

RAISON

EDITOR'S INTRO
HANGZHOU, CHINA / MARCH, 2008

D'ETRE

Our brief history shows us that mankind's brightest days often follow on the heels of our darkest hours. Time and again, humanity rises from tragedy, innovation from catastrophe, and promise from despair. We, as national and global citizens, need that resilience now more than ever.

We are faced with a new generation of challenges and our national and global political systems are growing increasingly divided, dysfunctional, and incapable of addressing the crises. The United States, along with other nations, is in a dialogical crisis. The political discourse in the U.S. has degraded into the white noise of mass media and shouting on the blogosphere. In this context, as *Discourse* is launched, I feel both frustration at the state of affairs and hope for the future. I am proud to welcome the first issue of this publication and hope this small but powerful journal will do its part to encourage a greater political and social conversation.

I write first as a citizen of the U.S. but also as a global citizen with the understanding that, in our increasingly shrinking world, the policy of one country affects many countries. For this reason, the breakdown of the U.S. political system poses both national and global dilemmas. Too often our public dialogue is polarized into Manichean talking points, and now more than ever the vitality of our country, democracy, and the world rests on finding reasoned solutions to our greatest crises. Too often, the vital issues are not substantively discussed, and this comes at a high cost to all those who stand to be affected by U.S. policies. However, the U.S. is in the midst of a presidential election cycle that has the potential to unite the country once again and to begin to repair its international relationships.

In a time of a rapidly-warming planet, formaldehyde saturated FEMA trailers, global environmental degradation,

education inequality, a shrinking middle class, a nine trillion dollar national debt, cronyism in government, un-warranted wiretaps, renditions, a seven billion dollar Chinese trade deficit, destabilization across the Middle East, a global AIDS epidemic, and an ongoing genocide, our ideals and our future rest on a strong national and international dialogue.

We must reject the notion that we are so greatly divided, both as Americans and as people of this ever-shrinking world. I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to call home the bluest state in the union, Massachusetts, the reddest, Utah, and the dearest to me, my home swing state of Montana. What is striking to me, in contrast to the widespread portrayal of polar opposite red and blue Americas, is how similar the people of those three states are. Certainly, I feel slightly more conservative in Massachusetts, slightly more liberal in Utah, and more at home in

Montana, but by and large the differences are far less than we are led to believe. At the end of the day, all adults worry about putting food on the table, protecting their families, and doing their part to better their small piece of humanity. These commonalities are true not only of most Americans but of most people. Our real differences are few, but our fears and frustrations have made us forget our commonalities, and divisive politics has sought to exploit these fears.

The obstacles we face are not distinctly Republican or Democratic issues. Our one billion brothers and sisters living on less than a dollar a day do not care whether you wear a donkey or an elephant on your lapel. When the oil runs out and our skies and rivers are as polluted as China's, it will not matter whether your tie is red or blue — or, for that matter, whether you are American or Chinese. Nuclear proliferation and loose nukes in terrorist hands pose urgent threats, global as well as national. Similarly, the fact that genocide is still occurring somewhere on the planet should keep everyone up at night.

Such issues have the potential to destroy us all — or to unite us in common cause.

It is both macabre and strangely appropriate to recall a campaign speech made 40 years ago during the 1968 presidential election. The day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down, Robert F. Kennedy, the likely Democratic nominee, gave a speech entitled, *On the Mindless Menace of Violence*. He spoke from Cleveland to an America similarly torn apart when he said bluntly, “This is a time of shame and sorrow. It is not a day for politics.” It was an America divided by violence and a seemingly unending war in Vietnam. It was an America living in fear of the spread of Communism. He spoke of the need for national dialogue with urgency, saying :

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We seemingly tolerate a rising level of violence that ignores our common humanity and our claims to civilization alike. We calmly accept newspaper reports of civilian slaughter in far-off lands. Too often we honor swagger and bluster and wielders of force; too often we excuse those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams of others. Some look for scapegoats, others look for conspiracies, but this much is clear: violence breeds violence, repression brings retaliation, and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our soul. / Robert F. Kennedy

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— Today, the U.S. is engaged in another war, with limited and dwindling support from international partners. Thousands of Coalition soldiers and hundreds of thousands of civilians have died in the war in Iraq, and yet, by and large, college campuses across this country are deafeningly silent. Afghanistan, which provided al-Qaeda sanctuary, continues to be a footnote, except for those families that have sons and daughters, fathers and mothers serving there. In homes across America, from Massachusetts to Mississippi to Montana, we are living our lives with a business-as-usual mentality. It is not the purpose of this publication to argue for or against the war in Iraq, but rather to insist that these national conversations must exist beyond temporal vanity.

I do not believe that this dialogical crisis is a result of apathy, but rather of assumed political paralysis. Although the information is constant and the chatter loud, discourse quickly breaks down into reactionary irrelevance. Modern media allows us to experience the Iraq war in real time, to visually witness the polar ice caps melting, to see the national failure in New Orleans — all of which presumably should result in our being more engaged and powerful as an electorate. However, the constant inundation of information, and at times deliberate misinformation, has led many to disengage from a predicament that seems simultaneously intolerable and insoluble. The result is that we stop discussing and blame the other half of the country or world. Reactionary media is strengthened by the breakdown while thoughtful media receives less focus due to its slower pace, its lack of reliance on sound bites, and its willingness to look at the complexities. The discourse favors reductionism and sensationalism without reflection.

Yet, the media is not the only player. As national and international citizens, we are responsible and accountable both for the politicians we elect and the solutions they select. We

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are now in need of the same “cleansing” RFK called for nearly half a century ago. We can either find reasoned solutions to our immigration crisis or allow fear to push the discourse to xenophobia. We can engage the world to work together in the fight against radical ideologies or we can allow fear and vengeance to guide our foreign policy. We must recognize our commonalities and our shared fate in the outcomes of today’s threats. The world has become too small for us to ignore the horrors on the other side of the globe or to pretend to be able to fight them on our own. But we cannot expect to have effective dialogue abroad until we resurrect ours at home.

Though from a different era, RFK’s appeal for unity is as necessary today as it was when it was made in 1968 :

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We must admit the vanity of our false distinctions among men and learn to find our own advancement in the search for the advancement of others. We must admit in ourselves that our own children’s future cannot be built on the misfortunes of others. We must recognize that this short life can neither be ennobled nor enriched by hatred or revenge. Our lives on this planet are too short and the work to be done too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in our land. But we can perhaps remember, if only for a time, that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life; that they seek, as do we,

nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can.

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These words are still both sobering and hopeful. RFK was lost to the very violence he spoke out against, America continued to be torn apart by race, and U.S. foreign policy was often misguided by fear. At times it may seem like we are moving toward a darker age. Racism and bigotry are still at times seen at even the most respected American universities, and racism like that seen in the Jena Six case quietly yet sometimes blatantly dominates much of obscure and popular American blog culture. Similarly, the same sort of fear that not so long ago led us to accept evil as deliverance from evil is leading us today down a dangerous path of foreign policy in response to fundamentalist totalitarianism. Yet for every example of failure, there are several examples of progress. Most symbolically in the context of RFK’s speech, among the most viable candidates for president of the United States in the 2008 election are a woman and an African-American. The war in Vietnam is becoming a distant nightmare for both that nation and the U.S., and, of course, the era of Cold War polarities is over.

I have faith that today, just as when RFK addressed the people of Cleveland and the world, the obstacles we face are great but surmountable. I hope that this publication

can, at least in a small way, serve as a forum for rebuilding the much needed cooperation of thought that can productively influence our efforts at building a sustainable future. *Discourse* is committed to challenging conventional wisdom, investigating the most difficult topics, and testing new and old ideas in the light of day.

Please join us in starting this exchange. We fully welcome work from students, professors, politicians, and professionals alike. We are interested in all mediums of thought, whether they take the form of analytical research, policy analysis and recommendations, perspective pieces, poetry, prose, art, or photography. We promise to explore popular and unpopular ideas while remaining dedicated to the pursuit of an intelligent, reasoned, civil *Discourse*.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our contributors for the insights their work offers and the urgency that it demands. I would like to personally thank our Senior Editorial Advisors, Douglas Glandon and David Taffel. Their dedication to this journal can be seen on every line. *Discourse* owes its material existence and powerful design to Giorgio Baravalle and his colleagues at de.MO. On behalf of *Discourse*, I would also like to thank *The Atlantic*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Paris Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Social Research* for supporting us in this endeavor. Finally our greatest thanks go to Director Sherman Teichman and Associate Director Heather Barry at the Institute for Global Leadership at Tufts University. Their support, guidance, and unshakable dedication to the power of reason and the exchange of ideas established the foundation for this publication.

Thank you,
Padden Guy Murphy
Founding Editor, *Discourse*