Century Marks

Century Marks in the April 20, 2004 issue

Mea culpas: Counterterrorism expert Richard Clarke's apology for the government's failure to stop the 9/11 attacks has brought mixed reactions: some family members of 9/11 victims were deeply moved, others thought the apology was opportunistic. Another kind of apology has come from Rick Mercier, a columnist for a small newspaper in Fredericksburg, Virginia (*Free Lance-Star*, March 28). Apologizing for the media's complicity in the Iraq invasion, Mercier said: "Sorry we let unsubstantiated claims drive our coverage. Sorry we were dismissive of experts who disputed White House charges against Iraq. Sorry we let a band of self-serving Iraqi defectors make fools of us. Sorry we fell for Colin Powell's performance at the United Nations. Sorry we couldn't bring ourselves to hold the administration's feet to the fire before the war, when it really mattered. Maybe we'll do a better job next war." Mercier admitted it was odd for someone so low in the media hierarchy to apologize for the media. But we don't expect an apology any time soon from a major news outlet.

News to you: What's the alternative to relying on the mainstream media? Read more news than you watch on TV. Start the day with a good newspaper rather than network or cable news (people are particularly influenced by images). Seek news sources on the Internet or in foreign news outlets. Write letters to newspapers or TV stations challenging biased reporting or calling attention to overlooked stories. Submit opinion columns to newspapers. And develop your own programs for public-access cable channels (*MoveOn's 50 Ways to Love Your Country*, Inner Ocean).

Leadership for a change: Betty Stanley Beane became CEO of the United Way of America at a difficult stage in its history, her predecessor having been convicted of fraud. Beane kept a bowl of Crayolas on her desk, and when staff asked why she would tell them that to turn the organization around they were going to have to be creative—to color outside the lines. Beane never asked her staff to do what she wasn't prepared to do, whether it was staying with a homeless woman at a shelter or working late to stuff envelopes for mass mailings. She made decisions using the "sunshine rule": don't do it if it doesn't look good in the light of day or you wouldn't

want to read about it on the front page of the paper. In her fifth year she resigned after some of the larger United Way chapters resisted her changes by denying their dues to the national office. But Beane believed that God had called her to the position in the first place, and was now calling her to leave it (James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Christian Reflections on the Leadership Challenge*, Jossey-Bass).

Real gravity: Some literary theorists claim there is no reality outside the self, and that anyone who believes there is an independent reality beyond the subjective self is a naïve realist. Essayist Scott Russell Sanders suspects, however, that these subjectivists "hug their own children as precious beings rather than as clever fabrications; . . . they fill their bellies with food, just as if they needed nourishment to stay alive; . . . they avoid jumping out of windows for fear of falling; . . . [and] they count on being able to withdraw money from their pension funds after they retire." Although we might think we can make of reality anything we want, most of us live as though "the world stubbornly resists manipulation by our minds" (*The Force of Spirit*, Beacon).

Brain waves: Moral philosophers, at least in the Kantian camp, assume that moral judgments can be made with the power of reason alone. But Joshua Greene of Princeton University has found that moral decision-making is much more complex. In his research, people's brains are scanned with a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) device while they are asked a number of questions, including moral conundrums. Greene has found that when personal moral decisions are made—such as whether it is ever morally appropriate to take one life in order to save multiple lives—other parts of the brain are triggered besides the analytical part. Personal, moral dilemmas engage parts of the brain that trigger strong emotions, that ascertain what other people are thinking and feeling and that gather information from the way people move their lips, eyes and hands. Indeed, there is even a part of the brain that is activated when the rational and feeling parts of the brain are in conflict with each other, serving as a mediator between them (*Discover*, April).

Fog of war: The phrase "fog of war" has been used frequently in reference to the Iraqi invasion. For instance, General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said, "In the fog of war, things happen that you don't expect." The metaphor comes from the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz's 1832 book *On War*. "The great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty," he wrote, "because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not unfrequently—like the effect of a fog or moonshine—gives to things exaggerated

dimension and an unnatural appearance.” It was in the same book that he penned the oft-quoted line: “War is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means” (William Safire, *The Right Word in the Right Place at the Right Time* (Simon & Schuster).

Queen has last word: Juliana, former queen of the Netherlands, known as the “bicycling monarch” and admired for her common touch, was laid to rest recently. Even in death she created a minor stir, having chosen a female pastor to conduct the service—and one who doesn’t belong to the Netherlands Reformed Church, which was formerly the state church. The pastor belongs to the more liberal Remonstrant Brotherhood, which was expelled from the state church back in 1619, first ordained women in 1915 and accepted marriage between same-sex couples in 1986. Queen Juliana was a staunch supporter of the ordination of women (Ecumenical News International, March 31).

Overdue: A British television station has altered sign language for the deaf to exclude offensive gestures for homosexuals and ethnic or racial minorities. This station will no longer use a limp wrist for homosexuals or slanted eyes for Asians. Additionally, the sign for Jews has been changed from the stereotypically hooked nose to a hand sign that mimics a menorah (UPI, March 24).