

His political and literary thought cannot—or at any rate should not—be divided. Today, whether as a source of amusement, controversy, or insight, the political writings overshadow his earlier work as a critic. But it was in that capacity that he first made his mark beyond the newsrooms of Baltimore. In his monthly reviews for *The Smart Set* and his 1917 *Book of Prefaces*, Mencken waged a one-man culture war against the regnant school of thought that held the purpose of literature to be moral edification. For Mencken, always skeptical of higher values, the purpose of literature was simply to show life as it is, in all its amorality. He championed writers who seemed to share this belief, most notably Theodore Dreiser, who by the standards of the day was considered risqué—indeed, his books were subject to being banned from the mails and suppressed by the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice. Such measures forced Mencken to carry his campaign beyond the review pages and into the courts. On both fronts, he won.

His most famous victory came in the “Hatrack” case of 1926, with which Rodgers opens her biography. The incident, which put Mencken himself in the dock, concerned a nonfiction story by Herbert Asbury—since more famous for writing *The Gangs of New York*—that ran in the April issue of *The American Mercury*. Asbury related the tale of a small-town prostitute shunned by the local churches who took her clients to graveyards for their trysts—Protestants to the Catholic cemetery and Catholics to the Masonic one, so as not to cause scandal. The story was cheap and vulgar, and Mencken, as editor of the *Mercury*, thought little of it. But, hard up for copy, he published it anyway.

Once he did, the New England Watch and Ward Society—whose leader, Rev. Franklin Chase, had long been a butt of Mencken’s derision—pounced, warning

No actual al-Qaeda terrorists have been identified and caught, but some American journalists might have been among the targets of the post-9/11 presidential order

to the National Security Agency (NSA) to tap terrorist communications secretly without judicial oversight. Given the imminence of the threat, the White House’s panicked response was understandable, but anyone who has worked in the intelligence community knows that teltap operations start with collecting and analyzing large volumes of raw data. Very few al-Qaeda members were known, much less their cellphone numbers, which meant that the investigation was of necessity wide in scope, seeking to establish linkages through identified individuals regarded by the U.S. government as extremists. NSA has admitted that the investigation was not limited to known al-Qaeda operatives and, according to one source, was a fishing expedition that sought to look at many individuals quickly. As is often the case where hard intelligence is lacking, many of the targets were little more than vaguely defined persons of interest who seldom had actual connections to terrorist groups. Some were contacts or sources for journalists in the United States who were working on terrorism stories and who were in turn linked to the ostensible targeting of al-Qaeda when their numbers came up on telephone logs. The presence of a number of American journalists in the investigative pool was undoubtedly a major reason the government chose not to apply to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court for authorization for the teltaps in the first place, as it would have raised both First and Fourth Amendment issues.



America’s Persian Gulf emirate allies have been watching the Iraqi elections warily and have begun making contingency plans against a much greater threat than that posed by deposed dictator Saddam Hussein.

Baghdad has been the traditional enemy of countries like Kuwait, but there are concerns that a break-up of Iraq will lead to worse evils, most notably the creation of a Shi’ite rump state that will effectively be controlled by the Iranians. According to defense sources in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, contingency planning is now focused on the threat from a united Iran and Shi’ite Iraq. Saudi Arabia is also engaged in similar planning. There is also a growing perception that Tehran poses an additional threat through its program to develop nuclear resources, particularly as Israel has made clear its intention to strike against the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr. If that were to take place, Iran almost certainly would retaliate by carrying out its stated intention to attack Israel and use intermediate-range missiles and its air force to strike all targets in the region that are linked to the U.S., which would include bases in Iraq, Camp Doha in Kuwait, Central Command in Qatar, and the Navy base in Bahrain, drawing the United States into the conflict. It would also undoubtedly unleash a wave of terrorism throughout the region and against the U.S. There are also civil-defense concerns. A bombed reactor could result in a Chernobyl-type meltdown that would produce contamination disastrous to the entire Gulf region.

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newsdealers in Massachusetts that the story contravened state obscenity laws and threatening anyone who sold the magazine with prosecution. When Mencken received word of this, he resolved to go to Massachusetts himself—both on principle and, no doubt, with an eye toward publicity—and sell a copy on the Boston Common. A circus ensued. Chase himself was soon on hand to buy the magazine and have Mencken arrested. Editor traded *Mercury* for 50-cent coin—which he bit, for good measure—and was promptly hauled off to the police station and booked.

He expected a protracted legal battle, and stakes were high not only for the *Mercury*, which stood to be prohibited in other jurisdictions and barred from the mail, but also for Mencken, who faced jail time. But in the event, the judge, after reading the magazine for himself, threw out the case. Boston's intelligentsia feted Mencken as a hero of free speech, and symbolically at least the victory helped bring down Comstockery and censorship laws nationwide. Mencken did not emerge from the episode entirely unscathed: the *Mercury* had lost some \$20,000 in court costs, perhaps ten times that much in today's money, and the Post Office did indeed suppress the April issue. But the Watch and Ward was discredited, and before long Chase was dead, killed, as legend has it, by the strain of the battle.

The "Hatrack" affair was a *cause celebre* on the order of the Scopes trial of a few years before—in which Mencken had also played a role, not least by christening it the "Monkey Trial"—and afforded Mencken an outright triumph. But what he might have made of the long-term consequences of his victory over Comstockery is open to question. Years before publishing Asbury's story, he had lamented that "The American puella is no longer naive and charming; she goes to the altar of God with a

learned and even cynical glitter in her eye. The veriest school-girl of today knows as much as the midwife of 1885." He objected to this, he wrote, not on moral but aesthetic grounds. All the same, his personal views were more conservative than his political and literary principles might suggest.

To his enemies, Mencken was "the idol of the earthly, sensual, devilish elements of our country," as the Anti-Saloon League of Virginia once declared. And in fact, he did have a dash of the lothario about him: not for nothing was he known to a few friends as "the German Valentino." Hobson and Rodgers devote considerable room in their biographies to his many lady friends—actresses, aspiring writers, Follies girls, and more. But Mencken was no libertine and had little patience with those who were. His friendship with Sinclair Lewis was strained to the breaking point by Lewis's dipsomania and shabby behavior. And he found repugnant Dreiser's adulteries and prodigious womanizing—while she lived with her husband, hardly a day went by that Mrs. Dreiser did not come home to find lipstick prints here and discarded brassieres there. The married Mencken, by contrast, was impeccably faithful to his wife in their five years together.

As for salacious literature, while he defended Dreiser's controversial novel *The "Genius"* and fought against the censorship even of such works of dubious worth as Asbury's story, he did not believe all things permissible in the name of art. He was dismayed when Dreiser sent him a play he had written about—in Hobson's words—a "sexually depraved murderer." "I say the subject is forbidden, and I mean it," he wrote to his friend. "It is all very well enough to talk of artistic freedom, but it must be plain that there must be a limit in the theatre, as in books." Where certain subjects were concerned, "The very mention of

them is banned by that convention on which the whole of civilized order depends."

In other respects, too, there could be a surprisingly traditionalist side to Mencken, one little remarked upon in his biographies. This was a man, after all, who lived his entire life in the city of his birth and spent most of it in his childhood home, 1524 Hollins Street. Even his garish attitude toward religion had its limits—though he would have no truck with any theology, he spared older, more liturgical churches much of the invective he heaped upon relatively recent, enthusiastic denominations. Critics accused him of being soft on Catholicism—he withheld the brunt of his fury from his family's ancestral Lutheranism, too—and, like Santayana, he could enjoy the charm of old Christendom. In 1920, he concluded an appreciation of the high Middle Ages with the observation that "Religions ... like castles, sunsets and women, never reach their maximum of beauty until they are touched by decay."

Mencken's longtime friend Philip Goodman offered another interpretation of Mencken's apparent weakness for liturgical faiths, if we can trust the account of the embittered Charles Angoff, Mencken's former assistant on *The American Mercury*. "Mencken is a lickspittle, like all Germans. He loves authority. The more authority an institution has the more he likes it," Goodman purportedly told him. Angoff's motives notwithstanding, there is probably some truth in the remark. Mencken did adore Germany and did indeed respect certain kinds of authority—in part because of his low opinion of democracy. His libertarianism was unabashedly of the elitist variety, concerned with the freedom of the noble man as much as with the nobility of the free man, as Michael Wreszin observed in relation to one of Mencken's contemporaries.

“All government,” he once wrote, “in its essence, is a conspiracy against the superior man.” In a democracy, that was doubly true. “I can be only an indifferent citizen of a democratic state,” he confessed in 1922, “for democracy is grounded upon the instinct of inferior men to herd themselves in large masses, and its principal manifestation is their bitter opposition to all free thought. In the United States, in fact, I am commonly regarded as a violent anti-patriot.” He hardly exaggerated—during the First World War, Mencken came under suspicion of being an agent of the kaiser. He wasn’t, and unlike many German-Americans Mencken endured little harassment. But the spectacle of a putatively free press trucking to George Creel and the proliferation of patriotic groups like the Boy Spies of America and the American Protective League sickened him and served to confirm his beliefs about the place of liberty in a democracy. “The kinds of courage I really admire are not whooped up in war, but cried down, and indeed become infamous,” he wrote.

Fifty years after his death, Mencken’s journalism still entertains and provokes; his literary criticism—once *avant-garde*, now rather old-fashioned—holds up well; and his life retains enough interest to warrant a few more biographies beyond the ones we already have. But in the midst of a perpetual war on terror, with critics of the president once again branded unpatriotic, Mencken’s timeliest quality remains his bedrock principles, particularly his commitment to civil liberty in times of hysteria—and regardless of popular opinion. Would that we could bargain with Hades and trade him for a Judy Miller or a David Frum. But as it is, we can content ourselves with Mencken’s works, and be thankful that Marion Rodgers has reminded us of a time when at least one journalist held to an unswerving commitment to liberty, Comstocks and Creels be damned. ■

Political Climate

The success of democracy may depend less on culture than geography.

By Nabil O. Al-Khowaiter

WHEN STAFF SGT. Larry Simmons, a Floridian from a Marine reconnaissance unit, saw the Euphrates River for the first time on March 23, 2003, he was not impressed. *Guardian* correspondent James Meek quotes him as saying, “You learn about the Euphrates in geography class, and you get here and you think: ‘This is the Euphrates? Looks like a muddy creek to me.’” Indeed, his words were true. Just as the Euphrates today “looks like a muddy creek,” the Iraq of today is but a shadow of the magnificent ancient civilizations that once thrived on its banks. One wonders, then, what happened to the Euphrates and what happened to Iraq—or as it was once known, Mesopotamia—that could have brought it down to this level.

The scientific evidence that has accumulated over the last 40 years indicates that the fate of Iraq, as well as the fate of many other once prosperous regions around the world, has been tied closely to major changes in their climates. In fact, we may very well be on the verge of a Copernican revolution in the way historians study and analyze the rise and fall of civilizations. In an April *New Yorker* article, “The Climate of Man-II,” Elizabeth Kolbert lists four different civilizations, from the 4,300 year old Akkadian Empire of modern Iraq to the A.D. 750 Mayan civilization of Central America, whose collapse has been firmly tied by scientific evidence to climate changes that led to prolonged droughts. Anthropologists like Brian Fagan and

Jared Diamond, with support from climatologists like Hubert Lamb, have been at the forefront of this movement to reinterpret human history through the lens of climate.

Much of this research and evidence is also relatively new, having been gathered mainly in the 1990s from soil samples and undersea core analyses. As the scientific evidence about the role of climate change in the rise and fall of human societies from the dawn of history to the present day accumulates and comes closer to the 21st century, will it also address the thorny issues of the day regarding the clash of civilizations and ideas? What if the rise of the West and the demise of the East over the last 500 years was due to climate change and not to the superiority of any particular ideas developed in the West? Furthermore, what if the very ideas that evolved in the West, like representative government and universal suffrage, were a reflection of societal distributions of wealth that happened as a result of climate-induced economic changes?

What then does this say about the pitiful state of the modern Middle East today, with its grinding poverty at one level and its autocratic governments at another? Should Arabs today tell Shakespeare’s Cassius that he was wrong to say, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.” Maybe, just maybe, the overwhelming reason for the lack of economic and political development in the