

# The Nation.

## STILL CLINTON'S SHOW?

by WILLIAM GREIDER

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**RACING  
INTO 2004**

by JOHN NICHOLS

**BUSH'S GULF  
OF CREDIBILITY**

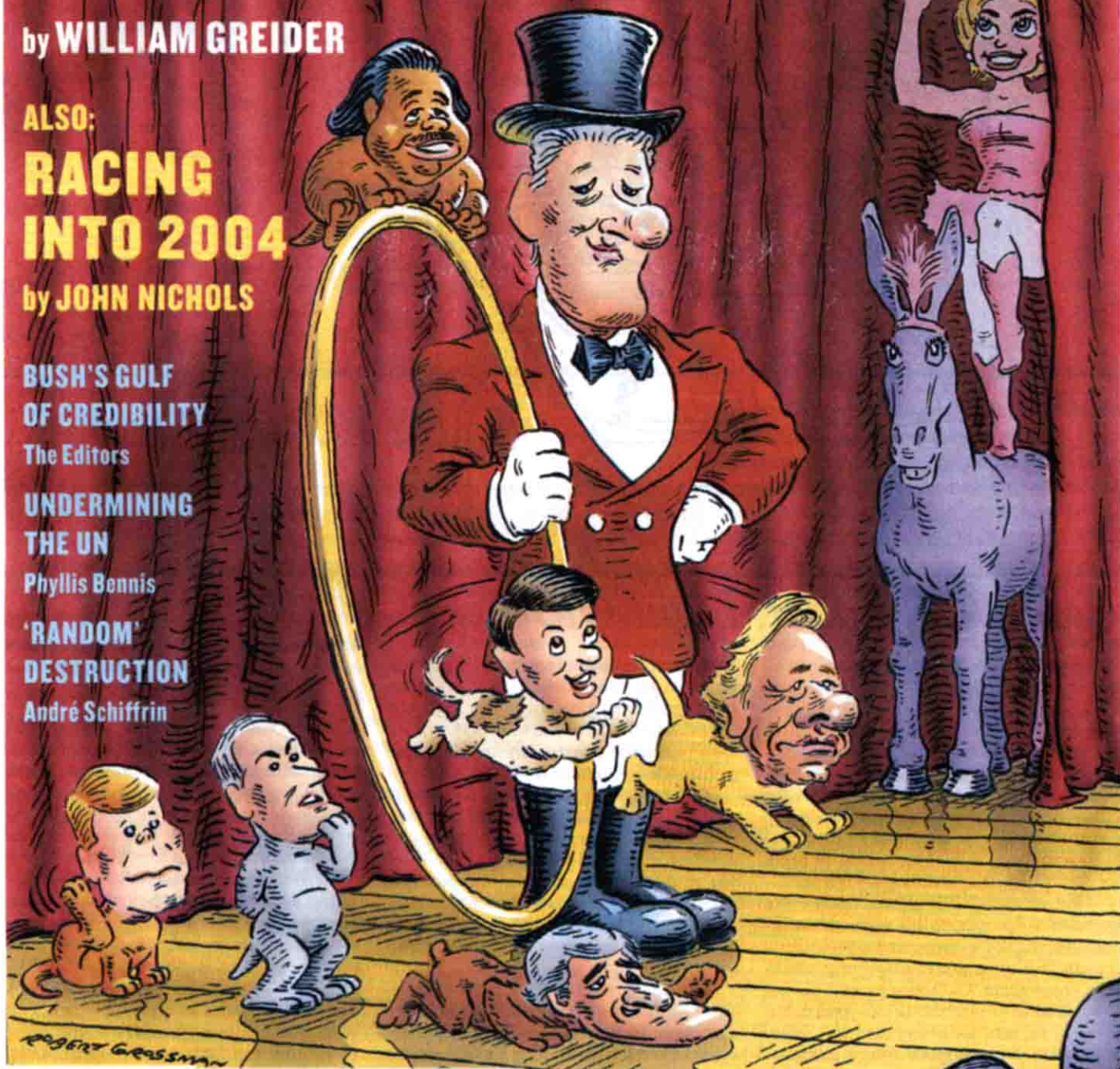
The Editors

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THE UN**

Phyllis Bennis

**'RANDOM'  
DESTRUCTION**

André Schiffrin



ROGER GRASSMAN

# Among the Lotus-Eaters

MARC SIEGEL

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**THE PIANO TUNER.** By Daniel Mason. Knopf. 318 pp. \$24.

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In 1886 the British are fighting an imperial war on another continent with the express goal of suppressing and maintaining control of the natives. Sound familiar? In *The Piano Tuner*, Daniel Mason gives us an alternative—it is the lush spiritual healing of old Burma—fighting against war not only with resistance but also with beauty, with the soulful, mystical songs of regional history. In the post-modern day, with another passionless war looming, we ache for just these sorts of songs, and many of us are haunted by their absence.

Like Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Mason's protagonist, Edgar Drake, goes on a spiritual voyage of self-discovery while traveling, in this case to Burma, where he finds an antidote to white imperialism in the songs and beauty of the native culture.

For months the images trembled in the back of his eyes, at times flaming and fading away like candles, at times fighting to be seen, thrust forward like the goods of jostling bazaar merchants. Or at times simply passing, blurred freight wagons in a traveling circus, each one a story that challenged credibility, not for any fault of plot, but because Nature could not permit such a condensation of culture without theft and vacuum in the remaining parts of the world.

But Nature cannot prevent the assault on this sensibility by soldiers. In Mason's novel, surgeon Maj. Anthony Carroll, an eccentric lover of music and a practitioner of the latest in botany and medicine, creates his own color of resistance, combining local mysticism and herbal cures with the

microscope and stethoscope. This automatically makes him a threat to the motherland, reminiscent of Conrad's Kurtz, chief of the Inner Station and object of Marlow's quest, who also ignores the hypocrisy of the European rulers and instead exchanges music and poetry with the natives.

In *The Piano Tuner*, the British War Office sends Drake, a bespectacled, bookish piano tuner, to Burma as a spy—of course without informing him that he will be doing anything other than tuning a piano, an 1840 Erard grand. This magnificent instrument is one of the first and greatest pianos ever made; it is at once a provider of musical cures, an embodiment of the best of the soothing spirit and a powerful tool of seduction. The British are in fact afraid that the piano is being used by Carroll as an instrument of diplomacy on behalf of his own rogue group as it negotiates with the Russians and the French, and they are hoping that Drake can find this out for them.

But as Drake travels toward his task, he is rapidly immersed in an adventure of beauty and poetics that soon replaces his linear purpose. On the ship he meets the "Man with One Story," who relates the mystical overcoming that cost him his hearing and changed his life. This man's encounter with an otherworldly woman, real or imagined, occurred at the very edge of consciousness and dream, between life and death.

I have never seen a vision so beautiful and yet so hideous. With woman's eyes

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she stared at me, but her mouth wavered, like a mirage, not the mouth and nose of a woman, but of a deer, its skin soft with fur. I couldn't speak, and there was a howling, and the sand took motion once again, spinning about us, blurring her. I raised my hands to my eyes.

And then again the sand stopped.

When Drake reaches his destination, he falls under the spell of Carroll, becoming his disciple, much as Marlow responds to Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. The protagonists in both books learn to see the ravenous imperialistic appetite in sharp contrast to the innocence of its victims. Here's Conrad, speaking through Marlow:

But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.

But *The Piano Tuner* is not just imitation Conrad. The structure is patterned after the great master's, but in this contemporary novel, spiritual healing is more the focus, as Carroll mixes mysticism with the latest science in a way that might well serve as a lesson for today's circum-spect physician. Carroll is among the first in the region to understand malaria and smallpox, using quinine to cure the former, cowpox to prevent the latter. His therapies include the local herbs, opium, songs and, of course, the soothing musical speech of his piano. The local people are devoted to him, and he dispenses cures and deathly news with equal displays of care and aplomb. Given modern medicine's almost automatic consideration of the latest chemical treatment, sometimes only an atom different from the one that preceded it, it is refreshing to consider a time and place where the latest discoveries are no more or less important than the power of herbs or song. The good doctor has neither respect for nor adherence to narrow views of medicine and healing.

Approve of what? Of opium? It is one of the best medicines that I have, an antidote for pain, diarrhea, coughing, perhaps the most common symptoms of the diseases I see here. Anyone who wishes to make policies on such subjects should come here first.

On the surface, Carroll seems to be a heroic figure with nothing to hide, a soothsayer of almost mythic proportions, whose love song on the flute once halted a battle in midshot. But as the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that the British officers aren't the only ones keeping their secrets from Drake. The persuasive doctor *has* in fact been committing treason against the British, using the French-made Erard and its tuner to preside over meetings with local Shan princes, where the doctor is representing his own interests, and perhaps those of the French or the Russians. Further, he has been employing his mistress, Khin Myo, to entice Drake unknowingly into this alliance, as he stays in Burma long past the time necessary to tune an eighty-eight-key musical instrument.

Carroll's deceptions make him a more believable if less sympathetic character. The duality helps explain his seductiveness; the people who stay with him are under his spell, not just devotees of his altruism. His charisma is self-serving, as charisma often is. Yet in the end, not knowing exactly how far Carroll has gone in cheating those who care about him, we are left feeling unsatisfied. Mystery is preserved, but definition or ultimate clarity is sacrificed.

As Carroll sends Drake and the Erard away on a river raft, he gives him a letter containing a page torn from *The Odyssey*:

My men went on and presently met the  
Lotus-Eaters,  
nor did these Lotus-Eaters have any  
thoughts of destroying  
our companions, but they only gave them  
lotus to taste of.  
But any of them who ate the honey-sweet  
fruit of the lotus  
was unwilling to take any message back,  
or to go  
away, but they wanted to stay there with  
the lotus-eating  
people, feeding on lotus, and forget the  
way home.

As Carroll writes in the accompanying note, Edgar Drake has clearly "tasted." But in questioning the doctor's seditious practices and in vying for his lover, Drake is no longer useful to the doctor and is dispatched down the river toward his eventual capture and worse at the hands of British

soldiers. An unanswered question remains: Is this still Carroll the renegade, primitive and calculating out of necessity, or has he taken on the self-serving characteristics of his oppressors?

This novel was written by a medical student, though it is clearly far from a typical medical student's or doctor's book. At first examination it doesn't appear to be about medicine at all. Yet buried at the heart of this lyrical historical tale is a serious question about spiritual and physical healing and its use in countering the abuses of monolithic displays of power, in this case war. War extinguishes the spirit, art, but the various forms of healing regenerate it. We see it in Carroll's clinic as well as in the first descriptions of Carroll the legend, stopping the impending battle with his flute: "A Shan love ditty... no man could kill one who played a song that reminded him of the first time he had fallen in love."

*The Piano Tuner* is filled with myth and story and songs of mourning. These almost hallucinatory notions and experiences are contrasted with the more rational explanations of the British imperialists, who would override the native spirit with a more mechanical view.

From deep within the rock came a singing, strange and haunting. He pulled his head away. The sound stopped. He leaned back. Again he could hear it. It sounded familiar, like thousands of soprano voices warming up to sing. "Where is it coming from?" he shouted.

The rock is hollow, they are vibrations from the river, a high-pitched resonance. That is one explanation. The other is Shan, that it is an oracle. Those who seek advice come here to listen.

For Drake, music is the central expression that combines his yearnings with what is most beautiful in the world. Evolving from the mundane world of the piano tuner to the rich world of the musician, he chooses a song to play for the Erard piano that is bound by strict rules of counterpoint, made of notes but lacking melody, mathematical, with emotion emanating from the order of the notes. If the strategy of music utilizes mathematical structure in order to release emotion, in *The Piano Tuner* the strategy of war views emotion as a weakness to be suppressed or exploited.

If Carroll is using the music to cement a treaty, Drake is committed to the beauty. It is the beauty that will, one hopes, save Drake's Burma from the machinations of

military action. But as we turn from this occasionally unfocused yet lush song of a novel back to the impending wars of our own mixed-up world, I feel compelled to

ask the following question: Since the time of *The Piano Tuner's* Burma, has the pervasive war mentality overcome our arsenal of healing songs? ■