

Rape has always been viewed as one of the most abhorrent of crimes. The new category of date or acquaintance rape expands the definition to cover a multitude of situations in which, as the editors of *Acquaintance Rape: The Hidden Crime* (1991) put it, "verbal or psychological coercion" is used to "overpower" the woman. Overcoming a woman's resistance with words, Podhoretz observes, "has in the past been universally known as seduction."

But to many feminists, he says, "a woman's no always means no, her maybe always means no, and even . . . her yes often means no." Harvard Law School's Susan Estrich says: "Many feminists would argue that so long as women are powerless relative to men, viewing 'yes' as a sign of true consent is misguided."

Why have the front lines of the war between the sexes been stretched so far? Podhoretz believes that feminism emerged in reaction to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, in which women shed many traditional feminine prerogatives along with their inhibitions. "Wanting to say no again but having signed on to an ideology that deprived them of any reason or right to say it, women were desperately looking for a way back that would not seem regressive

or reactionary." They found it in the movement for women's liberation and the belated discovery that the sexual revolution had been just "another in the long history of male conspiracies to degrade and dominate women." From there it was but a short step to "the conclusion that sex itself—heterosexual sex, that is—was the mother (or rather the father) of all these conspiracies." Shunning men altogether being too radical a solution for most feminists, they adopted the seemingly more moderate objective of working toward "a wholesale change" in the relation between the sexes. In the new sexual dispensation, women would call the shots. Hence, "any instance of heterosexual coupling that starts with male initiative and involves even the slightest degree of female resistance at any stage along the way" was deemed illegitimate.

But the "date-rape" campaign, in Podhoretz's view, faces a formidable enemy: Mother Nature. Most young men and most young women still will play "their naturally ordained parts in the unending and inescapable war between the sexes, suffering the usual wounds, exulting in the usual victories, and even eventually arriving at that armistice known as marriage."

PRESS & MEDIA

News We Can't Use

"Why the News Makes Us Dumb" by John Sommerville, in *First Things* (Oct. 1991), Inst. on Religion and Public Life, 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Journalists often bemoan the fact that Americans do not seem as interested in the news as they once were. Probably only about one-quarter of those under 35, according to a 1990 survey, read yesterday's paper. Sommerville, a University of Florida historian, is unmoved. The whole idea of "news" that must be ingested daily, he argues, is deeply flawed.

The "news," Sommerville points out, is only "what has happened since yesterday's paper or broadcast." Yet when information is sold on a daily basis, each day's report must be made to seem vitally impor-

tant—even when, as is often the case, it is ephemeral. Today's news is made to seem significant mainly by reducing the importance of yesterday's—the historical context of events.

USA Today, with its bite-sized stories, colorful charts, and obsession with celebrities and factoids, has often been condemned for trivializing journalism. In reality, he argues, it just accelerates existing trends. *USA Today* shows that news is "a concentration on the ephemeral—the flotsam and foam on the surface of history."

There is no room in news reports for

"real thinking," he says. "So news is made up of statements rather than arguments." In place of genuine debate, the news offers just a clash of opinions. "As a result, we forget how to carry on a debate, and fall back on polls." A "flippant relativism," in which truth is lost to view, is encouraged by the "evenhandedness" of the news, he contends. "The idea that all 'viewpoints' are somehow equal is the reason that we

do so badly in arguing our great social issues." Yet at the same time, the news media—in the absence of any agreed upon *scale* of values—may arbitrarily make some particular value or cause, such as helping the homeless, supremely important. But only for the moment. Tomorrow's news is almost sure to bring some newer and more urgent concern.

The "news," at bottom, is anything that sells newspapers. In the past, however, Sommerville says, editors "took a more high-handed approach and gave the public what they thought grown-up, serious-minded people would want to know about." Today's newspeople have wised up. They know "that deep down, we don't care if our daily news is entirely authentic so long as it is entertaining—like pro wrestling." The *National Enquirer*, he believes, shows where even the most respectable newspapers are headed.

Are Americans who have ceased distracting themselves with the "news" devoting their attention instead to more substantive subjects, such as philosophy, history, or religion? Sommerville is doubtful. "[T]he damage our spirits have sustained through news addiction makes it unlikely. But the first step back to health is still to Just Say No."

Booboisie Media

Novelist and wit Gore Vidal, writing in the *Nation* (Aug. 26–Sept. 2, 1991), not only finds much to admire in journalist H. L. Mencken (1880–1956), but thinks he had a keen understanding of the mass audience.

Mencken's ideal popular paper for that vast public that "gets all its news by listening" (today one would change "listening" to "staring"—at television) would be "printed throughout, as First Readers are printed, in words of one syllable. It should avoid every idea that is beyond the understanding of a boy of 10" on the ground that "all ideas are beyond them. They can grasp only events." But they will heed only those events that are presented as drama in "the form of combat, and it must be a very simple combat, with one side clearly right and the other clearly wrong. They can no more imagine neutrality than they can imagine the fourth dimension." Thus Mencken anticipates not only the television news program but the television political campaign, with its combative 30-second commercials and soundbites. Movies were already showing the way, and Mencken acknowledged the wisdom of the early movie magnates, whose simple-minded screened agons had made them rich . . .

Today, Mencken's boisterous style and deadpan hyperboles are very difficult even for "educated" Americans to deal with, and are Sanskrit to the generality. Although every American has a sense of humor—it is his birthright and encoded somewhere in the Constitution—few Americans have ever been able to cope with wit or irony, and even the simplest jokes often cause unease, especially today when every phrase must be examined for covert sexism, racism, ageism.

The TV Teacher

"As the Third World Turns" by Erik Hagerman, in *World Watch* (Sept.–Oct. 1991), 1776 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

A famous Shakespeare scholar, upon being told that he was expected to teach a graduate seminar every Wednesday evening, stared at his young department chairman

in disbelief and said, "Sir, surely there's been some mistake? Wednesday night is *Dynasty* night."

The story may be apocryphal, but no