

Campaign Survival

Right about this time—late spring, heading into early summer—every four years in the United States, just about all you can read in newspapers concerns politics and, more to the point, prominent political personalities who are threatening to become President. That’s the way it’s been for at least the past five or six election cycles, as American journalism has turned away from the seriousness inherent in print culture to the present-oriented “bread and circus” frivolities of image-based media culture. As Owen Harries used to say, left to their own natures unimproved by virtuous education, most people yearn to read mainly about flaps and chaps—translation out of British: scandals and celebrities.

As of this writing, even before the large televised national political conventions, the electioneering of 2016 seems to have whittled down the pack to just one Democrat and one Republican. Assuming neither gets indicted or succumbs to looming mortality before November, the media will predictably be filled with stories about them, their possible running mates, their families, their pets, favorite foods, vacation spots, cars, and anything else either prurient or superficial that the media can find or invent. In this “who’s up—who’s down” bubble, everything is fair game except serious policy ideas about how to fix what’s wrong with this country. There’s not much danger of those kinds of ideas intruding into the mix, however, since neither candidate and neither party has any—at least any they yet feel inclined to share—even if journalists were inclined, or able, to write about them.

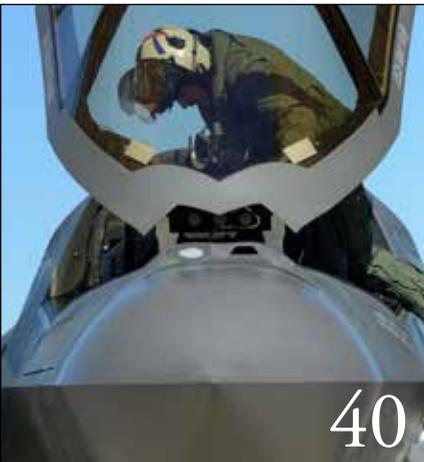
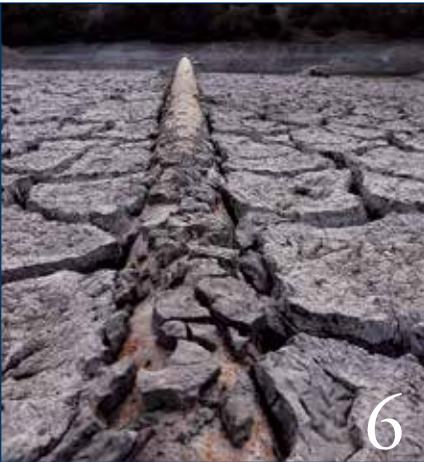
This 64th issue of *The American Interest*, like all 63 issues before it, willingly dooms itself to minority-reader status by admitting an interest in ideas well over and above flaps and chaps. It’s not that we don’t care about politics or politicians; we are concerned (word chosen with care) about both rather a lot—and issues 65 and 66, closer on to the election this autumn, will concentrate on them. But for now we’re patiently content with our time-tested mix of interwoven global, regional, and domestic political culture essays.

This issue’s lead theme, “Global Fractures and Fixes,” combines two broadly analytic and descriptive efforts with two more policy-focused efforts. “Defense and Defenders” seems at first blush to be far more narrowly focused on military issues, but these three essays’ burdens cannot help but blend with broader issues of political economy, intellectual style, and domestic politics. The “bottom” of the book this time around proffers, respectively, a personal testimony as to the nexus of craftsmanship and civic virtue, insights of cultural anthropology at its best, a dispassionate assessment of campus ideological conditions, a twisted history of the banjo, and an orthogonal literary take on Europe’s migrant challenge.

It’s your magazine to do with as you will, but let me pass along some advice, if I may, relevant to campaign season survival. Teddy Roosevelt said, “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.” Well, you can read, you have *The American Interest* to hand, and you’re doubtless somewhere. So if you ponder our pages slowly and carefully enough you might just be able to escape most of the seasonally intensified obsession with certain flaps and chaps. Not an idea maybe, but it’s a thought. 🌐

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the meaning of what is ‘American.’” There is no such “perfect instrument.” The meaning of what is American is too complex for that. (Indeed, from the social historical perspective it would probably be better to speak of meanings, plural.) But perhaps the reader won’t be surprised by Dubois’s account of why he would make such a stretch of a claim about the banjo: “precisely because it has its roots in the institution that was, for hundreds of years, the central pillar of the American economy,” namely, slavery.

And sometimes Dubois’s comments are just plain odd. He says, for example, that:

More often than not, banjos hum and buzz. They get out of tune, it seems, just to cause a hassle. When they are in tune, it isn’t always obvious. And people can’t quite agree on what “in tune” means on the banjo in any case.

None of this is true. Whatever Dubois means by describing banjos as “humming” (it’s certainly not the word that comes to my mind when I think of the sound of a banjo), they only “buzz” when the angle of the neck, the height of the bridge, or some other factor, causes the strings to be too close to the fingerboard. Then you get a buzz because a string, when struck or plucked, fails to clear the frets completely as it vibrates. Exactly the same problem can arise with guitars, mandolins, and other fretted instruments. When it does, it is easily fixed; indeed, it is more easily fixed on the banjo than on most other instruments.

Yes, like other stringed instruments, banjos sometimes get out of tune—less today than in the old days of skin as opposed to plastic drumheads. As with guitars, violins, mandolins, cellos, and the like, a particular instrument may be more “temperamental” in this way than others. But getting a banjo into tune isn’t especially difficult, and keeping it in tune is, at most, only slightly more difficult than keeping a guitar or violin in tune. (When adjustments need to be made, it’s usually because of humidity and temperature.)

As to people allegedly disagreeing about what “in tune” means on the banjo, they don’t. I’ve played with hundreds of banjo players. We disagree on many things: ideal bridge height

and head tension, “warmer” vs. “brighter” tone, Scruggs vs. Reno, whether Bill Keith’s “melodic” style of five-string banjo playing fundamentally altered the character of bluegrass music, how deep into the bowels of Hell people are condemned for attaching an electric pick-up to the banjo and plugging in. One thing we do not disagree on is whether a banjo is in tune. Any competent player—or listener—can tell whether a banjo is in tune or not simply by listening. We are no more likely than guitar players—or pianists, for that matter—to stand around arguing about whether a particular instrument is or is not out of tune.

None of this is to take away from Dubois’s scholarly achievements in *The Banjo*. Despite a few flaws, it is a volume worth owning and consulting, whether on the history of the instrument as such, or its place in African-American social history and the role of music in the lives and cultures of African slaves and their descendants (which is a dominant concern of the seven chapters before the one on Seeger). 

Robert George grew up in the hills of West Virginia, where banjos are issued to little boys at birth. He is McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University and a visiting professor at Harvard Law School.



RETROVIEW

The Man Who Disliked Saints

Asle Toje

George Orwell, which is to say Eric Arthur Blair, said and wrote many memorable things. One of them goes as follows: “Saints should always be judged guilty until proved innocent.” Flipping the ideal of justice enabled Orwell to aim his wit at an enduring truth about the often wayward consequences of good intentions, of whose dangers one should be cognizant when encounter-

ing “saints” wearing such intentions on their sleeves.

In some ways, but certainly not others, Orwell has a latter-day French doppelganger in Jean Raspail, who, by means of one of his novels, sideswiped American history in the early 1980s. One day, so the story goes, the flamboyant head of French counter-intelligence, Count Alexandre de Marenches, met his friend Ronald Reagan in the White House to discuss the Red Army’s war in Afghanistan. At the end of the conversation, the Count handed the President a French novel in English translation, saying: “You should read this.” French sources say that Reagan reported back, reviewing the book in glowing terms.¹

The book in question was Raspail’s fourth novel, the epic *Le Camp des Saints* (“The Camp of the Saints”), first published in 1973. At the time, the novel was admired by some and pilloried by many. It did not so much cause division as reflect an existing if still inchoate divide over how many non-European immigrants European cultures could and should absorb without losing their cultural souls in a broth of multicultural homogenization. In a sense, Raspail was the French Enoch Powell, whose famous 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech may have served as Raspail’s inspiration, along with other, more obvious French occurrences of that same year.

It is hard therefore to know what Reagan’s positive review meant. Raspail seems to have really been (and may still be at age ninety) a racist or something uncomfortably close to it, and Reagan was not. Reagan was the man, recall, who tried to overcome the Republican Party’s estrangement from African Americans, both for reasons of political calculation and also because he believed sincerely that the cultural conservatism of most American blacks made them natural allies of the GOP. Reagan’s mature politics alighted somewhere fairly far to the Left of Raspail’s, who can perhaps best be described as a reactionary conservative, the last of the royalists *Chouan* who fought the French Revolution, and somewhere less far to the Right

of Orwell’s, a devoutly anti-Communist social democrat. Maybe Reagan was just being polite.

Whatever the truth, *Le Camp des Saints* is back in play. The novel has enjoyed a renaissance this past autumn as a commentary on Europe’s ongoing refugee crisis. It has been reprinted by John Tanton’s Social Contract Press and is now available in Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, and Czech—as well as English—translations. Even before its recent revival it had sold more than half a million copies through 2006. Fortunately or not, it looks like sales can only rise as the migrant crisis deepens and endures. As before, too, the more those who excoriate Raspail get emotional, the more they make those on the other side of the divide want to read him.

When the book first came out, as already noted in passing, it received table-thumping

applause on the one side and saliva-spurting denunciations on the other, both from predictable quarters. Opponents, led by *Le Monde* editor Laurent Joffrin, claimed that the book was racist.

Raspail has insisted as

recently as this past September that he is not a racist, but then of course he would, wouldn’t he?² This has not ended the matter. For although the book probably did not meet criteria for racial hatred in the legal sense, the conflict within it is portrayed as being between races, not between cultures. Non-whites are consistently referred to in negative terms.³ This makes the book highly objectionable even if not plainly racist.

For that reason alone one may bemoan its popularity. The real question at issue is whether there is any way to balance, morally and

Le Camp des Saints (“The Camp of the Saints”)

by Jean Raspail

Éditions Robert Laffont (1973)

¹Jérôme Dupuis, “Le camp des Saints, de Jean Raspail, un succès de librairie raciste?” *L’Express*, April 6, 2011.

²Quoted in Saïd Mahrane, “Jean Raspail: ‘Que les migrants se débrouillent,’” *Le Point Politique*, September 29, 2015.

³Incidentally, a trait it shares with both Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

practically, two social virtues: generosity and compassion on the one hand, and integral cultural community on the other. Must the tension between the two be complete; must the struggle be zero-sum in character? Or, put a little differently, is it possible to be good to others without being excessively selfless, on the level not only of individuals but also of communities?

The answer had better be “yes,” but even if it is, it’s not an easy answer to find. The initial European (read: German) response to the migrant crisis arising most proximately out of the Syrian civil war was so far unbalanced to one side that it has provoked an equally imbalanced

Raspail anticipated well the emotional roller coaster on which humanitarian joy is replaced by frozen panic.

reaction toward the other side. You don’t have to be a racist to care about integral community, but when you ignore this second social virtue, you provoke racism in those who believe they have been threatened—and you drive them to read and applaud books like *Le Camp des Saints*.

So what tale does the novel tell? The essence of the plot is that wild-eyed, saintly European activists encourage a million underfed Indians to set course for the West in a fleet of rusty vessels. After being rejected everywhere else, the flotilla finally anchors off the southern coast of France, demanding permission to come ashore. The French President is torn between his humanitarian instincts and the devastating consequences for the homeland if he fails to be hard-hearted. He chooses a half-measure: He throws the dilemma into the lap of the army, vaguely encouraging the soldiers to “follow their conscience.” They do, and the state’s monopoly on violence predictably falls to pieces.

Fateful consequences ensue when the well-meaning activists who have fought and won the media campaign over the flotilla demand that “the oppressed” be given residence, then are themselves trampled to death when the masses

surge ashore. It is only the first wave; tens of millions of boat people follow in its wake.

The narrative alternates between French reactions to mass immigration and the attitudes among immigrants. The latter have no desire to become French. They just want the prosperity they lacked in their homeland. Raspail’s main thesis—if one might call it that—is that the idea that the West, and in effect only the West, has a duty to make up for the world’s injustices is fundamentally flawed. Such a mindset will lead to the destruction of the West, he argues. In this way, *Le Camp des Saints* can be read as the antithesis to Frantz Fanon’s 1961 classic

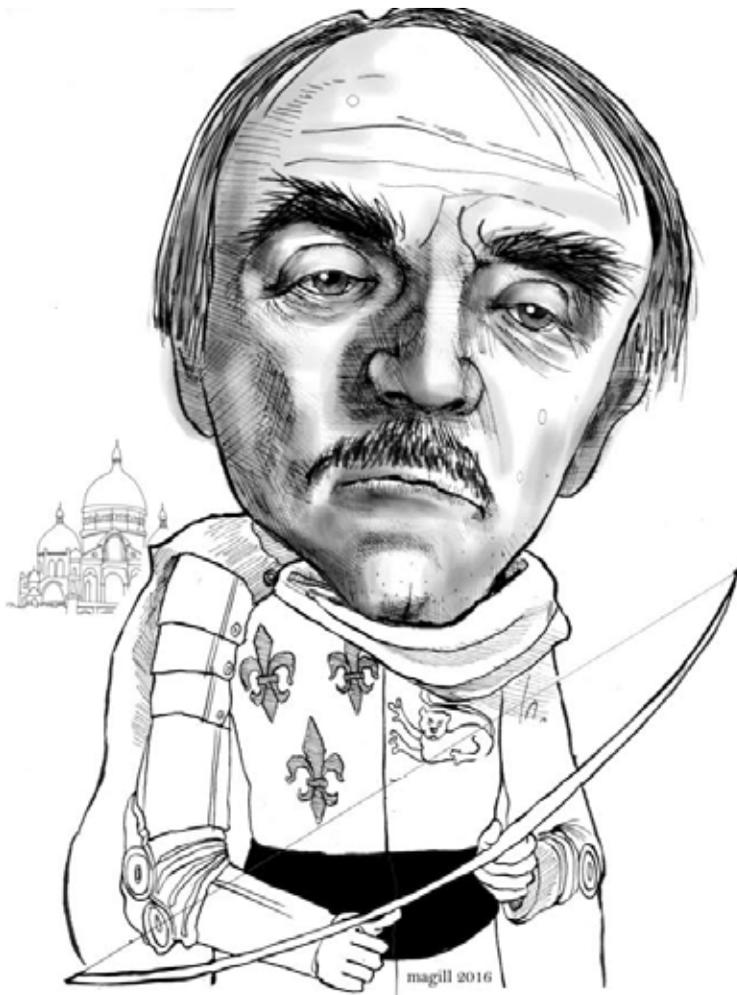
The Wretched of the Earth, which was as racist in its own way as *Le Camp des Saints* was accused of being a dozen years later.

In Raspail’s novel the Global North is overwhelmed by a wave of immigrants from the overcrowded Global South. In the final act, Switzerland stands alone.

This is where Raspail’s fictional author Dufort—for the book takes the general form of a *roman à clef* in which Dufort is Raspail—writes down his records to inform future generations of what really happened before the story is rewritten by Europe’s new residents. When the international community isolates Switzerland as punishment for its refusal to open its borders, Swiss are ultimately forced to capitulate. The West crashes and its ancestral history and civilization is lost, just as irrevocably as was that of Byzantium.

The book’s first chapter is, in the literary sense, the best. A retired literature professor sits in the villa that has been the family hearth since 1675; he looks down on the massive refugee flotilla thinking that “if, under the circumstances, the proverb is right, and if a door really has to be open or shut. . . .” Raspail’s professor finds that the combination of self-loathing and anti-racism has so shattered the European self that its very sense of self-preservation is weakened. “In their case it wasn’t a matter of tender heart, but a morbid, contagious excess of sentiment. . . .”

Raspail’s professor has his scholarly reflections interrupted by a young radical who proudly declares that he has come to rob the house because “[m]y real family’s all the people



Jean Raspail

coming off those boats.” He is looking forward to “sleeping with the first one that lets me, and I’ll give her a baby. A nice dark baby. . . . And after a while I’ll melt into the crowd.”

“Yes, you will disappear,” replies the professor. “You’ll be lost in that mass. They won’t even know you exist.”

“Good! That’s just what I’m after.”

When the civilizational collapse that the professor could reconcile himself with intellectually becomes a physical threat, he gets his gun and shoots to kill. Thus Raspail takes ample opportunity to illustrate the hypocrisy of the salon-crowd boosters of radical activists, not as “the homage that vice pays to virtue,” as his forebear La Rochefoucauld famously put it, but simply as rank dishonesty.

Such a mindset is not new, nor of course is it restricted to fiction. In some ways, Raspail’s

professor resembles Umberto Eco as the European intellectual *par excellence* as he appeared, just a few months before his passing, in a June 11, 2015 interview with the Danish newspaper *Politiken*. In his home, surrounded by matchless Western heirlooms and with armed guards at the gate, Eco philosophized that a large enough number of refugees will bring the end of the Europe we inherited, a price he in no way finds too high to pay for our “European values.” Eco chose to hope for the best, and complimented his African servant for her Italian spirit—after she had left the room, of course.

And there are always some who feel that the barbarians are already at the gates. Niall Ferguson has recently compared Europe’s current state to Rome’s just before its fall.⁴ Raspail ends his book with the famous sentence: “The

fall of Constantinople was a personal tragedy that happened to us all, only last week.” Ferguson and Raspail both walk in the footsteps of Oxford historian Arnold Toynbee, who wrote in *A Study of History* that civilization fails when it ceases to exist in the minds of its own citizens. “Civilizations are not murdered,” wrote Toynbee, “they commit suicide by failing to meet their challenges.”⁵ But alas, one of those challenges is to survive without becoming bad people. For the true Western heirs of Christendom and the Enlightenment, survival alone is not enough.

⁴Ferguson, “Paris and the Fall of Rome,” *Boston Globe*, November 16, 2015.

⁵Toynbee, *A Study of History: Abridgement of Volumes I to VI* (Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 273.

Jean Raspail was an unexpected source for conservative cultural pessimism. Before his fourth novel made a splash, he was best known as a supplier of witty travelogues—a sort of French P.J. O'Rourke. One that comes to mind is his account of the “war against illiteracy” in Anastasio Somoza’s Nicaragua, which consisted entirely of hanging up posters stating: “Learn to read!” (True story.) Raspail was a connoisseur when it came to the world’s less-traveled parts. He claimed that it was precisely this experience of endangered peoples that inspired him to write *Le Camp des Saints*. He openly sympathized with them; he simply did not believe that it was the West’s obligation to redeem them. In other words, he recognized a genuine dilemma.

Perhaps that is why, these many years later, parts of the book seem to be somewhat prophetic. Raspail anticipated well the emotional roller coaster on which humanitarian joy is replaced by frozen panic. He describes decades before its time the current beggar-thy-neighbor perfidy in which states funnel immigrants to the next border. He defines the anguish and uncertainty about whether the effects on the welfare state, the nation, or the culture are acceptable factors even to consider in an immigration debate that leading European media portray as a secular version of a biblical trial, in which righteous idealists oppose sinful conservatives.

As everyone now knows, Europe has seen the number of illegal immigrants crossing the Mediterranean rise to a point where Germany alone received more than a million asylum seekers in 2015. While all seem to agree that Europe cannot be the world’s lifeboat, Western Europe’s decision-makers so far have mostly followed their humanitarian impulses, knowing full well that the influx of migrants will exceed its ability to absorb them. Raspail’s description of feckless politicians will appeal to those today who call for genuine leadership and find little of it. Indeed, *Le Camp des Saints* foreshadows many a European leader who publicly claims “*Wir schaffen das*”—roughly, “we’ll get it done”—but behind closed doors admits that they have lost control.

Again, for better or worse—or both—Raspail expresses an un-hyphenated conservatism that is making a comeback in the European debate on thanks to the so-called Orbanites.

Orbanites (after Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban) are attracted by Raspail’s unvarnished political message, which is disturbing. *Le Camp des Saints* is also a disturbing book in another sense: Blood, violence, and faeces metaphorically drip from the pages, and many readers flock to it as voyeurs to the scene of an accident. This is peculiar in a way, because beyond its attraction as a politically incorrect experience, the novel is no page-turner. It constantly shifts perspective, one moment assuming the voice of the French President, the next of an American researcher, the next of a journalist. As a literary structure, this works partially at best and for pickier readers not at all.

But grace is not the point here, either for the author or for the reader. Raspail never lets the reader forget that the blame for the catastrophe to hand lies with idealists who assumed the role of saints on the basis of banal moral dichotomies and the naive cosmopolitanism that goes with them. Here at least he is at one with Orwell, the author of perhaps the most famous allegory in all of English literature. That’s as it should be, for what started in 1973 as a *roman à clef* has somehow become for many anxious readers in 2016 a prophecy playing itself out day by nail-biting day.

Jean Raspail still lives in the Paris suburbs—he’ll be 91 years old this coming July 5. He comments on the ongoing crisis with the grim satisfaction people sometimes feel when their prejudices, the baser the better sometimes, are confirmed. In an interview with *Le Point* in September, he concluded, “What’s happening today isn’t important, it’s anecdotal, for we are only at the beginning.”

Do tell, Jean. If this is only the beginning, how will it end? Well, *Le Camp des Saints* takes its title from Revelations 20:9: “And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them.” When conservative French Catholic monarchists write novels, they don’t mess around with excessive subtlety, do they? 🍷

Asle Toje is a Norwegian foreign policy scholar and commentator.