

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments November 2002

Rhetorical incontinence

On the antics of New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd.

If Annie Sprinkle provides one sort of counter-cultural entertainment, *The New York Times's* op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd provides another, less sexual but not necessarily less obscene. Dispassionate readers, encountering Dowd's hysterical outbursts, might be forgiven for wondering if she were quite sane. (They might also, we suppose, wonder about the sanity of her employers.) Dowd was already out of control in the Clinton years, when she first came to prominence. But since George W. Bush took office, she has left mere stridency for a form of editorial hectoring that is partly irresponsible, partly surreal. We would not presume to say which of Maureen Dowd's recent effusions is the absolute worst—the competition for that award would be too gruesome to adjudicate. But "The Soufflé Doctrine," published on Sunday, October 20, does represent a new level of rhetorical incontinence. It is one of Dowd's "creative writing" efforts, in which she pretends to be inside the head of her subject—in this case George W. Bush. The opening sentence epitomizes the tone and moral weather of the essay: "The Boy Emperor picked up the morning paper and, stunned, dropped his Juicy Juice box with the little straw attached." "Boy Emperor"? "Juicy juice box"? Dowd obviously gets a little thrill out of referring to the President of the United States as "boy": she does it nine times in the space of a 725-word piece. The aim of her expostulation is to pillory the President as a "befuddled" know-nothing manipulated by his advisors, especially by the eminent defense policy expert Richard Perle. What she succeeds in doing, however, is lampooning herself and casting doubt on the judgment of her editors. It was a fateful day when someone congratulated Maureen Dowd on her cutesie, baby-talk style of political satire. Poor thing, she believed it. And she has been embarked on a campaign to outdo herself ever since. It is a grotesque performance, the journalistic equivalent of Gloria Swanson's character in *Sunset Boulevard*. Unfortunately, while journalists like Dowd preen themselves, deadly enemies of the West go about their murderous business. Last week it was Bali. The week before, a French tanker off the coast of Yemen. Before that, some U.S. Marines in Kuwait. Not to mention the 3000 dead in lower Manhattan, the Pentagon, and that field in rural Pennsylvania. Such realities do not penetrate the coddled thought processes of Maureen Dowd. She is too engaged with her private arias. She is serious only as the symptom of a disorder. The question is, what should we make of a newspaper that continues to treat Maureen Dowd as a serious commentator?

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 21 Number 3 , on page 3
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