

*The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?*

*How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word "cowardly" is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards.*

*Our leaders are bent on convincing us that everything is O.K. America is not afraid. Our spirit is unbroken, although this was a day that will live in infamy and America is now at war. But everything is not O.K. And this was not Pearl Harbor. We have a robotic President who assures us that America still stands tall. A wide spectrum of public figures, in and out of office, who are strongly opposed to the policies being pursued abroad by this Administration apparently feel free to say nothing more than that they stand united behind President Bush. A lot of thinking needs to be done, and perhaps is being done in Washington and elsewhere, about the ineptitude of American intelligence and counter-intelligence, about options available to American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and about what constitutes a smart program of military defense. But the public is not being asked to bear much of the burden of reality. The unanimously applauded, self-congratulatory bromides of a Soviet Party Congress seemed contemptible. The unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy.*

*Those in public office have let us know that they consider their task to be a manipulative one: confidence-building and grief management. Politics, the politics of a democracy "which entails disagreement, which promotes candor" has been replaced by psychotherapy. Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen. "Our country is strong," we are told again and again.*

*I for one don't find this entirely consoling. Who doubts that America is strong? But that's not all America has to be.*

*Susan Sontag*

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Dear Dave,

Is this the Sontag piece (above) you referred to several issues ago in *Cerebus*?

Missed that *New Yorker*. Just tracked it down.

Is your recommendation to exclude her remarks from the larger discussion of foreign policy based essentially on the temporal proximity of her statements to the central event, or on the specific contents of what she has to say about it?

Given the known historical record of U.S. covert action in the Middle East over the last several decades, it's probably at least pertinent to address the striking similarity between "terrorism" and "armed insurgency." Specifically: What is the definition of "aggression" in relation to international politics? It seems that any real argument constructed on the assumption that "terrorism" oversteps civilized boundaries has to be grounded in simple definitions -- and must delineate boundaries that are clearly visible in the first place. An inconsistency in the recognition of such boundaries tends to deflate the moral platform that condemnations of uncivilized behavior issue from.

Better minds than any mentioned above excogitate in frustration on their long careers, having failed to establish these central working definitions. The United Nations has struggled since its inception with the inability of member nations to agree on even basic terms of civility when it comes to dealing with mechanized warfare. It should be clear by now that we can't simply fall back on the idea that "everyone knows what we mean." There should be a foundation for the language we use to describe these events, if those descriptions are to be treated as representative of reality, or built upon when stipulating accepted modes of behavior through legislation.

The fact that Sontag alludes to this problem in her September piece would not seem to immediately disqualify her from the larger debate when we're honestly considering the facts (though other factors could probably be sussed out if the need were to arise-- few human beings manage to fix a grip on existence without accumulating their own complicating histories, if one digs fervently and is motivated enough to eliminate their ideas from a discussion). Any sweeping generalization in this case is probably confusing the issue of legitimate dissent: When is it too soon to point out that the ship is leaking?

Two weeks? Six months?

Ray Earles

post script:

Note the subtext here. I'm not asking your to defend your position on Sontag's content -- but I am asking you to support the assertion that her comments should be automatically excluded from debate (apparently) simply because you disagree with what she has to say.

I don't think you've provided a solid argument for her irrelevance outside of simply restating your shopping list of claims about the reality of what's going on on the international stage. You might be evoking the "self-evident" too frequently here to be understood clearly.