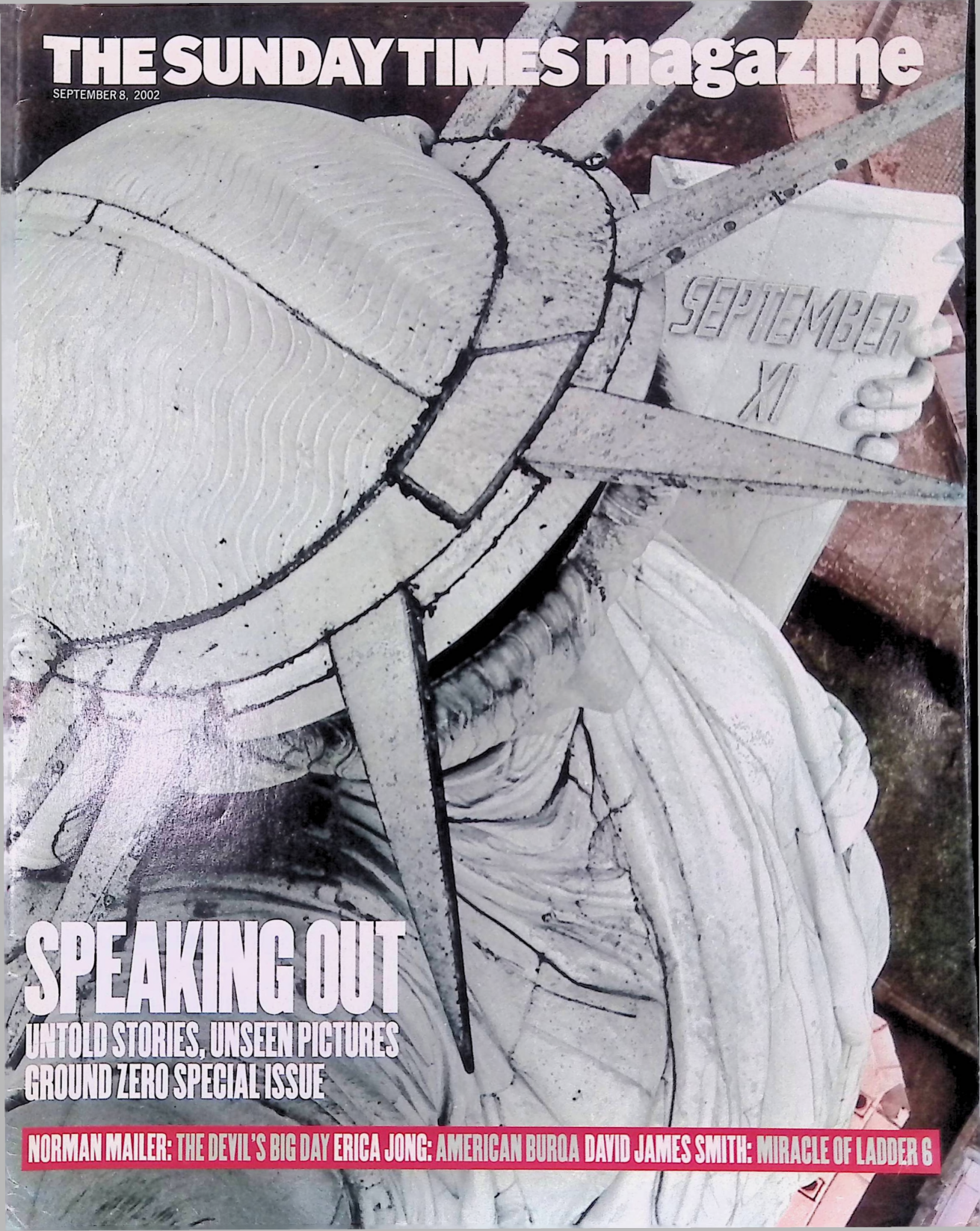


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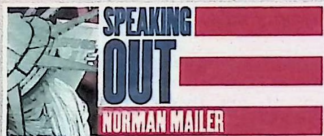
SEPTEMBER 8, 2002

SPEAKING OUT

UNTOLD STORIES, UNSEEN PICTURES
GROUND ZERO SPECIAL ISSUE

NORMAN MAILER: THE DEVIL'S BIG DAY ERICA JONG: AMERICAN BURQA DAVID JAMES SMITH: MIRACLE OF LADDER 6

There's just too much anger, too much ruptured vanity, too much shock, too much identity crisis. And worst of all, too much patriotism. Patriotism in a country that's failing has a logical tendency to turn fascistic



Norman Mailer, the distinguished American writer and polemicist, is known for his controversial views on everything from wars and assassinations to presidents. He talks frankly to Dotson Rader about the devastating effect September 11 has had on the national psyche, how people in power failed their country, and how greed may be the root of their problem — not terrorism. Main photograph: Anthony Suau



This may be the beginning of an int It's not unlikely that the basic desire is

DOTSON RADER: I was at home in my apartment on East 85th Street in Manhattan when the first of the twin towers was hit by one of the planes. Where were you on September 11?

NORMAN MAILER: I was in my house, up here in Provincetown [Massachusetts]. I remember a phone call, someone telling me to turn on the TV. While I was watching I called my daughter Maggie. I have an apartment in Brooklyn Heights, and she was staying there with a friend. You can see lower Manhattan and the twin towers from it: you just look across the East River. So Maggie had witnessed the first attack and was terribly affected by it. Then, while on the phone, the second plane hit the other twin tower. That was a considerable shock. Why? Because the one thing TV always promises us is that, deep down, what we see on television is not real. It's why there's always that subtle numbness to TV. The most astonishing events, even terrifying events nonetheless, have a touch of nonexistence when on the tube. It's why we can watch everything on TV.

Now, there are exceptions. The shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald was one; the second plane striking the second twin tower, the collapse of the towers. Those events suddenly get real, but TV is supposed to be a coat of insulation between us and the horrific. When broken, the impact is enormous. All the same, I didn't get a real sense of the impact of events of 9/11 until days later. Being up here in Provincetown, 300 miles away, the bit of my blood that's still journalistic felt wistful. You know, I wish I'd been in New York.

I had mixed feelings. Here were all these people dead, and New York was injured, but I couldn't mourn the twin towers. They violated that incomparable rising slope from the Battery up to Chambers Street. The skyline of lower Manhattan used to look like the needles of the Alps. Suddenly we had two huge teeth at the tip of Manhattan.

RADER: What do you think was the initial effect of 9/11 on our country?

MAILER: I think an unbelievable identity crisis hit just about everybody who lived in Manhattan – and then it went out in widening circles until all of America was affected. Ever since the second world war, there has always been this tacit notion that we Americans were impregnable. For 50 years we've had more in the way of armament than the rest of the world, and the wars we have had, with the

notable exception of Vietnam and Korea, were easy, rather stupid wars, and were never fought on our soil. There was a feeling that the country could take care of anything and everything. Now, suddenly, this monumental symbol of American capitalism, the twin towers of the World Trade Center, had been destroyed. Plus an attack on the Pentagon. In all, over 3,000 people had been killed – at the time we thought the count was 7,000 dead. And those events brought on an identity crisis for America.

I'm fascinated by the term "identity crisis", because when I was young I had one myself. I went from being an unknown young man from Brooklyn to a celebrity overnight. I was totally unequipped for it. As I said more than once, it was as if there was somebody named Norman Mailer, but to meet him people had to meet me first. That's the size of an identity crisis for one person: now multiply it by millions.

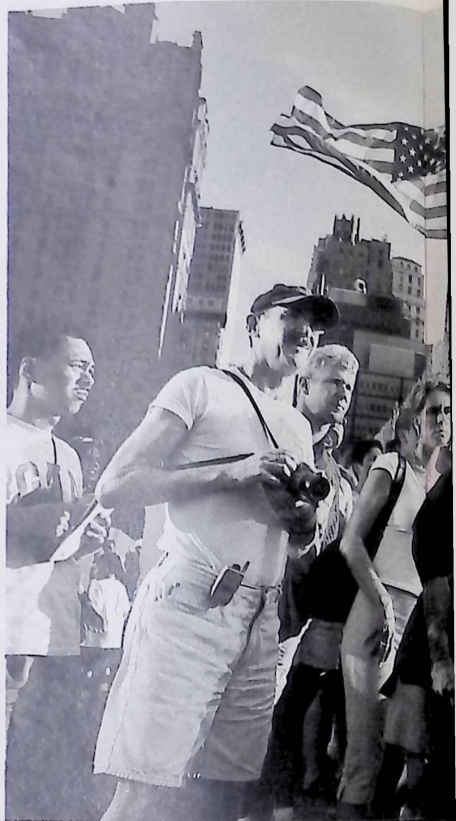
RADER: Why did the FBI and CIA fail so badly?

MAILER: The day after 9/11, a journalist called from Sweden and asked: "Why did they fail?" The remark I made was to a degree facetious, but nonetheless, thinking back, I'm not ashamed of it. I said: "Well, you know, we Americans are very bad at foreign languages." It is hard to be an effective spy if you don't speak the language. Simple as that.

Also the CIA, in particular, became very bureaucratic in the last 25 years and the FBI was always so under Hoover's imprimatur. Ambitious people in the CIA soon began to discover that spy work was not the place to be if you wanted to have a good career in the agency. Better to install yourself in the CIA bureaucracy. So, over time, the CIA came to depend on technology, not on its human assets.

RADER: There was a bombing of the twin towers in 1993 that wounded and killed people. Why did this earlier attack have so little effect, while 9/11 was so devastating to the American psyche?

MAILER: Because the first attack, while it did damage, did not seize the American imagination. One of the problems always when you're talking about the US is that there are those rare times when the country can almost be seen as a creature, reacting with a unanimity that's staggering, especially for a country that has so many odd and disassociated elements, enclaves and regions – and is so large, diffuse and contradictory.



Day-trippers gaze at Ground Zero. The New York att.

But in 1993 there was relative indifference to the attack on the twin towers. It only affected New York. There was a lot of outrage in the city but, once you crossed over to the mainland, people didn't give a damn, just as people in New York don't necessarily wear sackcloth and ashes if there's a dreadful flood in Kansas. Out of New York the general feeling could have been: "Well, New York's an ugly, rotten city and probably deserves it." While many people were somewhat outraged by the 1993 bombing, the terrorists who did it were caught, and although there was a lot of havoc and people were killed, it was not a catastrophe.

International cancer we cannot cure. is to invade as many organs as it can



attack had 'all the elements of a nightmare', says Mailer. Photograph: Tom Stoddart

This attack on 9/11, however, dwarfed those proportions. The entire nation saw the towers crumbling, saw bodies flying through the air, because men and women chose to plunge into the implacable surface of the earth rather than be roasted alive where they stood – all the elements of a nightmare. Moreover, the terrorists had gotten away with it. They had chosen to die in the attack. That was also staggering.

Other shocks that followed 9/11 also changed our notion of ourselves. The corporate shocks – that some of the most powerful corporations had built their fortunes on lies. And all the hideous

stuff about the Catholic Church and paedophilia. The church won't be the same in America for years to come. I think of friends who are priests, and how difficult it is for them now to walk the street and know that half the people looking at them are saying: "I wonder if he ever had anything to do with a child." It's no easy matter. Part of the core of American self-sufficiency has always been the dedicated Catholics in the working class. One of the reasons there's never been a revolution in America since the civil war is precisely because of that closeness of the church to the American working class.

So the American reaction to all this has been all too human, which is: we have to protect what we are in danger of losing. And that reaction, I think, accounts for the enormous popularity of President Bush through the year that followed.

What we have today is the peculiar business of living with a president who was not elected by a majority, and who gives every evidence when he's speaking on his own that he cannot bear any question which takes longer than 10 seconds to answer. What saves him is that he keeps changing his mind a little every week. It's as if somewhere early in life, Bush decided that in talking to most Americans you don't have to reason, just try to press the right buttons. Normally a president like him would become a laughing stock.

RADER: And he hasn't?

MAILER: No. Americans are wondering, why are we hated? Our complacency has been weakened. Our sense that America is just the greatest country ever is brought into doubt. We are torn. There's a reluctance to go against this huge faith that the ship of the United States is impregnable and on the right course, steering us into a great future. So every time you find something to show that America may not be on target, anxiety is created in average citizens. They feel like traitors to the grand design. That's the reason they gathered around Bush. The fact that he had not been elected by a majority became exactly his strength in a perverse way. Certainly after 9/11, the new majority could not for one moment contemplate the fact that maybe Bush shouldn't even be in the White House. Why? Because now the country had to be saved. A horror had come upon America, the horror of knowing that we are so hated that there are people on Earth perfectly willing not only to destroy us, but to immolate themselves. Goes right to the biblical root. Didn't Samson pull the pillars down? So what you've got now are all these Muslim Samsons.

Every American has to ask himself: "Am I ready to die for my ideas?" Well, there's a number of professional army men who are ready to do so. But for what? To kill some Afghans, when they really can't know for sure who are the good guys and who the bad? That doesn't help the identity crisis.

RADER: President Bush defines the world as white or black, good or evil. There is no ambiguity with him. You're either with us in the war against



This is a war between those who believe in the best solution for human ills and those who believe in the same solution five centuries ago and we've been going

terror or you are with the terrorists who hate us. And President Bush says the reason they hate us is because they are evil.

MAILER: That's the 10-second answer. He can use the word "evil" 15 times in three minutes. But evil is an exceptional element in human affairs.

Evil is—whether we like it or not—immensely interesting. And elusive. It is not banal.

RADER: But that doesn't answer why we're so hated.

MAILER: Obviously to some degree it's envy. Some human emotions are simple. We're also hated for more intrusive reasons. Corporate capitalism does have this habit of taking over large parts of the economies of other countries. Often we are the next thing to cultural barbarians. We don't always pay attention to what we are trampling on. What intensifies the anger is how often we are successful in these commercial invasions. You go into a McDonald's in Moscow and there are marble floors. The Russian equivalent of young corporate executives are phoning each other across the room on their mobile phones. They're proud of that. I spoke once at Moscow State University to a class that was studying American literature. One of the students asked me: "Is there anything in our economy that compares to American economy?" I said: "Yes. Your McDonald's are better than ours." And they loved it. They were delighted. They had something they could do that was better than us. It was as if Brooklyn College was playing the University of Nebraska in football. The score had been 100-0, but then they kicked a field goal—it's now 100-3. And the Brooklyn College stands went crazy. So, by the same token, those are the people—and these are the young people in Moscow—who are reacting positively to American corporate culture.

Now, think of all the other people in Russia who hate the very thought that not only were they bankrupted by the United States, not only were they betrayed by a communism that many of them had believed in, but now on top of it they're being culturally invaded by these people with their money-grubbing notions of food. And worse, the young love it. The young are leaving them. So the hatred towards America intensifies.

Now take the West's cultural invasion into Muslim societies. Their reaction is that Islam is endangered by modern technology and corporate capitalism. They see everything in America as

aiming to destroy the basis of Islam. The huge freedom given to women in America is seen as an outrage by orthodox Muslims. Our TV finds licentious in the extreme. They feel all that Islam stands for is going to be eroded by our culture.

The core of the hatred of Muslims towards us is the fear that they're going to lose their own people to western values. Maybe half the people in Muslim countries want to be free of Islam. And so the ones who retain the old religion become extreme in response. Many Muslims can put Christian fundamentalists to shame by the intensity of their belief. There is one fascinating element in Islam, which is the idea that all Muslims are equal before God, a tremendous egalitarian concept. Like all religions, Islam ends up being the perversion of itself in practice.

Just as in Christianity, compassion is supposed to be the greatest good, but its present exercise in the world seems to be a study in military power and greed. In Islam, no Muslim has the right to consider himself superior to another Muslim.

What happens in reality is that you have oppressive societies run for the wealthy, with the poor getting less and less. There are tremendous economic inequalities in many a Muslim society. And tyrannical people in the seats of power.

In Islam [there are] any number of countless movements to restore the original religion. To restore the Koran with its beliefs. Now, of course, the Koran, like the Old and New Testaments, has something in it for everyone. You can run north, run south, blow east, you can blow west. But there have been numerous revolutions within Islam over the centuries to restore its original beliefs. There is no understanding of Islam until one recognises that Muslims who are truly devoted feel they are in a direct relationship with God. Their Islamic culture is the most meaningful experience of their lives, and their culture is being infiltrated. They feel the kind of outrage towards us that, let's say, a good Catholic would know if a black mass were performed in his church.

There's no quick fix. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that this is a war between those who believe the advance of technology is the best solution for human ills and those who believe that we got off the track somewhere a century ago, two centuries ago, five centuries ago, and we've been going in the wrong direction ever since. That the purpose

of human beings on Earth is not to obtain more and more technological power, but to refine their souls. This is the deep divide that now goes on even with many Americans: what does it profit me if I gain the entire world and lose my soul?

One thing must be said about technology. Live in a technological environment long enough and you begin to feel as if your soul is frayed. A curious process has been going on in America for many years. You could term it the dumbing-down of Americans. The country seems to be getting more loutish every year, as if we're reacting to a terribly uncomfortable time of coming to grips with technology, which is essentially antipathetic to the part of ourselves we love best—that creature who senses and can enjoy life. At this point in existence we're being asked to substitute power for pleasure.

Technology says to you: "Fellow, get it through your head, you're going to have a little less pleasure from now on, but much more power." That's technology's credo. When you work in a technological environment, what do you have under your fingertips? Plastic. We all know plastic doesn't feel as good as wood or skin. Even metal offers more to the touch, but the aim of technological society, ultimately, is to work everything over to plastic—woods, metals, flowers; food if they can do it.

Take commercial aeroplanes, for example. Getting on one is always a hellish experience. Not because you fear the plane is going to crash, but you are put into a totally plastic environment, you are hermetically sealed, you are engaged willy-nilly in the collective aura and psychic emissions of 60, 80 strangers in a confined space. So it is a specifically unpleasant experience. And the airlines have been trying intermittently for the last 50 years to make the experience less unpleasant. The rest of the time they are looking to reduce amenities and squeeze out more money.

RADER: The notion of American foreign policy being a cause of 9/11 has been suggested by European and other critics. It is the observation that our own policy has denied other nationalities hope and therefore made them our enemies. This sort of criticism infuriates many Americans. To what degree are we complicit in the causes of that hatred? How do we fix this thing?

MAILER: Like so many Americans, you really have this notion that there's got to be a remedy for

believe the advance of technology is those who believe that we got off the track going in the wrong direction ever since



everything. Maybe there are problems that are not solvable. Did you ever hear of tragedy? I would go so far as to say that this century coming up is going to be the most awesome of all centuries to contemplate. Because in my mind there is a real question whether humankind will get to the end of it. We could destroy the world as we know it in such a way that civilisation could be gone in 100 years. If not the globe itself. Those potentialities are now there in a way they weren't before. They were felt in the 20th century in the fear of a possible nuclear war. But everybody was appalled by that possibility. We drew back in terror. Even the warmongers took precautions so that no fool could ever get a finger on the button.

Now it's almost as if we've gone into a new phase. There is a kind of blindness to the ways in which the world could be destroyed bit by bit. The indifference to the possibility of global warming is a very small example of the kind of self-centredness of many of the power groups in the world today. I expect their feeling is: "Why should we carry the freight for everybody else? After all, it's not certain that global warming is our fault. So I'm not going to be the fall guy." So speak the corporate men of the oil world.

Or another modest example – extending life. Who's going to benefit from it? It's going to be very expensive if it works. The very wealthiest people, the ones who can never make enough money to satisfy themselves, will be the only ones able to afford these procedures. That means we are doomed. Because we all know enough about the wealthiest and most powerful people. We know their terrible faults. We know them well. And extending their lives will extend their strain.

RADER: Clearly, the towering symbol of that technological future is America.

MAILER: Look, America's an exceptional country. And I don't like being in a position of always belabouring it. But on the other hand, it's so big, and so powerful, and so vain, and so capable of doing marvellous things, that I get angry when I see it being less than it can be.

When one suggests that these acts of terror, like 9/11, are America's fault, there is a distinction lost. It assumes it's the fault of Americans. That →

An effigy of Bin Laden hangs in a garden in the US. Photograph by Anthony Suau



We're a 300lb man who's 7ft tall, abso- minutely he's got to reaffirm that his arm

assumes implicitly that we all have the power to change America. We don't. We're a democracy that has lost many of the essential elements. Nobody ever said that a democracy should be a place where the richest people in the country earn 1,000 times more than the poorest. When the richest man earns 10 times more, even 50 times more, it's not hard to conceive of a reasonably decent society. When you get to the point where it's 1,000 to 1, something outrageous is going on. The people who feel this uneasiness probably make up two-thirds of the country, but don't want to think about it because they can't do a damn thing. We don't control our country.

I don't hate Americans. I don't hate the fundamental concepts of America: I loathe the corporate power that's running this country now. Americans, many people agree, can be the warmest humans you'll meet. But the notion that we have an active democracy that controls our fate is not true. Was I ever able to vote on how high buildings could or should be? No. Was I ever able to say I don't want food frozen? No. Was I ever able to say I want aeroplanes to have half as many seats? Nobody's ever been able to vote on anything that really counts in terms of how our lives are led. And, of course, we see the political process get more and more money-mechanised. We're on a power trip in which only a small fraction of America manages to participate. We live in a technological society we never voted for.

RADER: Ever since the events of 9/11, the Europeans have been complaining about American unilateralism; that America doesn't consult with them; that she bullies them; that she acts like an imperialist power. Is that true?

MAILER: Yes, it's got a great deal of truth in it.

RADER: Is there no patriotic defence here?

MAILER: We had a small parade in Provincetown on the Fourth of July. And a rather nice-looking, pleasant fellow—he looked like a young liberal lawyer—came up to me, smiled and tried to hand me a small American flag. I looked at him and just shook my head. And he walked on. It wasn't an episode. He came over with a half-smile and walked away with a half-smile. But I was furious at myself afterwards for not saying, "You don't have to wave a flag to be a patriot," because what bothers me terribly is the kind of free-floating patriotism that's going on now in the United

States. It is a measure of our free-floating anxiety.

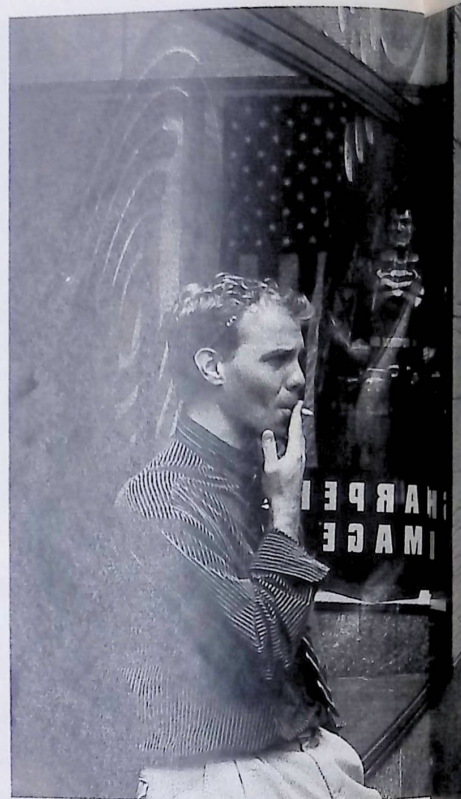
Take the British, for contrast. The British have a love of their country that is profound. They can revile it, tell dirty stories about it, give you dish on all the imperfects who are leading the country. But deep down, it's their country. Their patriotism is deep.

In America it's as if we're playing musical chairs, and don't get caught without a flag or you're out. Why do we need all this reaffirmation? It's as if we're a 300lb man who's 7ft tall, superbly shaped, absolutely powerful, and every three minutes he's got to reaffirm the fact that his armpits have a wonderful odour. We don't need compulsive, self-serving patriotism. It's odious. When you have a great country, it's your duty to be critical of it so it can become even greater. But culturally, emotionally, we are growing more loutish, arrogant and vain. We're not only losing a sense of the beauty of democracy, but also of its peril.

Democracy is built upon a notion that is exquisite and dangerous. It virtually states that if the will of the populace is freely expressed, more good than bad will result. When America began, it was the first time in the history of civilisation that a nation dared to make an enormous bet founded on this daring notion: that there is more good than bad in people. Until then, the prevailing assumption had been that the powers at the top knew best. So I would say we have to keep reminding ourselves that just because we've been a great democracy doesn't mean we're going to continue to be one. Democracy is existential. It changes all the time. You don't take it for granted. It is always in peril. We all know how individually anyone can go from being a relatively good person to a bad one. We can all become corrupted or embittered. We can be swallowed by our miseries in life, become weary and give up. All those things. That's the peril. That's why I detest this totally promiscuous patriotism. Wave a little flag and become a good person? Ugly. You take a ruling monarchy for granted, or a fascist state. You have to. That's the given. But not democracy.

RADER: What [to most Americans] appears to imperil democracy itself isn't coercive patriotism or technological tyranny; it is the scourge of terrorism.

MAILER: I hate terrorism, I loathe it. Since I believe in reincarnation, I think the character of your

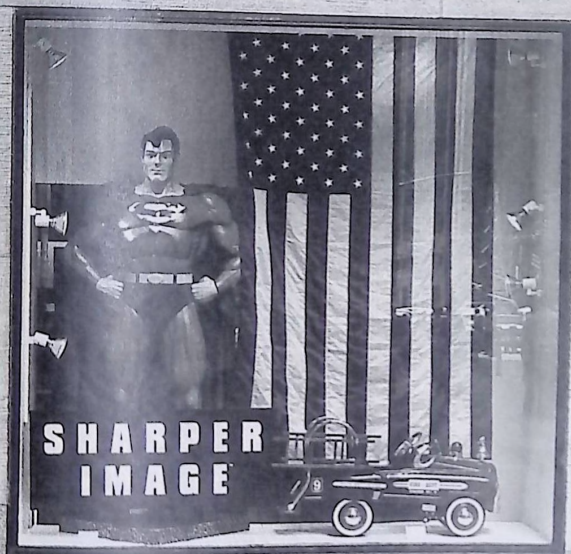


Superman: the embodiment of Americans' desire

death is tremendously important to you. One wants to be able to meet one's death with a certain seriousness. To me, it is horrible to be killed without warning, because you can't prepare yourself in any last way for your next existence. So it contributes to absurdity. Terrorism's ultimate tendency is to make life absurd. And the element in terrorism that I find profoundly offensive is that it's irrational.

When I consider the 3,000 people who died in the twin-towers disaster, it's not the ones who were good fathers, and good mothers, and good daughters, and good brothers, and good husbands or sons, that I mourn most. It's the ones who came

absolutely powerful, and every three armpits have a wonderful odour



desire for power and patriotism. But have they become too vain? Photograph: Leonard Freed

from families that were less happy. When a good family member dies, there's a tenderness and a sorrow that can restore life to those who are left behind. But when you have someone who dies who's half loved and half hated by his own family, whose children, for example, are always trying to get closer to that man or to that woman and don't quite succeed, then the after-effect is obsessive. Those are the ones who are hurt the most. I won't call them dysfunctional families, but it's into the less successful families that terrorism bites most deeply. Because there is that terrible woe that one can't speak to the dead parent, or the dead son or daughter, or dead mate, one can't set things right

any more. One was planning to, one was hoping to, and now it's lost for ever. That makes it profoundly obsessive.

RADER: Would you define terrorism as wickedness, as an evil?

MAILER: To me there's a great difference between doing evil and being wicked. I don't use the words interchangeably. People who are wicked are always raising the ante without knowing quite what they're doing. Most of us are wicked to a degree. Most of us who are game-players or adventurous any way at all are wicked, because we do raise the ante all the time without knowing what the results might be. We're mischievous, if you will.

Evil, however, is to have a pretty good idea of the irreparable damage you're going to do, and then proceed to do it. In that sense, yes, terrorism is evil. However, it's worth trying to understand terrorism in the context by which the terrorists see it. They feel they're gouging out an octopus that's looking to destroy their world. And this despite the fact that the individual terrorist might be violating every single rule in Islam, as well. He might, for example, be a drug addict, or booze a lot, but at the end he still believes he will find redemption through immolation. He is one small shard in the spiritual wreckage in the world. After all, in America there are a great many people on the right who are going around saying: "Let's kill all the Muslims, let's simplify the world." You think Islam has a special purchase on terrorism?

RADER: Are we facing a war of civilisations between an Islamic cult of death...

MAILER: Wait a minute. Cult of death? You're going too far. For every Muslim who believes in your cult of death, thousands don't. People who are ready to sacrifice their lives form a very special group. They don't need big numbers.

RADER: But millions cheer them in the streets.

MAILER: Oh, it's easy to cheer. I can cheer athletes who score winning touchdowns when I don't know the first thing about them. I'm cheering for an idea. That's one thing. It's another to shed your own blood. There's a gulf between the two.

I'm sure they [Muslims] have as many sons of bitches and hardheads as we have, and maybe more. They probably have more, in that they have lousier living conditions and they're under more tension. Muslims also bear a huge sense of shame because they were a superior civilisation around AD 1200, 1300, the most advanced culture then, and now they lag behind. There is a deep sense of failure among them. Think of those periods in your life when you felt you were a failure, and really recall the bitterness, the anger, the disturbance. Multiply that by the followers of a faith: that gives some sense of how bad it can get.

We in the West have this habit of looking for solutions. Part of the spirit of technology is to assume that there's always a solution to a problem, or something damn close to one. There may be no solution this time. This may be the beginning of an international cancer we cannot cure. What's in the mind of a cancer cell? It's not unlikely →



The notion that we have an active den true. We're on a power trip in which only

that the basic desire is to kill as many cells and invade as many organs as it can. So, too, the greater number of people the terrorists can wipe out, the happier they're going to be. Before you feel too righteous and outraged, however, let me ask: "Did Harry Truman shiver in his bed at the thought that 100,000 people had been killed in Hiroshima and another 100,000 in Nagasaki two days later, or was he proud that he had won the war?"

RADER: Why did the British respond immediately with such generosity to American distress and vulnerability after 9/11 when other allies, like the French, were less forthcoming?

MAILER: There are superficial answers I can give you. One is that the British have lived closer and longer with terrorism than the French. France did suffer terrorists during the bad years of the Algerian war, but the British had a much more difficult situation with Palestine. In fact, the roots of a resurgence of a certain amount of anti-semitism in Britain can be traced back to British soldiers being killed by Jewish terrorists like the Stern gang in the early 1950s. And then there are the long troubles in Northern Ireland. Bitterness about Irish terrorism often got very intense. I remember the English feeling against Irish Catholics in London years ago. It was very strong.

Another element, of course, is the common language we share. That is a profound bond. If you live with the English language, you love it. And the English have more right to enjoy that language than we do. Their literature enriches more of their people than ours does.

RADER: What I also sense about the British is they have a feeling toward us that is almost familial. When the outside world hits us, they're not about to join in with everybody else in jumping on us.

MAILER: Well, there is a final bond, don't forget, which is that if things ever got bad enough, the two countries would probably join. That would be interesting, yes.

RADER: Among the unhappy results of 9/11 has been the extra legal detention, without access to counsel, of thousands of suspects in the US and the imprisonment of "enemy combatants". More importantly, unique in our history, is the creation

A patriotic advertisement and the Empire State Building – now the tallest edifice in Manhattan. Photograph: Tom Stoddart



Democracy that controls our fate is not only a fraction manages to participate

of a single, unified national police/security bureaucracy, the new Department of Homeland Security, headed by a cabinet secretary, a policing mechanism through which one man can potentially control the entire nation. This consolidation of police power, with a budget in excess of \$30 billion and as many as 170,000 employees, was created without any real political debate. What do these post-9/11 developments portend for the future of our democracy?

MAILER: Because of this intense feeling I have about the fragility of democracy, I've been predicting one or another kind of totalitarianism for America over a good many years now. And I've been wrong every time. If I were to go back and read old interviews I'd be embarrassed. About 10 years ago, I remember saying that I was happier now than I used to be because, having a profoundly pessimistic nature, but discovering I was wrong a lot of the time, it has made it easier over the years. All the same, here I go again. I'm still concerned. They speak of pre-cancerous conditions in bodies, and I think we have a pre-totalitarian situation here now. I expect we'll muddle through, despite homeland security, provided there are no more large disasters. There are pro-democratic forces in America that assert themselves when you don't expect them to.

But the situation is serious. If we have a depression or fall into desperate economic times, I don't know what will hold the country together. There's just too much anger, too much ruptured vanity, too much shock, too much identity crisis. And worst of all, too much patriotism. Patriotism in a country that's failing has a logical tendency to turn fascistic, just as too much sentimentality will corrupt compassion. Fascism in America is not going to come with a party. Nor with uniforms. But there will be a curtailing of liberties. Homeland security has put the machinery in place. The people who are running the country, in my opinion, simply don't have the character or wisdom to fight for the concept of freedom if things get very bad here. And by that I mean horrors: dirty bombs, terrorist attacks on a huge scale, virulent diseases. The notion that you're going to have your freedom saved by people who work for security agencies is curious at best. They're on a one-way street. Anything bad is very bad for them. So they're going to do their utmost

to restrict the freedom of people during critical situations. In the final analysis, democracy is inimical to security. Americans have to be willing to say at a certain point that we're going to take some terrorist hits without panicking, that freedom is more important to us than security.

Let's suppose 10 people are killed by a small bomb on a street corner in some city in America. The first thing to understand is that there are 280m Americans. So, there's one chance in 28m you're going to be one of those people. By such heartless means of calculation, the 3,000 deaths in the twin towers came approximately to one mortality for every 90,000 Americans. Your chances of dying if you drive a car are 1 in 7,000 each year. We seem perfectly ready to put up with automobile statistics.

RADER: What you are saying implies there is a tolerable level of terror, and we have to accept it.

MAILER: That's what I fear I am ready to say. There is a tolerable level to terror. Let's relieve ourselves of the idea that we have to remove all terror. Look what goes on in Israel. So far as I know, Israelis are not fleeing the country en masse. They've learnt to live with the anxiety, and their numbers are a good deal worse than ours per capita.

What scared the hell out of me was a recent poll indicating that half the people in America are willing to accept a certain curtailment of their liberties in return for more security. If, already at this point, 50% of the people are ready to give up some of their liberties in return for more security, then what's going to happen if something truly bad ensues? Our belief that Americans are free individuals has suffered erosion in the last 10 years from too much stock-market greed. You know, Marx and Jesus Christ do come together on one fundamental notion: money leaches out all other values. Those 10 years have done a lot of damage to the country's character. It's not as nice a place.

RADER: You're talking the Bill Clinton years.

MAILER: Yes. Well, I'm not an unbridled champion of Bill Clinton. In fact, one of the things I've always found least attractive about Tony Blair was his toadyish attitude toward Clinton. If you're searching for a good big brother, don't look for Bill. On the other hand, if you're drawn to a very attractive, exciting, immensely selfish big brother, then do go to him.

RADER: The Department of Homeland Security

was created by George Bush specifically in response to 9/11 and the perceived incompetence of the intelligence community, especially the CIA, which his father once headed. Do you think he will be comfortable with what he has created? **MAILER:** Quite comfortable. Why wouldn't he be? What are his personal gifts? First, he's fairly good-looking. Not outrageously, but good enough so that the average American woman and man can find him attractive. That's his No 1 gift. The other element is that George Bush is very, very good at prepared speeches. He's studied enunciation, articulation, emphasis, stress, and all the other qualities you need for a speech, provided it's presented on a prompter and he's gone through it a few times so he can read it. And he's a college fraternity president, essentially.

He's also a bit of a civilised psychopath. They have a very good sense of the present. Mind you, I'm a bit of one too. I rise to the moment, and get into a lot of trouble for doing so. Many of us have a bit of it in us. The way I define a civilised psychopath is that while they are not personally violent, their sense of the present is much more intense than their grasp of the past or future. Not to put him down again, but Bill Clinton had a hint too much. Can you give me a better explanation for his personal troubles? Ronald Reagan was a goody-goody with a good deal of the very civilised psychopath in him. In his case it was all sublimated into politics and soundbites and lies.

It's very hard to become president of the United States without having that element in your make-up. Jimmy Carter, who's a wonderful, decent man, suffered in his presidency terribly because he didn't have enough.

Since George W. is not at all a profound student of politics itself, he is wise enough to depend on his people. His psychopathology gives him a sharp sense of when other people are trying to bullshit him. I would guess he can tell when one of his experts knows what he's talking about and when he's only pretending he knows.

So President Bush makes his decisions in opposite fashion to Bill Clinton. He does the exact opposite of Bill Clinton. Clinton made a point of surrounding himself with people who might be 90% as intelligent as himself, but never his equal, and never, never more intelligent. Clinton, therefore, was always the brightest

NORMAN MAILER: continued

guy in his circle. Whereas Bush is smart enough to know that he couldn't possibly do the same, or the country would be run by morons. So, in contrast, he looked to get bright people around him — Rumsfeld, Chaney, Rice, Powell, able people with strong ideas who are not necessarily all in agreement. And when they start arguing, Bush has an ear for which is most incisive at a given moment. He can pick up the hint of the inauthentic in a seasoned expert's voice. I'm speaking as a novelist now. Bush has a bullshit detector. That's one of the reasons he changes his mind so often. Different experts have days when they're better than they are on other days. And so on a given morning he listens to Expert A, and that voice sounds the best. Three days later, Expert D comes in better. The result is that he's always tweaking his policies.

His parents offer a more patrician quality, but he didn't want that for himself. He knew it wouldn't play in Texas. He has now carried that snobbery of the fraternity president up to his global assessments. 9/11 gave him legitimacy. He didn't earn it. He depends on his luck.

RADER: Let's return to the question of whether in post-9/11 America there exists the threat of a potential totalitarian state.

MAILER: All right. In a country where values are collapsing — as I keep saying — patriotism becomes the handmaiden to totalitarianism. The country itself becomes the religion. If you look at it on a scale of religious fervour, consider our present cast: bullies, thugs, idiots and all these good, decent people who are filled with love. They all love America. Love it because America has become the substitute for religion. And to love your country indiscriminately means that critical distinctions begin to go. But democracy depends upon these distinctions. Simple devotion to your country just because it is your country has to be, finally, irrational. Why is the place that you were born more important than other places?

Go back to the British love of their country, which strikes me as better founded. I believe that's due to the close and intimate texture of their history. To know your history is to be nourished, not just by all the positive things that Great Britain did, but all the bad and ugly things as well. A good British man has a certain sense of the complexity of life. They have memory in a way we don't. That is the scariest single thing about American democracy to me — we don't have roots the way other countries do. Relatively, we are without deep traditions. So the transition from democracy to totalitarianism could happen rather quickly. There could be fewer impedimenta here, those brakes and barriers that true conservatives usually count upon. But without the stops and locks, a nation can swing from one extreme to the other.

Look at our situation. Virtually everyone who came here was a reject from their original country. It was certainly true of my people. The majority of the immigrants were not winners. But they were ready to try something new. That's why I don't want to call them losers. And many thrived. And

did not look back. But in the act of always looking forward, few traditions survived.

RADER: Perhaps 9/11 was so shocking because we'd become a far less serious people. Superficial. Self-indulgent. We got silly. We were serious about money and acquiring stuff, yet most other things that took any thought or required any passion bored us. So 9/11 brought a deadly, unavoidable seriousness back into our public and private lives.

MAILER: Yes, and we're less equipped now to be serious. That's my fear. Because we want palliatives, to be told how to live. And there are plenty of powerful people around who are willing to tell us. The right wing of America's in an ongoing, still-controlled rage, but they want to take over. So 9/11 was a huge boon to the right wing, the military and security organisations.

RADER: The "war on terrorism", as President Bush christened it, the government seems to believe will go on indefinitely. Do you agree?

MAILER: It's not a war, it's a police action. It is the most perfect "war" a country like ours can have, because nobody's bothered by it. We can feel virtuous about being at war but not have to suffer directly for it. An ideal condition. All the advantages of war, few of the liabilities, other than the future taxes we'll have to pay. And the whole humungous question of security.

RADER: Nevertheless, whether you call it a war or a police action, [doesn't it] have to be won?

MAILER: Well, it depends on the pervasiveness of terrorism. If terrorism grows, there's no real way to protect against it. If I were a military man, I suspect I would look at it as if I were facing viral wars on the health of the public. Where's the cure for a virus? Is there one? The hard answer may be that the cure for a virus is that the virus wears itself out. But if it does go on and on, it can destroy the body politic. In any case, there are many viruses besides terrorism attacking us. Greed may end up doing more damage to the American psyche, and the American economy, than terrorists. We just don't know their future strength. So far there's been only one large attack in the United States — 9/11 — but the future may call on us to learn to live like the Israelis. Obviously, they hate terrorism for good cause. At its worst it can leave many half-demented. The majority learnt to live with it because finally the chance of stopping any attempt at any given moment is small.

RADER: The argument is advanced that Muslim terrorists hate us because we support Israel and if we would only change our foreign policy, the terror would stop.

MAILER: It is in the interests of the Arab nations to have Israel as the great villain. Although I'm Jewish, bone and blood, I'm not a patriotic Jew in the sense of Israel right or wrong, my Israel. I don't have those feelings. But what I do think is that at the end of the Holocaust the real example of how cruel, how definitely inhuman, the people are at the top of each Arab nation, is that they could have said: "Here's a modest piece of land — let these people have it. It's not going to hurt us. We could even use them." They didn't. They chose to make them the enemy.

I suspect these other Arab nations are now using the Palestinians and secretly despise them. High Saudi officials might well be content that the Israelis have a Palestinian problem because if they didn't, the Saudis would. To some extent the Palestinians, because of their unique history, are perhaps less malleable than other Arab peoples to the various Arab and Muslim establishments. For one thing, they're not even all Islamic. It's a very difficult mixture for countries like Saudi Arabia to deal with directly. So the Arab leaders have this wonderful ploy where they use the Palestinians as their reason to hate Israel, when in fact they see Israel as their safeguard against the Palestinians.

RADER: You've been critical of America and you've also spoken about American generosity. You fought in the second world war for this country, and then you opposed another war, Vietnam, because you love this country. What is it about this country that you love?

MAILER: The freedom that I've had in my life. Who has ever had the opportunities I've had, the extraordinary freedom to be able to think the way I think? For better or worse, I had the great good luck that very few people have, to be a writer. I've had more time to think than most people. I've had that advantage, that luxury. I can hardly hate the country. I don't want to make this a sentimental journey, but I have been treated very well.

You know, I once attacked J Edgar Hoover on television in 1959 when he was still director of the FBI. I said he'd done more damage to America than Joseph Stalin. Years later, under the Freedom of Information Act, I obtained my FBI file and 80 pages of it were devoted to my remarks on that one TV show. Most of the FBI comments were on the order of: "Oh well, Mailer is just an arrogant fool." Yet the fact is, no matter how angry those people were, they didn't take me off in chains.

I have had great freedoms here in America, and I don't want to see them lost to the people who come after me. But, I repeat, freedom is as delicate as democracy. It has to be kept alive every day. So yes, I do love this country. If our democracy is the noblest experiment in the history of civilisation, it may also be the most singularly vulnerable one.

When you scratch an American, he always says: "This is God's country." Well, I would suggest that the US is God's most extreme and heartfelt experiment. So I lean towards thinking that the best explanation for 9/11 is that the devil won a great battle that day.

As if part of the devil's aesthetic acumen was to bring it off exactly as if we were watching the same action movie we've been seeing for years. That may be at the core of the immense impact that 9/11 had on America. It was as if our movies were coming off the screen and walking into life, chasing us down the canyons of the city. That makes sense to me, that the devil pulls off such a coup. I'm a great believer in Occam's razor: the simplest explanation that covers a set of facts is bound to be the correct explanation. If you can tell me why God wanted 9/11 to succeed, then I'll give you. But until then let me rely on the supposition that this was the devil's big day ■