residents of the town are secular (they drive on the Sabbath) and live in this quiet spot in a world totally remote from Tel Aviv’s big-city atmosphere.

It is also a world and a half distant from the kind of life she led in Plano. In Ale Zahav, Helena and her friends ride their bikes in the neighborhood, but do not venture beyond the checkpoint manned at all times by a soldier. If they want to go into the city, someone must drive them, as there is no bus service. I am amazed at her ability to adapt to this austere existence. That she was able to bring her beloved dog with her from Plano has been a major comfort.

But Helena does love her school and, last fall, with her class, went camping in Galilee and later spent a week living on an army base with servicewomen. The latter program is mandatory. Now she is concentrating on improving her Hebrew and wondering whether she will join the Israeli Army or apply directly to college in the United States.

Her only grandparent visited her recently and felt chilled by the atmosphere on the West Bank. The presence of the Israeli military is everywhere and it leaves the visitor feeling a sense of discomfort and concern that the problems between occupier and occupied are insurmountable.

Bowen
by Janet George

Bowen is my grandson’s best neighborhood friend. I am spelling his name phonetically because Bowen is Chinese, and although Sam once wrote his name for me, I can’t remember where the “j’s” go.

Bowen is a year and a half older than Sam, but the boys get along fine and share a love of robotics, computer games, and Lego. Bowen attends a school that specializes in teaching English to children from other countries. Sam helps Bowen and his parents with the English language. He has not done so well with the grandparents.

Two years ago, Bowen, his parents and one set of grandparents came here from mainland China. I don’t know why they came, but I was surprised that the Chinese government would allow such a move. The grandparents know no English at all and are steeped in the “old ways.” They also cherish quiet and civility. One day when Sam was at Bowen’s house playing a game, he won big. Sam has a loud voice, so when he started yelling “I won! I won! I won!” the old couple thought he was becoming violent and threw him out of the house. The two sets of parents talked, and Sam, having learned to express his feelings with less vigor, is back in their good graces.

When Bowen comes to Sam’s house he often dines on pizza, chicken nuggets, hot dogs and hamburger. Sam loves anything that can be smothered in catsup. But at Bowen’s house, Sam eats what he calls “that weird food.” Bowen’s family eats only Chinese, but it is food that does
not come in little white boxes. It’s home-cooked with lots of fresh vegetables, and Sam is learning to like it.

Sometimes I hear Sam utter unintelligible expressions. “Oh, that’s Chinese” he’ll say, and proudly translate for me. He tells me facts about China and says that he dreams of going there. I have no doubt that he will realize his dream.

Sam is entering a global world with possibilities of which I am just beginning to imagine. I think back to the homogeneous neighborhood of my childhood — it was safe, comfortable, and undemanding. His school is far more diversified than mine could ever have been. Among his school friends are Haitians, Indians, Hispanics, and African-Americans, and the school faculty is also diverse.

I admit to a stubborn pessimism about this war-torn world, and despair of our ever solving the problems before us. But when I look at Sam and his buddies, and see the casual way they adjust to cultural differences, I feel some hope. I only regret that I can’t follow him into that new world; but I’m betting on him and his buddies all the way.

## Observation #1
Remember that the terms “liberal” and “conservative” are sometimes very misleading when applied to judges. While a president, a senator, or a representative may take a series of positions on issues that fit those labels, judges are more constrained. The facts of the case, the opinion, and findings of the judge and jury who decided the case at trial, the opinion and dissent in appeals before the Federal Circuit Courts or State Supreme Courts, the earlier decisions of the Supreme Court itself are all factors to be weighed in a final decision. These factors tend to constrain a justice or, at least, to modify the opinions of the Court.

We must also bear in mind that many cases coming to the highest Court do not fit neatly into a liberal or conservative mold. Congress may pass a long bill which is itself the result of compromise. The Supreme Court is later asked to interpret what the law means, and the language used by Congress is sometimes vague or even contradictory. There is no set of approved liberal or conservative norms for reading vague laws. So my first rule is: Be cautious of the labels. One final thought: What was liberal in the 18th century may be conservative in the 21st! Even worse: What was conservative in 1920 may be liberal in 2008!

## Observation #2
The Supreme Court hears about 80 cases each year. Depending on the cases chosen for actual argument, percentages of agreement and disagreement may vary significantly from year to year. Jeffry Toobin, in his recent book, *The Nine*, notes that the number of cases decided unanimously spiked to 50% in the first year that Roberts was chief, but dropped to 25% in his second
year. Statistics for one or two years prove little. Only after a more significant period are the numbers helpful, and only then can reliable inferences be drawn. During the years Rehnquist was chief, about 40% of all cases were unanimously decided.

Observation #3
A review of the internal documents now available to historians, lawyers, and political scientists reveals that there were often deep and acrimonious tensions during the years Warren Burger was chief. Relationships among the justices were often far from harmonious. Burger’s formality (some said pomposity) and his method of assigning cases (some called it unfair and punitive) exacerbated philosophical differences. Under Rehnquist, the climate changed dramatically. The justices themselves, and students of the Court also, saw a more relaxed and congenial group who “played well together,” despite sharp philosophical differences. Every indication is that this spirit continues under Chief Justice Roberts. Roberts is very bright, even brilliant, but there is no arrogance. He seems open, easy to meet, self-assuming, and fair.

Observation #4
Bear in mind that the Court does not like to declare laws passed by Congress unconstitutional. Justice Louis Brandeis famously cautioned that the Court should never reach a constitutional issue if it can be avoided. Cases, he observed, should be decided on other grounds if possible. While the Supreme Court does not always follow this sage advice from the past, Justices are well aware that declarations of unconstitutionality have the effect of taking important questions away from the people and their elected representatives. Of course, there are cases where the issues truly demand constitutional solutions, but the justices tend to be wary of such an exercise. It is not a surprise that important and controversial constitutional cases are often close, often 5–4.

Observation #5
Be ready for more fireworks in the future, but from the Senate. Several justices are likely to retire after the next election. This year, Justice Stevens will be 88, and Justice Ginsburg 75. Justices Scalia and Kennedy are already in their 70s, and Justice Burger will be 70 in August.

If a Democrat is the next president, Republican senators will not forget the 22 votes cast against Roberts, or the 44 cast against Alito, although neither was an “in your face” nominee. No matter which party wins the presidency, Democrats will still almost certainly control the Senate. Nominees perceived to be against abortion as a legal right will face antagonistic opposition. Acrimony will drive the nomination process for the entire foreseeable future. While everyone may regret it, a polarized electorate elects a polarized Senate, and that means polarized debate, with lots of bitter name-calling.

Observation #6
There is a relatively modern phenomenon called “public interest law.” Groups interested in particular causes sometimes recognize that their position can be enacted into law only at the cost of lengthy and expensive delay. The ordinary democratic process of convincing two houses of Congress and a president (or, in a state, two houses of a legislature and a governor) can sometimes be short-circuited by a lawsuit. To give an example, education advocates may sue a state for additional school revenues.

Of course, test cases are not new in American law, but certain types of these cases may involve the courts in highly emotional and controversial political issues. While Americans generally believe in the abstract proposition that courts should not be political, both the left and the right regularly bring lawsuits which demand a political judicial involvement. An easy prediction: The suits will continue, and there is little the courts can do to evade it.

Observation #7
Finally, remember that press coverage of the Court is both partisan and unsophisticated, with a few notable exceptions like The New York Times and The Washington Post. Often, the coverage reports facts without context, or makes a caricature of justices with a “good guys, bad guys” point of view — as a result, public opinion about the Court is often poorly informed. A good rule of thumb: Distrust any article which gives only one side of a controversial issue. A second rule of thumb: If an article gives only the results of a case, and does not give the reasoning of the opinion, distrust the account.
There are unlikely to be any sharp turns in the immediate future. In the interim, these observations may throw light on what the Court does.

Exercise Tiger

by Stan Panitz

Reveille sounded 30 minutes earlier than usual on April 27, 1944. It was still dark because we were on double British summer time*. Something was in the air. The officers assembled in the ward room at 0630, earlier than normal. Captain Doyle appeared a moment later and with a wave of the hand, asked us to sit.

We were nine officers and a crew of 135 on LST 515 at anchor in Plymouth, England. Captain John Doyle, Lt. USN, said, “Gentlemen, we hoist anchor at 0830 and sail northeast to rendezvous at point T-4 in the English Channel with LSTs (landing ship tanks) 507, 289, 531, 511, 496, and 58 at 0400 just outside Brixham. We are the task force lead ship. You all know your duties so there is nothing more to say except to remember to hit the sack early and keep your clothes on, because a radio report has alerted us to the possibility of E-boats in the area.”

We had learned that the German fast motor torpedo boats were likely to be active, and their record against Allied naval vessels was well known. A calm sea and overcast sky were made-to-order conditions for them.

LSTs were large, bulky, slow, flat-bottomed, ocean-going vessels built to transport vehicles and personnel to invasion locations and to land on beaches for discharge of troops, tanks, and trucks. With a length of 312 feet, beam 32 feet, and a shallow draft, they were known within the amphibious navy for excessive rocking and rolling. It was often assumed that LST stood for Large Slow Target.

The 515 was one of seven LSTs fully loaded with over 400 U.S. infantry soldiers of the 29th Division, along with supporting trucks and tanks. The mission was a practice landing at an appointed beach on the south coast of England known as Slapton Sands. We were preparing for the coming massive British and American landings on the other side of the channel — Normandy. In addition to the regular crew, the 515 carried three staff command officers — Lieutenant Hallett, communications officer; Lieutenant Hawley, M.D., a Johns Hopkins Medical School graduate; Commander Cahill, a Naval Academy graduate; and a higher-ranking commanding officer, Captain Doyle.

It was Navy practice for a higher-ranking officer with staff to command a task force such as ours. Captain Doyle had been a regular Navy petty officer promoted to lieutenant after heroic action at Pearl Harbor. He was a capable fellow with much sea experience. The U.S. Navy needed such officers to command the hundreds of new vessels being hurriedly built for the war in Europe and the Pacific. They couldn’t have picked a better man for the 515.

At the appointed hour, all seven ships met in convoy formation at point T-4 and set sail northeastward for rendezvous with *HMS Azalea*, a destroyer escort “en guard” against German E-boats. At about 0100 on the 28th, general quarters sounded. Except for engine and communication crews, every man put on shoes, jacket, and helmet and ran to his battle station where there were 20- or 40-millimeter guns and cannons. Some donned phone-equipped helmets and reported to the officer of the deck (OD). Ensign Panitz reported, from the bow, which had two, twin 40mm mounts, “Station two ready and able, sir.” He had OD Ensign Downing on the phone and asked, “What the hell’s going on?” The answer was, “Look astern.”
The LST fourth in line was aflame. Downing gave Panitz a bearing and distance reading of what was surmised as E-boats and relayed Doyle's order to fire when ready. We fired but without success. We could only fire the starboard guns in the direction of the enemy craft, but not with any degree of accuracy because we couldn't see them. In addition, because our 40mm shells were equipped with tracers, the E-boats could clearly identify the positions of our LSTs. Altogether, three LSTs were torpedoed. Two sank and the third was badly damaged. It was loud and wild and scary.

In order to save the surviving ships, Commander Cahill went to the bridge and, based on Navy regs, ordered Doyle to return to port, just as he had radioed the other LSTs to do. Doyle replied, “Commander, I will not abandon all those kids begging for rescue in this freezing water.”

“Captain, you know you can be court-martialed for disobeying a commanding officer's order, although I recognize your right as captain of the ship to make that decision.”

Doyle, who remains a hero in the memory of all survivors, ordered small boats to be lowered and manned by bos'ns with instructions to save as many soldiers and sailors as they could. He was acquitted after a postwar trial, but denied permanent rank in the Navy despite his having rescued nearly a hundred men. In addition, about 75 men brought aboard were dead. The total count revealed by the Navy years later was 749 dead — the greatest number killed in any single naval action during the entire war in the Atlantic and Pacific.

After our return to port, we were visited by a naval intelligence officer who, on orders from U.S. Supreme Headquarters, ordered all officers not to speak of the event. If the Germans learned they had interrupted our invasion exercise at Slapton Sands, it was feared they could also anticipate — because of a similarity of terrain — the planned D-Day landing, which would occur at what was to be known as Omaha Beach.

After the war, Doyle returned to his family ranch in Montana. He received a decoration from the United States Department of the Navy in 1975.

*During World War II, Britain advanced its clock by two hours in summer instead of by one (Daylight Savings Time).

**Book Review**

*Neurosurgery as a Hobby*

by Axel V. Schneider

Crutchless Press, 213 pages, $21.95 hardcover

Upon the recommendation in a recent edition of the Evergreen Journal, I obtained a copy of the new self-help book “Neurosurgery as a Hobby” by Professor Schneider of Columbia. It turned out to offer a welcome alternative to the medical fraternity’s grim insistence on radical surgical procedures to relieve a mere pinched nerve or two.

If you’ve ever received a medical diagnosis calling for a knee or hip replacement, rotator cuff surgery, or the like, run (or hobble) to the nearest bookstore and buy a copy of Schneider's book. It offers a non-invasive, panacea-like approach to bringing nerves under control by calling attention to the latest mind-body research findings and simple mental exercises. Such exercises have been found to create “emanations” or a healthy “aura” around any essential, but dysfunctional body part. In 95% of single-blind test cases, belief in the efficacy of such auras has alleviated a substantial amount of perceived pain and removed any desire on the part of the patient to proceed with the recommended neural surgery.

It is entirely possible that if enough gullible sufferers read this book and practice these procedures as a hobby, a new era of do-it-yourself medicine may mean the end of neurosurgery as a profession.
Judy, Rise, and Me

by Jacob Radin

When I resigned from the symphony in 1948 to change careers, I maintained my membership in the Musicians Union, Local 40. This enabled me to work as a freelancer, something I enjoyed, and also provided extra income for my growing family.

In April 1959, I was engaged as an orchestra member to back up Judy Garland in her appearance at the Mayfair Theatre. The first half of the rehearsal involved only the orchestra. No Judy. During the break, some of the musicians were standing around kibitzing when we were joined by an unidentified young man. His comments soon had us in uproarious laughter. That night, we saw him again, onstage, warming up the crowd for Judy. The announcer introduced him as Alan King.

After the intermission Judy came on stage. She was 36. Her appearance was shocking. The youthful innocence projected in her early films was gone. Facing us was an overweight, double-chinned woman whose troubled life was reflected in her face.

But the voice was there. At the performance that night she held the enthusiastic crowd in her hands. The final encore was her signature piece, “Over the Rainbow,” something she had sung hundreds, or perhaps thousands of times. I looked up at the conductor, a jaded and hardened professional. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

Judy’s singing career continued until her death ten years later.

Much earlier in my freelance music career, only shortly after I’d left the symphony, I got a call from a local contractor to play at the Lyric where the Metropolitan Opera was presenting Der Rosenkavalier. The Strauss score calls for a small off-stage orchestra during the ballroom scene. The other musicians and I were seated behind the scenery, where we could be heard but not seen by the audience. The only light came from our music stands and the beam on the conductor’s baton.

Just as the rehearsal began, a gorgeous brunette appeared, hovered over my shoulder, and began coaching me and the other musicians. From a quick glance I realized that she was Rise Stevens, the acclaimed star of the Met. I was so taken aback that I lost my place, momentarily. Rise stayed with us during the entire rehearsal. She was friendly and ingratiating. Considering that she had a busy night ahead in the role of Octavian it was generous of her to work with the local musicians.

For that brief encounter with the magnetic Ms. Stevens I would have gladly played the engagement without pay.

The News

by Leight Johnson

I get the news I need on the weather report.
– Paul Simon lyric

Maybe it’s my age. I used to think it was important to keep up with the news, to be well informed about everything. I read the paper carefully and thoroughly. I knew who the President’s cabinet members were, what Congress was up to, who was running for what office, what disasters were raging around the world.

In college I took a one-term course called “Contemporary History.” We met weekly on Monday and were required to have read, from cover to cover, the previous day’s “News of the Week in Review” in The Sunday Times. The quiz was a piece of cake. That semester I really knew what was going on.
A few years ago I read an E.B. White essay in which he claimed to have stopped reading newspapers, except the obituaries “to see who’s dead.” I am following in E.B.’s tracks. I check the obits to see what contemporaries I have outlived and which once-famous people have finally passed on. Kitty Carlisle Hart died recently, 70 years after I saw her on Broadway in White Horse Inn.

If there’s a Grand Slam tennis tournament going on, I follow that, and I keep up with the America’s Cup races every few years. Having sailed my own boats, I’m fascinated by the idea of wealthy sponsors spending millions on a sailboat race crewed by highly paid professionals. What was for me a pleasant recreation is big business for some.

Nowadays I read the Op-Ed columnists who confirm my own opinions. Those who point out the many forms of mischief coming from the current occupant of the White House and his gang are bright and perceptive. Those who defend him seem to have their heads in the sand — like the congressman who considers global warming to be a hoax.

Even if I cancelled both newspapers, I would still be unable to avoid being assaulted by current events. Between the evening network newscasts, the car radio, and the windows that greet me when I log on to the Internet, I’m deluged with the latest about Anna Nicole Smith, the Virginia Tech massacre, deadly earthquakes in Asia, car bombs in the Middle East. The bad news is endless, and I am benumbed by it all.

I can download the crossword puzzles from The Times, but all I need to know is this: Will it rain tomorrow?

New Boots

by Martha McCoy

The elderly woman, shopping with her daughter at the January shoe sale, carefully picks up a boot outlined with rhinestones. Her eyes sparkling, she muses, half to herself and half to her daughter, “These are nice.”

“Mother, you really don’t need a pair of boots — especially that pair. You already have a good pair of snow boots,” reasons her daughter. The mother’s eyes veil, as the wistful expression recedes from her face, leaving it flat and noncommittal. Saying nothing, she quietly replaces the boot.

The two women continue to walk up and down the aisles. The daughter calmly assesses quality and appropriateness — selecting and then rejecting one pair of shoes after another. Her mother unobtrusively studies only the boots. After walking past several counters displaying conservative brown and black boots, she stops to look at a pair with large, gold nails. Right beside these stand all of the boots with gold heels. A few feature graphic gold designs that highlight colored, artificial jewels. Such opulence!

Next, she spies a pair of boots with two tigers clasping a large gold buckle on the front of each boot. Picking up one of the boots to admire the whimsical use of the tigers, she is brought back to earth by the familiar voice of her daughter who says, “Mother, don’t be silly. Where would anyone wear those?”

“I’m just looking,” she says, frowning disdainfully over her shoulder at her daughter as she replaces the tiger-boot and continues on to the next aisle.

Suddenly a pair of crushed black velvet boots, pirouetting on a mechanical display round, whisper provocatively, “Look at me.” At first it appears as if the boots are standing on their toes until she notices that the three-inch acrylic heels are responsible for the illusion. “These are just lovely,” she murmurs to herself. Looking furtively over her shoulder, she slips them on.

“I feel like I’m walking on air,” she confides to another shopper as she walks back and forth in front of the shoe mirror, marveling at the boots’ design. Her daughter, exasperation on her face, watches from the neighboring aisle.
The mother turns to her daughter. “I’m going to buy these.”

“Where on earth will you ever wear those boots,” the daughter asks incredulously.

“Everywhere.”

Replacing the boots in their box, the mother walks resolutely to the cashier’s counter. After paying the cashier, she sits down, removes her worn brown boots and places them on the floor beside her. Lifting the new boots from their box, she caresses each one, making sure of its perfection. As she gets ready to leave, she surreptitiously kicks her old boots underneath the chair and out of sight.

Standing up, she straightens her coat, adjusts her purse over her right shoulder and glances lovingly at her new boots. Head held high, she walks proudly out of the store — out into the beautiful, cold and sunny winter day.

Artists in Residence

by Barbara Orbock

I know why painters have always loved Tuscany. In few other places do light and shadow frolic on a landscape blessed with such a full palette of colors, a spectrum of delicacy or intensity, depending on the hour and the season. To awaken to a cock’s crowing and hear the voices of the vineyard workers magnified in the early morning stillness reminds me that I am a privileged visitor in this ancient, artists’ paradise. To the east the mist still blankets the valley and the sun is a small golden orb that pierces the gauze just enough to silhouette the ramrod cedars that spike the distant hills.

As I walk down the lane, the farmyard dog greets me with a hopeful bark. He is much in need of human reassurance for the resident kittens are positioned in a circle around him, a paw’s length away from the end of his tether. One or another meows teasingly or yawns in boredom as il cano reaches out in frustration. However, soon they will depart and be at our doorstep in search of scraps. Yesterday it was cornflakes and peas. They are not picky.

It is autumn and most of the sunflowers, brown and shriveled, wait to be harvested. A few outside the fields cling to the thin rocky soil in my path. I duck into the olive grove and follow it to the end where San Gimignano comes into view. The towers rise above the haze and send me back in time to when they were bannered with drying silks that would eventually make their way to the profitable markets of medieval European cities. A church bell rings, then a clock chimes; several minutes later two more are heard. They are striking eight, but not in unison. This unsynchronized cacophony will go on throughout the day, but no one seems to notice.

I stroll on, going nowhere in particular. The mist lifts slowly and the day’s palette is revealed. The sky is azure and cloudless, the valley now a verdant veil, from the mint-green of the olive groves to the olive-green of the vineyards. The hills of dry, ochre soil ring the periphery, highlighted in places with patches of silvery karst. The cedars that surround them have changed from black to a rich forest-green and are interspersed with tiled-roofed dwellings of terracotta and white. I head back to the farmhouse for my sketchpad. For a short hour or two I shall be Pietrafitta’s artist-in-residence.
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