

# The New Criterion

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## Incontinent moralism

*On Susan Sontag and the war in Kosovo.*

It struck us as grimly appropriate that the reading list for Wesleyan's course on pornography should include Susan Sontag along with the Marquis de Sade and *Hustler*. The aging doyenne of radical chic seems to show up at every party where the protagonists "push people over the line, whatever their line is." It was not all that long ago that Miss Sontag was denouncing America as an evil imperialistic state that, "founded on a genocide" itself, seemed bent on exporting murder and mayhem to other parts of the globe. Not that Miss Sontag reserved her animus solely for Americans; white Europeans in general qualified for unbridled contempt. As she put it in one of her more memorable formulations, "The white race *is* the cancer of human history."

As far as we know, Miss Sontag never retracted that statement (though she later suggested that it might be unfair—to cancer). Yet the imperatives of seeming always more progressive than one's neighbor are stringent. So many causes, so little time! Who knows where the fickle finger of trendy smugness will next land: Vietnam, Cuba, Bosnia, Rwanda... ? At the moment, obviously, the digit of progressive anxiety is pointing unequivocally toward Kosovo. After all, Britain's prime minister recently declared that NATO's assault on the Milosevic regime was "the first progressive war." So how could Miss Sontag resist? She couldn't. A few years ago, while demonstrating solidarity with the oppressed of Sarajevo by staging a production of *Waiting For Godot* with her friend Annie Liebowitz, Miss Sontag declared that "Sarajevo is the Spanish Civil War of our time." In a way she was right: Sarajevo, like the Spanish Civil War, was an irresistible, miasma-producing magnet for pontificating moralism.

Yesterday Sarajevo, today Kosovo. It makes a kind of sense. And yet there is something vertiginous about the spectacle of Susan Sontag writing in *The New York Times Magazine* a few weeks ago about the wimps who worry about "Helpless Europe being dragged into a bellicose folly by Big Bad America." Asking "how can you stop those bent on genocide without making war," Miss Sontag concludes that "Europe needs its overbearing America."

Well, maybe it does. But the fact is that NATO's adventures in Kosovo (with accidental stops in Sofia and elsewhere) have generated more confusion than any foreign-policy gambit

since Vietnam. That many conservatives agree with Susan Sontag, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Bianca Jagger (to name only a few left-wingers who have lately turned in their dove's feathers for hawk's talons) only adds to the confusion. For us, NATO's bumbling (and, incidentally, illegal) aggression in Kosovo is a lamentable and extremely dangerous fiasco—"a foreign policy debacle," as Owen Harries, editor of *The National Interest*, put it in a brilliant Op-Ed piece in the *Times* on May 16. "It is true," Mr. Harries wrote, "that Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing is a barbaric thing. But contrary to what President Clinton now claims, until things seriously deteriorated after NATO's intervention, it was no worse than what he and other Western leaders had been able to bear with comparative equanimity in Turkey, Kashmir, Sudan, Rwanda—and Croatia."

That is perhaps small consolation. But when it comes to foreign policy, one is often faced with the choice between small consolations or none at all. In this sense, the "idealistic" option is also the irresponsible one. Thus it is that an incontinent moralism is often the enemy of the very things it professes to cherish. As Mr. Harries observed, "what is wrong is not the impulse to give foreign policy a moral content, but the presumption that doing so is an uncomplicated business, one not requiring calculation and compromise but merely purity of intention. Cheap moralists are as dangerous as cheap hawks—indeed they are often the same people." It is disconcerting to recognize just how large the population of cheap hawks has grown.

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