

who admire him for his willingness to defy the white establishment. Likewise, for some of his most vociferous critics, nothing he could say now on the Brawley matter will ever convince them he is anything but a charlatan. Between those extremes, however, are countless potential supporters who would welcome a princi-

pled attempt by Sharpton to confront his past. In the absence of such a reckoning, he will remain a formidable political force but a largely black phenomenon. With it, however, his future takes on new possibilities. If he meets the challenge, perhaps one day it will be said: *You won, Sharpton, you won.* ■

PRAISING ITS COVERAGE, NOT CRITICIZING IT, IS THE BEST ROUTE TO GETTING PUBLISHED.

Times Letters Unfit to Print

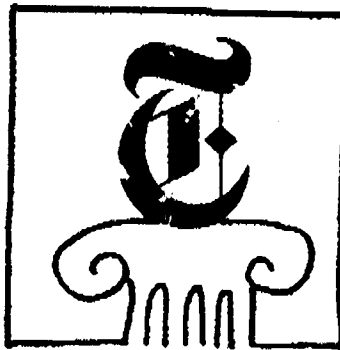
MICHAEL MASSING

The *New York Times's* letters page has a reputation for being the nation's liveliest. Here appear brief but beautifully crafted commentaries from top government officials, diplomats, scholars, researchers, lawyers, physicians, educators and, of course, everyday readers, offering their insights on the great issues of the day. The one thing you won't find here, however, is substantive criticism of the *Times* itself. For all the appearance of debate and contention on this page, it seldom features letters challenging the way the *Times* covers the news. Its real purpose, in fact, seems to be to shield the paper's reporters and editors from any outside reproach.

My enlightenment on this point came in mid-November, when the *Times* ran an article headlined "Italian Sociologist's Goal: Make Opium Farming Fade Into History." The piece described the efforts of Pino Arlacchi, the United Nations' top antinarcotics official, to stamp out opium production in Afghanistan and surrounding nations. "Afghanistan is now the world's largest producer of opium," the article stated. "If Pino Arlacchi has anything to do with it, however, opium should become as much part of history in Afghanistan as it now is in Thailand, which is getting ready to open a museum of opium." Arlacchi was attempting to accomplish this, the piece noted, by setting up a 300-person antidrug unit in neighboring Tajikistan to seize drugs coming out of Afghanistan and by lobbying Western governments to give the Taliban government assistance so that it could compensate farmers who stop producing opium (the raw material for heroin).

Overall, the article provided a very optimistic account of Arlacchi's efforts, leaving the impression that if only the West cooperated with him, opium production in Southwest Asia could be eliminated once and for all.

Sure, I thought. Based on years of research I did for a book about US drug policy, I knew of periodic crusades to eliminate the Asian opium trade, none of which ended successfully. Whenever one source of supplies was wiped out, another quickly emerged. As long as there's a demand for drugs, history shows, someone will find a way to supply it. No suggestion of this appeared in the *Times* article, however. It cited no independent assessments



STEVEN BRONER

of Arlacchi's work. Nor did it question his highly debatable emphasis on law enforcement as the best way to fight the world's drug problem. From start to finish, the article read like a puff piece.

Irritated, I sat down to write a letter to the editor. To increase its chances of getting published, I did not mention my sense that the article was excessively flattering toward Arlacchi. Nor did I refer to its lack of balance or absence of historical depth. The only hint of criticism I allowed was to call the piece a "rosy account" of Arlacchi's efforts. Otherwise, I simply described my own view that, based on the long history of global antidrug efforts, Arlacchi's campaign was doomed to fail.

I e-mailed the letter to the *Times*—and heard nothing back. Nothing unusual there. Only a small portion of the letters sent to the *Times* actually get published. Two weeks later, however, the *Times* ran another letter, commenting on an article about US antidrug efforts in Colombia, that made many of the same points I had made in mine. Unlike my letter, however, this one contained no criticism of the *Times's* coverage; instead, it simply recounted the writer's own views. Which made me wonder: Was it my inclusion of the word "rosy," with its gentle chiding of the *Times*, that kept my letter from being printed?

Curious, I began scrutinizing the *Times* letters page. While editorials and Op-Ed pieces were sometimes criticized, news articles almost never were. Overwhelmingly, letters about news stories conveyed the writer's own views about the subject in question, rather than challenged the way the *Times* had covered it. Many of the letters began with a bland "Re," followed by the title of the article, followed by a summary of the writer's thoughts about the subject at hand. "Re 'Ease Up, Top Colleges Tell Stressed Applicants' (front page, Dec. 7)," a typical letter began. "I do not foresee college applicants being less stressed any time soon. Society, especially in the Northeast, reinforces the idea that getting into a top college is the only way to be successful...."

Surveying the letters page during the month of December, I found no more than a half-dozen letters that could be considered even remotely critical of the *Times's* coverage, and even they were worded so delicately that it wasn't at all clear the paper was being criticized. "The article 'Testing the Agency Stockpile in a Test Ban Era' (Nov. 28) presents an incomplete picture of nuclear-explosion testing in sustaining the United States arsenal," began

Michael Massing, a contributing editor of *CJR* (the *Columbia Journalism Review*), is the author of *The Fix*, a study of US drug policy.

April 16, 2001

The Nation.

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a letter published on December 5. Another, appearing on December 8, began, "Your Dec. 3 front-page article about the shortening of Russian lives and decline in live births ('An Ailing Russia Lives a Tough Life That's Getting Shorter') did not mention an important factor...."

Even these mild critiques were greatly outnumbered by letters praising the *Times* for its coverage. Some examples:

"Often, Parole Is One Stop on the Way Back to Prison' (front page, Nov. 29) is a wake-up call for those who feel that the best way to deal with people who commit crimes is to put them outside our field of vision...."

"Your Dec. 3 front-page article about the decline and fall of President Alberto K. Fujimori of Peru was terrifying and illuminating...."

"Next Stop, Dessert: Street Theater Moves Onto the Subway' (Arts pages, Dec. 11) reminded me of how delightful experiencing 'underground' art can be...."

"Re 'For "New Danes," Differences Create a Divide' (front page, Dec. 18): I was truly moved by the story of Bunyamin Simsek and the failure of his arranged marriage...."

Overall, from reading the *Times* letters page, one gets the impression that most readers are deeply satisfied with—even grateful for—the paper's news coverage.

The letters pages at other top newspapers, while not exactly debating societies, do allow readers considerably more leeway. The letters in the *Wall Street Journal* can be quite barbed. For example:

"May I suggest that your Dec. 8 page-one article about P&G's effort to create a tampon market outside the U.S. strained the

boundaries of polite public discourse? Whatever the business merit of the information, women's private parts were editorially relegated to the basic status of an animal science class discussion."

"For some reason, you seem to love to run scary airline stories. Last year you tried to convince the public that air-traffic controllers make many serious mistakes. Before that, you said older DC-9 aircraft could be dangerous. Now, you attack GE CF-6 aircraft engines as frightfully dangerous (page one, Jan. 2). Deeper in the story, you acknowledge that the average engine would fly 30 years before suffering a shutdown, and even then the shutdown might not lead to further complications. You take a handful of incidents and paint the whole airline industry as dangerous. Why?"

And, from the *Washington Post*:

"Shame on The Post for insensitive sensationalism in referring to Robert Downey Jr. [Style, Nov. 27] as a '35 year old actor/addict.' Were Mr. Downey suffering from epilepsy or asthma would The Post have called him a 35-year old 'actor/epileptic' or 'actor/asthmatic'? Addiction is a disease. Practice compassion...."

"Regarding the article 'On Brazilian TV, an Unhealthy Dose of "Reality"?' [Style, Dec. 16]: Did Stephen Buckley really have to give a blow-by-blow (literally) description of the horrific child abuse that was shown on a Brazilian TV station? His description is as bad as the TV station that aired it and is the lowest form of tabloid journalism. Did any of your higher-ups read this article?"

In addition, the *Post* has an ombudsman who follows up on readers' complaints and reports his findings on the Op-Ed page. The current ombudsman, Michael Getler, has been so sharply critical of the paper that some reporters have howled in protest.

"Eloquent outrage." —*New York Times Book Review*

YOU READ IT FIRST IN THE NATION



JONATHAN KOZOL

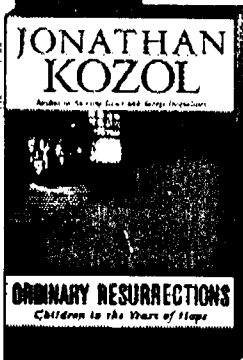
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"Deeply moving . . ." —*Washington Post Book World*

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Perennial
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The *Times* offers no such outlet. Even concerning its coverage of Wen Ho Lee, which generated so much controversy, the paper did not run a single critical letter. "Re 'Nuclear Scientist Set Free After Plea in Secrets Case; Judge Attacks U.S. Conduct' (front page, Sept. 14)," began a typically bland submission. "The Wen Ho Lee case raises some troubling questions..." Only after the *Times* ran its own lengthy *mea culpa* in late September did it allow a few notes of protest to creep onto its letters page.

The true purpose of that page became apparent to me after reading a memo that executive editor Joseph Lelyveld circulated to his staff in October (and that someone at the paper sent me). "We've long had a policy of openness and engagement with readers," the memo began. "Most of us answer our mail conscientiously, and we publicly correct every error we learn about. Still, in a large and busy newsroom, it's easy for a message or a letter to go astray, or for a phone caller to reach someone who doesn't know how to help or, worse, can't be troubled. Now we're going to take a few steps to fulfill our promise of openness."

Henceforth, the memo continued, the *Times* would publish a daily announcement on page A2 inviting readers to phone in or send e-mails about not only errors of fact but also their larger concerns. "We are guaranteeing that every message will receive a prompt answer," the memo stated. "For those readers whose comments are thoughtful and serious, we mean to make our replies substantive."

Deciding to put this new policy to the test, I sent an e-mail to the *Times* laying out my observations about the letters page. As a regular reader of that page, I wrote, "I have noticed that the paper rarely publishes letters that are directly critical of the paper's news coverage. Editorials, Op-Ed articles and other letters are often criticized, but news articles seldom are. Rather, letters about news articles usually convey the writer's views about the subject

in question—not about the way the paper has covered it. Does this reflect a policy on the part of the *Times*?"

I received an e-mail back the next day. "The editors of the letters column are not averse to publishing criticism," it stated. "But you perhaps infer such an aversion from the fact that we never use the column to correct errors that the paper has printed. We believe that an error of fact in an article needs to be corrected in the corrections space on Page A2, so as to make quite clear that we are conceding the fact of the error. A reader of a letter asserting that The *Times* had been wrong might come away from it wondering, in effect, Who's right? Once you exclude that category of letters, what's left tends to be opinion. Hope this helps you."

I found this highly disingenuous. For the *Times*'s "Corrections" space is known for its almost comic preoccupation with triviality—misspelled names, incorrect dates, garbled titles. "Because of an editing error," a recent example read, "an Arts Abroad article on Wednesday about modern Kabuki performances in Japan misstated the location of Hiratsuka, the hometown of one enthusiast. It is 38 miles southwest of Tokyo, not 132." Sometimes, the *Times*, in its "Editors' Notes," does make larger concessions, but these run very infrequently and address only major screw-ups. In between the minor factual errors addressed in "Corrections" and the larger blunders handled in "Editors' Notes" are such important concerns as balance, fairness, bias and depth. My beef with the piece on Pino Arlacchi concerned not any factual errors but what I considered its excessively fawning tone. Under the *Times*'s prevailing guidelines, however, I had no way of registering my dissatisfaction. Indeed, its new policy seems intended to make sure complaints are handled in-house, away from public view.

The *Times*—a great newspaper—is in the business of holding powerful people accountable. Shouldn't it provide readers a forum to hold it accountable?

LETTERS

CONTINUED

(Continued From Page 2)

for another candidate in 2004, it should not have to look too much further than Jackson's doorstep. If the left wants to resuscitate itself, it needs to speak—and act—with the unashamed *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* with which Jackson speaks. People like him give me hope and represent an America that is all but lost in this environment of hip fascism (I don't think I'm exaggerating).

BEN LANIER-NABORS

Lauderdale, Minn.

■ I wish Jesse Jackson Jr. the best of luck in building a "progressive bipartisan economic coalition" by reclaiming the Democratic Party from its conservative wing. If he succeeds, he may draw me away from the Green Party. And if any Greens are elected to Congress in the coming years, I hope Jackson's coalition will welcome them warmly.

ETHAN PERRY

STAYING INVOLVED

Boulder, Colo.

■ We had an interesting "town meeting" event at the Boulder Theatre in January, titled "Or-

ganizing for Democracy After the Stolen Election," which featured former State Senator Tom Hayden visiting from Los Angeles, Yippie Stew Albert of Oregon, Democratic State Senator from Boulder Ron Tupa, Green Party activist Ron Forthofer, editor Pamela White of the *Colorado Daily*, diversity activist Sherry Weston as well as yours truly, token poet. I read from a new piece, "Pique State," and reported on experiences at the Shadow Inauguration in DC the previous weekend, where more than 2,000 people took an oath to uphold the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and surrounded the Supreme Court building. Most chilling had been the taunt from a Bush supporter: "Get back to the back of the bus!" which haunts and propels me with particular urgency to *stay involved*.

Boulder citizens young and old—after venting their continuing outrage at the New Select Administration—also promised to get more active. The distinguished guest speakers had a lot of cogent analyses and clear-cut advice, which is, of course, the same old stuff: Keep the heat on through media bombardment, letter and Internet campaign, phone calls, boycotts,

actions in the streets; push on voting reform, pro-choice rights, environmental issues and also keep the pressure on the Democratic Party and know who the judicial candidates are on your local ballots! Kick out the jams! Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner" was even played. Jeff Milchen's reclaimdemocracy.org is a good resource. I wanted to encourage public forums like ours to start up (if they haven't yet) all over the country. As one of our poets' protest signs in DC said, using Voltaire's celebrated injunction: *Ecrasez l'infâme!*

ANNE WALDMAN

The Jack Kerouac School of
Disembodied Poetics

LITERARY REFERENCES

Eagle-eyed readers point out that in William Greider's April 2 "Stockman Returneth," it's the Queen of Hearts, not the Red Queen, who says, "Sentence first, verdict afterwards." Also, the *New Yorker* cartoon featuring Fido was actually a *Far Side* cartoon featuring Ginger. Apologies to Lewis Carroll and Gary Larson.