

smear campaign” against King, Thomas notes, Kennedy was “not personally sympathetic” to the civil rights leader. After movingly addressing an Indianapolis crowd the night King was slain in 1968, Kennedy remained dry-eyed while some of his staffers wept. “After all, it’s not the greatest tragedy in the history of the Republic,” he told one aide, perhaps thinking of another assassination five years earlier.

Haunted by his brother’s death, Kennedy turned to displays of physical courage—climbing mountains, shooting white-water rapids, plunging into piranha-infested waters. There may have been an element of political calculation in some of those displays, a point that Thomas oddly relegates to a footnote: In a 1966 memo, adviser Fred Dutton recommended “at least one major, exciting personal adventure or activity every six months or so,” which would help move Kennedy “into the ‘existential’ politics that I believe will be more and more important in the years ahead.”

Alas, there were few years ahead for Kennedy. Had he lived, it is by no means certain that he would have won his party’s presidential nomination and then the election. Nor can we know what sort of president he would have been. But, writes Thomas, “he would have surely tried to tackle the problems of poverty and discrimination, and . . . to end the killing in Vietnam long before President Nixon did.” For many who were young then, and who look back yearningly on the imagined path not taken, that is enough.

—ROBERT K. LANDERS

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**THE MYSTERY OF COURAGE.**

By William Ian Miller. Harvard Univ. Press. 346 pp. \$29.95

Miller first intended to write about cowardice, a subject that most of us intuitively understand. We can identify with the Confederate soldier’s response to flying bullets and exploding shells at Antietam: “How I ran! Or tried to run through the high corn. . . . I was afraid of being struck in the back, and I frequently turned half around in running, so as to avoid if possible so disgraceful a wound.” More difficult for us to grasp is the captain in Vietnam who, as described by an infantryman,

“charged a Viet Cong soldier, killing him at chest-to-chest range, first throwing a grenade, then running flat out across a paddy, up to the Viet Cong’s ditch, then shooting him to death.” Later, the captain says to the infantryman: “I’d rather be brave than almost anything. How does that strike you?”

Miller kept finding himself drawn from the Confederate to the captain, from natural self-preservation to seemingly unnatural valor, and so he decided to write about courage. A law professor at the University of Michigan and the author of *An Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), he attempts to cover the entirety of the vast topic, including moral strength, civility, chastity, and the courage of the terminally ill, but it is his battlefield ruminations that prove the most compelling.

The fortunes of war depend on how troops handle the uncommon stress of combat, stress that turns out to be cumulative. During the intense Normandy campaign of 1944, one study found, troops’ “maximum period of efficiency occurred between 12 and 30 days, after which it decayed rapidly through stages of hyperreactivity to complete emotional exhaustion, ending in a vegetative state by day 60.” Those few men (two percent) who could keep fighting, week after week, were found to have “aggressive, psychopathic personalities.” That is the great difficulty for soldiers—performing fearlessly in battle, yet managing to temper warlike impulses in ordinary life—and it arises frequently in literature and history. Norse sagas speak admiringly of heroic warriors but warn against “uneven men” who pick fights, “exercising their courage by testing that of others.”

Aristotle maintains that the truly courageous man is virtuous in all ways, an assertion that strikes modern sensibilities as a bit too neat. Indeed, one admires those less-than-courageous soldiers who nonetheless get the job done. Some, though practically paralyzed by fear, pick themselves up and advance. Others act bravely because they fear court martial (though the author cites numerous examples of soldiers coming up short and receiving little or no punishment) or the goading of fellow combatants. Then there is the courage of the average soldier who, the author writes, “charges ahead assisted, but only in part, by his tot of rum.”

Tales of bravery, Miller observes in a brief, somewhat wistful postscript, can elicit uneasy

self-scrutiny as well as admiration: “The courage of average people forces us to make a personal accounting; it makes a powerful demand on us to conform and sets us to fearing that we might not be up to it.” If we’re not

up to it, perhaps we can hope to justify ourselves as well as the British private who explained, “I’m not afraid, Colonel, Sir. But I don’t want to be shot at. I have a wife and pigs at home.”

—JAMES CARMAN

## CONTRIBUTORS

**James Carman** is managing editor of the *Wilson Quarterly*. **Paul R. Gross** is the co-author of *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (1994) and the author of *Politicizing Science Education* (2000). **Robert K. Landers** is senior editor of the *Wilson Quarterly*. **William Lanouette** is the author of *Genius in the Shadows: A Biography of Leo Szilard, the Man behind the Bomb* (1992). **Tom Lewis**, a professor of English at Skidmore College, is the author of *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (1997). **Marty Linsky**, the author of *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policy Making* (1986) and other works on the policy process, teaches at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. **Wilfred M. McClay**, who holds the SunTrust Chair of Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, is writing an intellectual biography of the American sociologist David Riesman. **Jonathan Mirsky**, who lives in London, covered East Asia for *The Observer* and *The Times* for many years. **James Morris** is deputy editor of the *Wilson Quarterly*. **Richard Schickel**, film critic for *Time*, is the author of *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (1985) and *Matinee Idylls: Reflections on the Movies* (1999), both newly available in paperback. **Amy Schwartz** writes about cultural issues for the *Washington Post*. **Charles Seife**, the author of *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (1999), newly available in paperback, writes for *Science* magazine. **Laura Ackerman Smoller** is an assistant professor of history at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. **Jacob A. Stein**, a practicing attorney in Washington, D.C., has written for the *American Scholar* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. **Martin Walker**, the author most recently of *America Reborn: A Twentieth-Century Narrative in Twenty-Six Lives* (2000), is a Public Policy Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

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