

## On the Left Bank

Driving to Provincetown with Scott McConnell and Kara Hopkins to interview Norman Mailer brought back memories. Getting famous writers to say yes is not

always easy. In the autumn of 1972, I was living in Paris, and William Buckley suggested I interview expatriate American writers like James Jones and Irwin Shaw for *National Review*. I was excited by the idea and went to work immediately. I rang James Jones from my room at the Plaza-Athenee, where I was living in great comfort after my *al fresco* stay in Hue, Vietnam the previous spring. Jones answered the telephone himself, and the conversation went something like this:

**Me:** Hello, Mr. Jones, my name is Taki Theodoracopulos. I write for *NR* and would very much like to interview you.

**JJ:** I am sorry, but I do not give interviews.

**Me:** This is very bad news because I'm a struggling writer who has just returned from Nam and needs to feed two children and a wife.

**JJ:** Well, we are all struggling writers, what can I say?

**Me:** Some more than others. But the kids gotta eat.

**JJ:** What did you say your name was and who do you write for?

**Me:** Taki Theodoracopulos, and it's *National Review*, the William F. Buckley Jr. conservative fortnightly.

**JJ:** You poor bastard. You better come around.

And around I went, to his beautiful house on the Left Bank, where he and

his wife Gloria treated me with great kindness and generosity of spirit. Jones revealed to me that he'd had it with Paris. "I'm going back to my roots in the good old U.S.A. Paris is really yesterday. Like Papa said, 'Paris is for the young ...'" He pointed out that the City of Lights had been irreparably damaged by the modern architecture sprouting all over the place and that the people had lost some of their spirit for the arts and literature. "The mindset is now that of Wall Street, so why settle for second best?"

A butler served us a wonderful lunch, Jones encouraging me to have seconds and thirds, obviously hoping to fatten me up before I returned to a diet of bread and beans. We talked about writing. *Time* magazine had just published some rubbish about how Irwin Shaw and Jones were *passé* because they were simple storytellers. "Yes," said Jones, "both Irwin and I write books that have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and we try to entertain our readers, not confuse them." This was before deconstructionism and magic realism had muddled the issue of literature. Still, we found plenty of ammunition against the modernists. Having taken copious notes, I bade James and Gloria *adieu* and thanked them profusely. I had spent eight hours with them, but it felt like much less. Jones looked awfully uncomfortable as I was leaving. But Gloria whispered something to him, we shook hands, and I left. I found out later that he wanted to slip me a few francs, but his wife thought I might be insulted by it.

Now comes the good part, as told to me by Irwin Shaw years later. Two weeks after my interview with James Jones, he and Irwin and their wives were dining in a bistro when the *Time* magazine article came up in conversation. Irwin was steamed up about it. "Who the hell are these no-talents to be passing judgment on us?" He then made a few choice remarks about critics and the press in general. James tried to calm him down. "Don't forget, we're quite fortunate. I had a kid come and see me recently, and he has a family to support on the lousy \$8,000 per year that Bill Buckley pays him. He had a long, strange name, a Greek one."

"That's funny," said Shaw, "I know somebody like that. His name is Taki Theodoracopulos."

"Yeah, that's him," said Jones.

"Well," said Irwin, "Taki is a friend of mine, is not married, has no kids, writes the occasional article for *NR*, and in case you're interested, I'm going to be on his yacht in the south of France next week."

"Son of a bitch," spluttered Jones, "I've been conned by a fascist."

Years later, at a Fourth of July party in Easthampton, Irwin couldn't stop chuckling about it. James Jones had passed away by then, as Irwin would soon afterwards, but he went on and on about it, actually congratulating me for having tugged at James's heartstrings. "You must have known that James was a softie underneath, didn't you?"

Well, I didn't, but successful, tough-guy writers like Jones are more often than not eager to help those whose talents don't match their own. Shaw was also like that, as is Norman Mailer. At least this time I didn't need to pretend I

was broke with children and a wife to feed. Norman knows my family, and his son Michael has cruised on my boat. Honesty, after all, is by far the best policy, but sometimes it doesn't get you the interview you desperately need.

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I greatly enjoyed the election results. I have always believed that President George W. Bush is a very smart and decent man whom the increasingly hysterical media elite have tried to paint as an idiot.

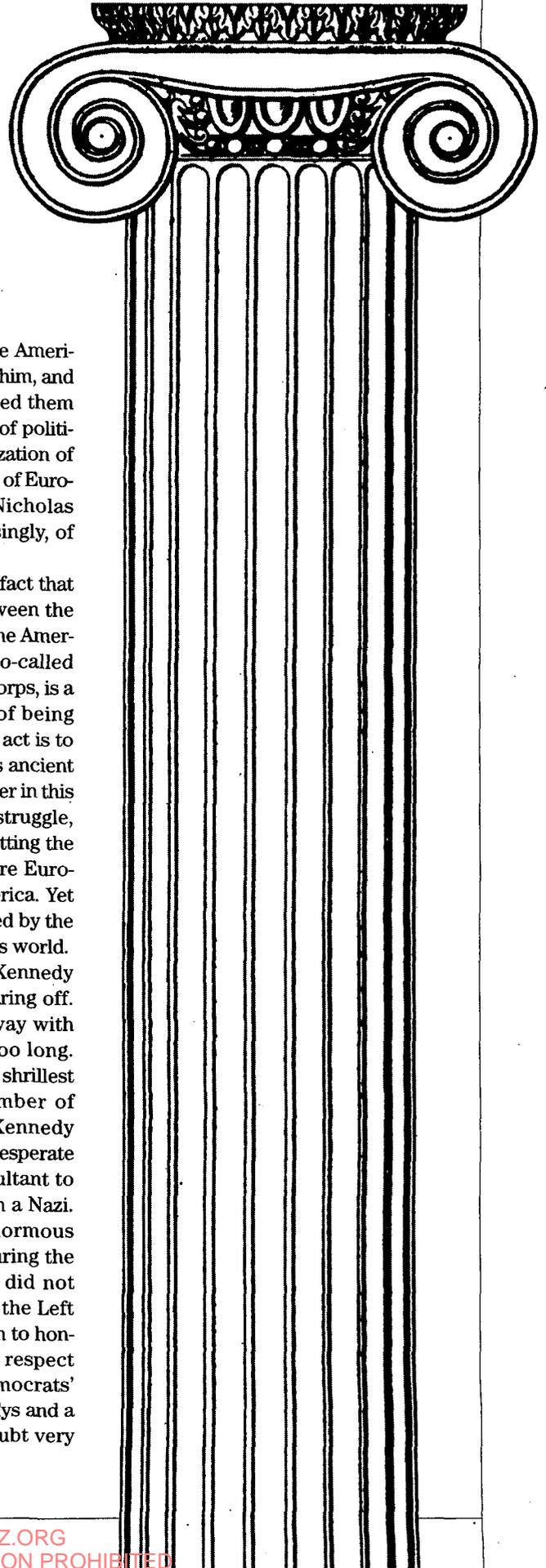
There is a wonderful moment in the film "Patton," when Rommel's commanders try to convince him that if the Allied attack comes, he will only have to face George Patton and the Americans. "They are nothing, Herr General." Rommel, a wise and great commander knew better. "Why do you say this? He has never lost."

Ditto with George W. He has lost only once. And that was early on. He is the only president with an MBA, a successful baseball team owner and oil man despite the mud which is constantly being flung at his achievements by class warriors like the egregious Paul Krugman of the *New York Times*. (Krudman would be a more apt name). Krudman's hatred for the president borders on obsession. I am not a pop psychologist, but this obsession could have something to do with bed-wetting, strange sexual fantasies, or having been molested by extra large rabbits when young. Krudman will not accept George W. Bush as president. He blames Jewish retirees who voted for Pat Buchanan, right-wing pundits working for non-tax-paying corporations, leaflet distributors in minority districts, extra large rabbits nibbling away at Democratic ballots ... anything

and anyone but the fact that the American people like George W, trust him, and voted for those George W. asked them to. Needless to say, the venom of political discourse "and this ghetto-ization of information is sadly reminiscent of European politics," according to Nicholas Kristof, also, however surprisingly, of the *New York Times*.

Sad though it may be, it is a fact that there's a great disconnect between the Beltway liberal-Left elites and the American people. Helen Thomas, so-called dean of the Washington press corps, is a case in point. Thomas' idea of being forced to commit an unnatural act is to accept a Republican victory. As ancient as she is, she has not grown wiser in this her 18th century or so. Class struggle, scare tactics against the old, pitting the poor against the rich—these are European tricks not worthy of America. Yet these are the weapons employed by the Kennedys and Krugmans of this world.

The good news is that the Kennedy magic seems to be finally wearing off. The Kennedys have gotten away with bluster and bullying for far too long. Patrick Kennedy has to be the shrillest as well as the dumbest member of Congress, just as Kathleen Kennedy Townsend had to be the most desperate candidate, allowing her consultant to call the victorious Bob Ehrlich a Nazi. Watching Ted Kennedy's enormous jowls grinning with delight during the Wellstone funeral obviously did not help. The hate-filled vitriol of the Left did not work this time. A return to honest debate marked by mutual respect and civility should be the Democrats' goal in future, but with Kennedys and a Clinton still in Congress, I doubt very much it will be. ■



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