

*Hail to the Critic*

The thoughtful *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne last summer chided presidential candidate Robert Dole for his favorable review of the box-office hit *Independence Day* and his more mixed assessment of the recent output of Hollywood in general. Dionne's swipe was only half serious, and the columnist ultimately conceded that presidents and presidential aspirants should be encouraged to take matters of culture seriously, even to comment upon them from time to time.

They should indeed. In fact, it could be argued that, apart from the role as commander in chief of the military, the greatest responsibility now devolved upon the office of the president is that of first critic.

To varying degrees, presidents have always borne this responsibility. And from the Republic's infancy on, they have learned that the "bully pulpit" is an excellent place from which to pronounce upon the currents of our cultural life. George Washington, in his Farewell Address of 1796 (see page 65) and in other pronouncements, did so to great effect. Though he didn't use the word *culture*, Washington was supremely concerned with all those educative forces that shape the character of the citizenry: schools, churches, manners and morals, as well as political institutions and what might be called the civic creed. What he said about these matters in turn helped shape the civic creed that formed generations of Americans until, possibly, the more recent, past-neglecting ones.

Today, the forces that shape the citizenry are cultural in a somewhat different sense from what Washington would have understood. The term "popular culture" embraces many but not all of them, and the most powerful emanate from a vast, interlocking arts-and-entertainment industry that each year sells more than two million books, releases more than 400 new movies, promotes more than 10,000 professional sporting events,

publishes more than 10,000 magazine and periodical titles, ships more than one billion CDs and records, and produces countless hours of television and radio programming, to name but a few of its offerings. Today, moreover, most Americans, like most other citizens of the developed world, enjoy unprecedented leisure and disposable income: the enabling conditions of unprecedented cultural consumption.

Given the time and money dedicated to cultural consumption and production, it is hardly surprising that American popular culture has become almost synonymous with the American identity and the American destiny. We may cherish older ideals—the City on the Hill, the frontier and the frontiersman, the yeoman farmer, the innovator, the independent entrepreneur, but such ideals are more tokens of nostalgia and campaign rhetoric than objects of daily dreams and strivings. Movie stars, rock musicians, and sports idols, their accoutrements and "lifestyles," the words or expressions they utter—these are such stuff as dreams are now made on.

It's understandable, perhaps noble, but ultimately pointless to bemoan this fact of contemporary life. Moreover, American popular culture is so pervasive and resourceful that it can absorb and put to use almost anything that is said against it. But if its power and ubiquity defy moralistic dismissal, they should not insulate it from sustained and intelligent criticism—or from criticism that is political as well as aesthetic.

Plato's fear of the poets, and his desire to see them banished from the ideal republic, constitute a touchstone of political commentary on the role of the arts in shaping the citizenry. Plato might have been speaking hyperbolically (and no doubt was speaking with a philosopher's envy), but his famous ban has endured as a troubling reminder of the corrupting power of seductively shaped words, sounds, and images.

Yet in other ways, Plato as much as



acknowledged that there was no way around the use of the arts as a school for character. The education he prescribed for young boys was to consist solely of athletics and music. Arguably, what Plato feared was not art as such—certainly not the great Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedies, which formed the spiritual character of the Athenian polis at its height—but bad art, such as that of the lesser playwrights, which he feared inspired nothing more than cynicism and cheap irony, the emotional props of selfish individualism.

Selfish individualism: we might linger with the phrase. It could even serve as the starting point for a political critique of contemporary popular culture. To what extent do our arts and entertainments encourage mindless self-absorption and a blithe disregard for almost everything else, including other people, common decency, and the well-being of the nation? To what extent do the various offerings of the arts-and-entertainment complex contribute to our collective coarsening and the death of fellow feeling? Such litmus questions, if asked insistently enough by our political leaders, might be of far more use to the commonweal than endless wrangling over what precisely constitutes pornography or how much or what kind of violence is appropriate for adult as well as younger audiences. (Why such an expense of energy in grading the degree of our degradation?)

Individualism lies at the heart of the American ethos, of course, and anything that challenges it stirs wrath across the political spectrum. But a degraded individualism, an individualism run amok, has become our greatest spiritual affliction. Calvinism, as the historian Jack Diggins has argued, once provided a check against the excesses of individualism. With the demise of Calvinism and its various secularized variants, those excesses abound, and they poison the moral atmosphere of the nation.

Useless hand-wringing? Perhaps. But

every political issue facing Americans today, domestic or international, relates in crucial ways to how we answer the question of what, if anything, matters beyond the boundaries of our egos. Does our culture—high, low, and middle—encourage even a minimal concern for others?

If the question is impossible to answer in the aggregate, it can be explored through specific instances. And it would pay for our political leaders to be far more specific when they engage in cultural criticism. If *Independence Day* is salubrious art, Candidate Dole (or President Clinton), then what lessons do we take from it? What does it say, for example, about nationalist isolationism versus international cooperation? What does it say about divisions within our own society, and about how they might be transcended? And what does this very Old Testament story, with a rabbinical figure playing a crucial role in the plot's dramatic reversal, have to say about religion as a contract involving humility, heroism, sacrifice, and mutual concern?

It may seem far too much to ask of what is, after all, a popular science fiction entertainment. But a nation that spends a smaller portion of its gross national product on foreign aid than do any of the 21 donor nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (including such economic giants as Portugal and New Zealand) should be prompted, through whatever vehicle available, to contemplate the meaning of its relations with the rest of the world. We've heard American pundits calling for benevolent American hegemony in the post-Cold War world. Doesn't such hegemony call for sacrifice and generosity as well as strength and leadership?

Connections need to be made. That is what good art and intelligent criticism do. And politicians, precisely because it is their business to connect individual citizens with the collective destiny of the nation, and indeed of the world, should be able and willing to speak about the works that have such power to define, unite, or divide us.

—Jay Tolson