

Toward a Durable Pluralism **Dudley Cocke**

What is the responsibility of U.S. artists in a time when their government has declared a global war on terror? The answer proposed by this essay: artists and others who work intentionally with culture can help build a durable pluralism as the foundation for world peace.

The first requirement for defeating an insurgency according to the U.S. military's new counterinsurgency manual is "an understanding of local society." It is only several logical steps from this assertion to the first sentence (and premise) of 1993's **Voices from the Battlefield: Achieving Cultural Equity**: *The chief problem facing the United States of America in the twenty-first century will be cultural equity.*

To what degree is the present Iraqi insurgency encouraged by U.S. ignorance of the diversity and complexity of Middle Eastern local life and culture? Conversely, to what degree is the deadly conflict sustained by Iraqi ignorance of the complexity and diversity of U.S. society, an ignorance which makes the terrorists' erroneous contention that the U.S. is nothing but a heartless materialist and imperialist state a compelling recruitment message?

As I wrote in *American Theatre* magazine shortly after September 11, 2001, our global war against terror is a cultural and ideological fight. I argued that if this was not the case, our overwhelming military superiority would have quickly settled the conflict. On May 1, 2003, President Bush was only thinking about our military superiority when he jumped out of the S-3B Viking onto the flight deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln and declared victory in Iraq. To wage ideological warfare successfully in the 21st century, the U.S. will need to re-clarify and to live large its founding values of liberty and justice for all, insisting that all people *everywhere* are created equal with certain inalienable rights. To wage cultural warfare successfully, as the military has correctly concluded, understanding the distinctive spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and material traditions and features of other societies is the heart of the matter.

In the war against cultural ignorance – our own and our enemy's– the U.S. immediately needs to step up its international cultural exchange programs. Unfortunately, U.S. cultural policy has been taking us in the opposite direction for the past 25 years. The Reagan administration's withdrawal from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1987 announced our isolationist intentions to the world, while on the home front, the administration began refocusing national arts policy on a few select Western European traditions. Evidence of the effect of this narrowing domestic policy is the fact that now 81% of the U.S. not-for-profit professional theater audience is white and from the top 15 percent of the U.S. population measured by income. It follows that in the rare instances when international exchange now occurs, it is usually between white elites. The result: people outside the U.S. have little or no chance to witness the cultural diversity that energizes and propels the country. And now we at home are struggling to sustain this diversity and its energy.

It is clearly in our national interest to end cultural isolationism and replace it with a federal policy that secures the role of the not-for-profit arts in international exchange and links that

exchange to a domestic arts policy that values our own national diversity. In this way, there will be the framework for the arts at home and abroad to develop common goals. These goals should include broadening and deepening public participation in artistic expression; telling the stories the commercial cultural industries don't tell; supporting communities' efforts to achieve justice; and celebrating diversity as a positive social value. In their pursuit of meaning, relevance, and beauty, the arts have a capacity to do all of these things and more in a manner that builds bridges of empathy and understanding across the boundaries that separate people and the borders that divide regions and nations.

Strengthening arts organizations that represent the full spectrum of U.S. diversity and providing them with ample opportunity to interact with cultural communities around the world is an immediate first step that the federal government can take for relatively little expense compared to the \$60 million daily cost of war. Once support for culturally diverse organizations is restored – or commenced in many cases – such organizations, as a group, will face several challenges.

Never adequately supported, arts organizations built for the majority of Americans, as opposed to the elite, have either gone out of business in the past 20 years or been reduced to skeletons when compared to their robust potential. After two decades of being whip-sawed by the art establishment's old *either – or's* (“Is it art or social work?!”, “Amateur or professional?!”, “Universal or Ethnic?!”, etc.), many of us still standing have naturally become defensive. However, as I argued in the 1993 **Voices from the Battlefield**, regardless of this experience of marginalization, we as individuals and as a confederation of organizations must implicate ourselves in the problems that exist, knowing that it is insufficient to blame others and cast ourselves as victims. Therefore, we need to promptly regenerate our critical discourse, represented by **Voices**, arriving at a set of standards that defines excellence based on *our* contents, *our* cultural processes, and *our* values. Once established, such standards can be the basis for ongoing critical discussion leading to the further development of our theories and practices, which, in turn, will further develop our standards.

Complicating this regenerative process is the dispiriting fact that the founding generation of leaders of diverse, non-elite arts organizations have never been given their due – chiefly respect – or the opportunity to exert much leadership in the not-for-profit arts field. Now these founders must pass-on their organizations to the next generation. This is necessary because young men and women naturally possess a sharpened sense of present threats and opportunities. Let's infuse this important transition with imaginative intergenerational collaborations that combine innovation with wisdom.

I believe that one of the pillars of our justice-minded cohort must be an abiding attention to place. It is our distinctive places and unique cultural communities which locate us in the world. Place matters because when local life becomes conscious of itself, the cultural grounding that results pushes back against the forces of homogeneity, cultural hegemony, and environmental destruction. Somewhat counter-intuitively, local life and culture can provide us with the independent perspective necessary to see beyond ourselves. However, for the millions of people annually dislocated by war, famine, and the new global free market economy (which, for

example, is causing many to leave the rural countryside of their ancestors in search of work in a distant metropolis), place has acquired more complicated meanings; indeed, a cultural sense of place based in landscape now exists for many only in memory – and for their children, even the memory will have vanished.

My homeland in the central Appalachian coalfields was one of the first rural regions to experience large scale economic globalization when its absentee owners – national energy corporations - were subsumed by transnational energy conglomerates. Appalachia's experience teaches that the fight for a fair shake, for example economic justice, is best grounded in particular geographies and communities where complex problems can be collectively discerned and untangled. However, even before globalization, the boom and bust economy designed by Appalachia's absentee owners caused large migrations of people. For example, between 1950-1965 three million people left the mountains for jobs in cities like Detroit, Flint, and Chicago. Such mass dislocations make trying to discern and analyze community problems that much harder.

Now my hope to lead a fulfilling life in a small Appalachian coalmining town is linked to the fortunes of people in villages, towns, and cities around the globe. For the past several decades, U.S. society has been in massive denial about its symbiotic relationship to the natural world and to its brothers and sisters who walk upon it; against all logic and fact, we have convinced ourselves that money, power, and privilege can buy us a fate different than the rest of humanity. Now our reckless dreaming is becoming our nightmare. I hope that those with wealth and power – the gilded illusion's progenitors and most faithful adherents – will see their error and without delay join us in developing a durable pluralism based on universal human rights. Because we are presently the most culturally diverse nation on earth, the United States has the opportunity – and, I would argue, responsibility – to pioneer intercultural dialogue as the cornerstone of world peace.

Postscript

The preceding essay was written in preparation for the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute's June 8-9, 2007 national convening of culturally diverse arts organizations committed to achieving social justice and cultural equity. Following are several additional thoughts based on attending that convening.

Under steady assault by the culture war declared by the Reagan administration, our movement for cultural equity has weakened and become increasingly confused. At our June 8-9 convening, for example, some argued that we should no longer look to government for remedy – notwithstanding that to give up on government in a democracy is to give up on democracy itself. An indicator of the cultural democracy/cultural equity movement's weakened state is the lack of a critical discourse among ourselves about a strategy to advance our values and about our own standards of excellence. This state of affairs can be reversed within a decade if we reinvigorate our internal critical discourse and become part of a national grassroots movement for democratic policy change.

For public policy to change, there must be a broad base of public support for the change. Diverse culturally grounded arts organizations and their stakeholders can be an important part of such a progressive national base. This base, in turn, must make achieving cultural equity an integral part of its agenda.

The organizations represented at the June 8-9 gathering have two important strengths to bring to such a national movement. First, we are culturally grounded in the realities of our particular poor and working and middle class communities where the majority of Americans live. Second, we are skilled public enactors of the democratic ideal of inclusion and pluralism, an ideal especially evident in our community-grounded, intercultural artistic collaborations.

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