

**THE BLOG**

# The Fabulous Baker Boys

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By Marty Kaplan

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So here they are at last, the superheroes come to save us, the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (plus, as Washington Redskin John Riggins called her, Sandy Baby). They're the Incredibles, the Impossibles, the Justice League of East 68th St. They're the mandarins, the magi, the foreign policy priesthood, the bipartisan Biker Mice from Mars meant to rescue us from the errors of our earthly ways. A grateful nation thanks them for their report. The White House says President Bush will spend the next three weeks studying it. What, they couldn't produce a version he could earbud while working out?

I want the war in Iraq to have a happy ending, I really do. I want the Sunni to lie down with the Shiia. I want the IEDs to be beaten into iPods. I want the eagle of freedom to destroy Al Qaeda like the angel of death demoralized the Egyptians. I want the smell of democracy from Baghdad to be so strong that the Taliban will abandon Afghanistan, the Paks will shut down the madrassas, the Iranians will abandon their nukes, the Syrians will abandon Lebanon, and the Israelis and the Palestinians will embrace their ancient brotherhood in Abraham.

Oh, and I also want a pony. And a cure for cancer, an end to racism, a 32" waist, a killer backhand and Scarlett Johansson. But in my occasional moments of lucidity, I'm afraid that I also have to admit - as the kids say - that it's NGH.

September 11th, as it turns out, was not the death of irony. It was the death of maturity, and the death of democracy. It began the time of magical thinking, when theories become true if only we clap harder. It inaugurated the era of reason as treason, dissent as defeatism, and stop-and-think as cut-and-run. It enforced penalties on open discourse and political opposition so severe that neither Mao nor Stalin would have trouble recognizing their handiwork. September 11th infantilized us, intimidated us, and today, as we begin to rouse from our slumber and stupefaction, we can hardly believe the horror we have enabled.

So now we have placed the nine Fabulous Baker Boys, plus the Justice not replaced by Harriet Miers, in some sacred circle where they will have ten minutes to tell the truth and not be called America-haters.

But alas, there will be no happy ending in Iraq. Like parrots squawking "Victory!" and "Finish the Job!" and "Achieve our Objectives!" in a burning house, Bush and Cheney are determined to remain the punchline of a sick joke. Without a military draft, there will be no American force large enough to impose martial law, let alone democracy, on Iraq.

Without a return to earth of the Prophet himself, may his name be blessed, there will be no political solution in our lifetime to centuries of Islamic division and violence. All that lies ahead is a nightmare of slaughter, for them and for us; all paths lead to generations of instability, not just in Iraq, but across the region.

There are really only two questions America faces. One is to figure out the least bad course — to piece together the best way to contain the carnage, limit the damage, begin the painful, painstaking, decades-long process of rebuilding our credibility in the world, and pursue, at long last, a counter-terrorism strategy that serves our interests, not our enemies.

The other is to learn a lesson from this catastrophe. This will be played out not in the realm of reason, but in the media; it will be the mother of all political hot potatoes. The emerging Republican narrative is that the “liberal media” lost Iraq; they brainwashed the American people. On the Democratic side, the liberal hawks and triangulators are doing whatever they can to avoid sounding like Nuremberg witnesses: We were only being patriots. No one knew the truth. If Colin Powell, Hillary Clinton and the New York Times were for it, who was I to know better?

There’s a lot to be said — once we get our kids out of the line of fire — for playing the blame game. Courage and independence deserve to be rewarded by our political system, and it would be beyond sublime if the batshit insanity in our pundit class actually incurred a penalty. But that would be like bashing Brownie for Katrina, but failing to learn anything from how the Army Corps of Engineers so badly botched the levees.

There is a hole in the heart of our American democracy. For all their brilliance, for all our theoretical checks and balances, the Framers failed to protect us from panic and demagoguery. But the Founders can hardly be blamed for failing to anticipate the power of the electronic media. If there’s a shred of truth to the right-wing argument that the MSM have turned against them, there must also be some truth to the case that that same echo chamber empowered them in the first place.

I don’t know if “September 11th changed everything,” but one thing it did change is the will of the Fourth Estate to unearth and oppose official deceit. Reporting as court stenography, journalism as the false equivalence of he said/she said, news as entertainment, intellectual cowardice rationalized as respect-for-the-office, gossip disguised as analysis, faux-think tanks gaming the “expert” system, food fights masquerading as debate, gotcha games penalizing leaders’ growth and change... I’m a huge fan of the blogosphere, I really am, and a proponent of its power, but in the age of Rupert and Rove, the internets are no match for a complaisant media complicit in its own castration.

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