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The Washington Dread and Denial Association Dinner



By Marty Kaplan

“Don’t do it!”

Stories, whether torn from history or made from whole cloth, can make us want to shout that. Don’t open that door at the top of the stairs. Don’t get on that boat. Don’t believe that president, general, journalist, preacher, cop.

This packs a punch in a short story Delmore Schwartz wrote when he was 21, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.” The narrator tells us he dreamed he was in a movie theater watching an old film of his parents’ courtship. His father asks his mother to marry him, she says yes — and the narrator is galvanized to stand up and shout, “Don’t do it! It’s not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous.” The whole audience is annoyed; the lady next to him tells him to be quiet, “and so I shut my eyes because I could not bear to see what was happening.” He awakens from the nightmare to the morning of his twenty-first birthday.

We can’t stop Othello from trusting Iago, or Antigone from burying her brother. We can’t stop America from swallowing President Johnson’s lie about the Gulf of Tonkin, or President Franklin Delano Roosevelt from interning Japanese-Americans. (Richard Reeves’ new book about that, *Infamy*, is horrifying.) But in real time we want to forestall new bad things from happening, and the same bad things from happening again. When we fail, sometimes it’s a failure of clairvoyance, which is forgivable; sometimes it’s a consequence of our ignorance or impotence, and sometimes it’s because our default hardwiring is denial.

Did you see any of the White House Correspondents Association dinner? Politico called it an “orgy of everything people outside the Beltway hate about life inside the Beltway... clubby backslapping, carousing and drinking between the press and the powerful.” The event, as usual, was crawling with celebrities. Cable panelists hammered the Association for going Hollywood. President Barack Obama and Cecily

Strong seemed hip to how bizarre the evening was, “bizarre” being what NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen called it on his blog PressThink just before the red carpet glam began. He compared the press corps to a “big extended family with a terrible secret that cannot be confronted because everyone knows how bad it would be if the discussion got real.” That terrible secret: the Iraq war.

“For a press that imagines itself a watchdog,” Rosen writes, “failing to detect a faulty case for war, then watching the war unfold into the biggest foreign policy disaster in memory... is an event so huge and deflating that it amounts to an identity crisis.”

That crisis hasn't happened. Instead, the festive crowd at the Washington Hilton on Saturday night looked pretty much like it did in 2002 and 2003. Getting real about that terrible secret ought to be a prerequisite for the press to serve as watchdogs of today's wars, as educators of citizen choices between “Don't do it!” and “Do it!” Instead, the Beltway press says, as Obama did of the malefactors of the Great Recession, “Let's move on.” In principle, history should guide us. In reality, Dick Cheney — “the worst president in my lifetime,” Obama called him at the WHCA — is as belligerent about Iraq today as he was when he got Colin Powell to fool us at the United Nations.

I think there's a second terrible secret those playas in that ballroom and those corporate after-parties also can't face: the complete corruption of our political system by money.

Much of the dysfunction that now poses a lethal threat to our politics and government is ultimately about money, and the media it buys. From time to time, campaign-finance reform comes up — Hillary Clinton says it's a big issue for her — but the Washington press corps treats the cesspool like old news. Maybe they've just gotten used to the smell. If the press weren't in denial, if it truly functioned as a watchdog, that corruption would be **BREAKING NEWS**, and a public informed and therefore outraged about how far gone our self-governance is would be shouting “Stop! Don't do it any more!” But as the 2016 race begins, it's normal — not bizarre and scary — when the Koch brothers say they'll spend nearly \$1 billion on the election, when Clinton supporters talk about her raising \$2 billion. There is no brake on this train, nothing — not even the Constitution — to stop runaway oligarchs and deep-pocketed industries from hijacking American democracy.

The trouble, of course, is that we're in denial about other terrible secrets as well. Our failure to prevent another financial meltdown. Or a global cyberwar. Or climate change. Or earthquakes. The devastating news from Nepal is prompting Californians to check our emergency water and batteries, but soon we'll forget again that, at any instant, the worst earthquake in thousands of years could forever mark the biggest Before and After in the lifetimes of everyone who lives through and comes after it.

I don't blame us for wearing blinders. I think our brains would explode if we faced the realities of risk and mortality all the time. Yes, I know that climate change will be irreversible unless the world puts a price on carbon pollution and changes what we grow and eat. But thinking about that makes me feel depressed and helpless. Luckily, the human brain has a built-in proclivity for processing tragedy with magical thinking, for *believing* we're being rational rather than actually *being* rational. That helps with the pain.

When Jon Stewart told a *Guardian* writer why he's quitting *The Daily Show*, he said that his job — which requires him to watch news all the time — “is incredibly depressing. I live in a constant state of depression. I think of us as turd miners. I put on my helmet, I go and mine turds, hopefully I don't get turd lung disease.” Our best satirists — Stewart, John Oliver, Stephen Colbert, whose genius 2006 routine the WHCA received like a turd — try to wake us from our sleepwalking, to shake us from our amnesia. But there's only so much reality you can take before — Hey, is that Bradley Cooper with Justice Scalia?

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyr@jewishjournal.com.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director