

Box 65: Commentary from the GWS Office and Our Members

Between Jihad and McWorld:

Parks and the Question of National Identity

When we look back at our century—fast slipping away from us now—and erect, in our minds, the milestones by which we will judge its history, the close of the Cold War has to rank as the most momentous political event since Hitler's defeat. The Soviet Union came to its end, not with a bang, nor even a whimper, but with ... with no sound at all. It simply dissolved, seemingly overnight. With it went an entire generation's way of looking at the world: the idea of good nations standing rock-solid against evil ones, the simplistic but handy metaphor of duelling superpowers calling the global tune, and, of course, hanging over and coloring it all, the prospect of nuclear war as filtered through that ultimate affront against logic: the idea that security could be had only through the threat of "mutual assured destruction."

When the Wall came down a few years ago, I was hopeful enough to believe that the result would be a bit of a respite from our global anxieties, that we would get to turn down the burners for awhile and get in a few years' worth of work building a more amicable global community. How naïve. It turned out that the Cold War, miserable though it was, did have the cardinal virtue of bestowing an intelligible structure on the politics of the planet. When it evaporated we had nothing comparable to put in its place, and in the void some of our species' worst parochial (some would say "tribal") tendencies came to the surface. Since then, as we all know, we have had Bosnia, Rwanda, and a hundred other lesser conflicts whose roots and dynamics seem hopelessly obscure to outsiders.

At the same time the pell-mell advancing front of technology and science has impugned our very notions of reality. Any ethical concerns we laypersons might have about where all this is taking us are of no concern to the technogeeks who imbibe the Internet: they revel in the lung-bursting speed of change in their virtual universe and sneer at the trepidations of the rest of us. The community of professional scientists is somewhat better; at least one gets the sense that they understand there might be ethical implications to their more controversial findings. But even here the reductionist compartmentalizing of modern scientific research tends to produce practitioners who cannot put their results into any sort of ethical context. So average folks are yanked from cell phones to cyberspace to sheep-cloning with no time to catch their breath. Instead of relieving anxieties, the end of the Cold War, coupled with the dizzying pace of technological change, has left us with a new world disorder to

sort out. In place of the Cold War's good-versus-evil dichotomy we now have a battle between those who wish to reinforce traditional cultural differences in the name of stability, and those who embrace change for change's sake as the new path to global harmony.

The contrast between the retrogressive and progressive extremes in current world affairs is the subject of a recent, very readable book by the American political scientist Benjamin R. Barber, titled *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995). His terms are, obviously, telegraphic for the sake of convenience, with "Jihad" (the Islamic term for a Holy War) connoting a passionate, inward-looking, dogmatic affirmation of identity in ancient ethnic, religious, and racial affiliations, as contrasted with the breezy, outward-looking, capitalist-driven "McWorld" where technology is celebrated and global differences gleefully erased. As Barber puts it:

The first scenario ... holds out the grim prospect of a retribalization of large swaths of humankind by war and bloodshed: a threatened balkanization of nation-states in which culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe, a Jihad in the name of a hundred narrowly conceived faiths against every kind of interdependence, every kind of social cooperation and mutuality: against technology, against pop culture, and against integrated markets; against modernity itself as well as the future in which modernity issues. The second paints that future in shimmering pastels, a busy portrait of onrushing economic, technological, and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize peoples everywhere with fast music, fast computers, and fast food—MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald's—pressing nations into one homogeneous global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and commerce. Caught between Babel and Disneyland, the planet is falling precipitously apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment (p. 4).

One of the ironies of this situation, as Barber goes on to thoroughly demonstrate, is that both Jihad and McWorld tend to corrode existing nation-states: Jihad through secessionist demands for independence and recognition of cultural distinctiveness, McWorld through its main instrument—the modern multinational corporation, which increasingly owes little or no allegiance to individual countries and whose power in many spheres (e.g., telecommunications) outstrips that of national governments.

What does all this have to do with parks? Plenty. We must remember that protected area systems are important social institutions, particularly at the national level, and as such have been used frequently as agents to consolidate national identity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Canada, where in 1994 the national parks agency (then called the Canadian Parks Service, now again known as Parks Canada) joined a newly created Department of Canadian

Heritage, which itself was a not-so-subtle response to the Quebec secessionist movement. Canada's unique political system—a loose confederation of highly autonomous provinces, further dissected along the cultural lines of Anglophones, Francophones, and First Nations—has engendered perpetual debates about what it means to be Canadian. Faced with the real prospect of Quebec's departure hanging on the outcome of a 1995 referendum, the federal government grasped the symbolic importance of Canada's national parks and historic sites and enlisted them in the battle over the country's future. Although it's unlikely that this action alone had any important effect on the vote, the important thing is that recognition was given, and generally accepted, that protected areas are of national heritage significance and value to Canada, and should be promoted as federal symbols. (In the end, the secessionists lost the referendum, but by a razor-thin margin. The issue remains far from settled, with the possibility of additional referendums to come.)

Here in the USA, the rising debate over what constitutes our nationhood has called into question the continuing relevance of the time-honored "E pluribus unum" out-of-diversity-comes-unity theme. The response of the National Park Service (as mediated through Congress and outside interest groups) has been dramatic: over the past generation the bureau has made an attempt to broaden the National Park System to include urban recreation areas, park units whose significance resides in their association with specific ethnic groups, and sites that commemorate neglected facets of American history (e.g., Women's Rights National Historical Park). The inclusion of such areas as Maggie Walker National Historic Site, which commemorates the accomplishments of an African-American woman banker, testifies to this new direction. I daresay that Stephen Mather, the father of the National Park Service, never in his wildest dreams imagined that such a park would come to stand alongside Yellowstone: the conception of "national significance" (read: national identity) has changed that much.

Probably the most explicit statement of American identity in its national parks can be found at Mount Rushmore National Memorial, where the larger-than-life faces of four of the country's icons—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt—are chiseled into a mountainside for all to see. The intended message is plain: these men built America, and their creation is going to stand as long as this granite does. We are invited to marvel unreservedly at this "shrine of democracy."

But democracy in today's America, declaring itself in all its untidy diversity, no longer superintends a unanimous interpretation. Not a few Native Americans and others sympathetic to them see Rushmore as nothing more than a desecration of the Black Hills, symbol of one of the grandest thefts in the history of the continent. On posters and T-shirts they have reinterpreted the Memorial with a fifth face, Sitting Bull's, peering above the others. The caption reads "Shrine of Hypocrisy" with a further legend: "Always remember—your

fathers never sold this land.” Such counter-assertions tend broadly toward the Jihad stream of political activity identified by Barber.

The McWorld side of the ledger is relevant to the question, too. National identity, indeed the very idea of nationhood, depends on fostering a positive connection to a real, coherent, graspable expanse of Earth; otherwise the fictions of invisible boundary lines drawn on flat pieces of paper become totally untenable. Yet we are witnessing the coming of age of a generation of young people for whom Nintendo, the Web, and saturation cable TV are second nature—in fact, more second nature than Nature itself. No one really knows how this will play out, but it’s clear that the various virtual realities being dished up are radically disconnected from any tangible on-the-ground sense of place. Indeed, as the very landscape becomes less regionally distinctive (another McWorldian consequence), more and more places fit Gertrude Stein’s famously caustic description of Oakland, California: “There isn’t any *there* there.” This emerging state of affairs has the potential to leave national-level protected area systems—predicated as they are upon ideals of national significance that must seem positively antique, if not downright baffling, to the average 20-year-old—in an increasingly marginal position.

The potential problem becomes even more acute when we look at those protected sites which are devoted to national history. In a future-oriented McWorld, all age groups, and not just youth, are tacitly encouraged to see the past as a foreign country (borrowing a phrase from David Lowenthal). To flog the example of Mount Rushmore one more time, in an era where proficiency at channel surfing is more widespread than a knowledge of history among the American populace, it is questionable how many tourists to the Memorial really grasp (either uncritically or not) the achievements of the men who look down so serenely upon them.

The Cold War is dead, and I for one am not in mourning. I’m not sure any of us would have chosen what has come forth to take its place, but, honestly, is anyone (other than politicians running for re-election) really ready to entertain the idea that humankind collectively chooses its path to the future? There are too many diversities, too much contingency; that’s what the Jihad-versus-McWorld debate is all about. In any case, however all these tangled questions work out, we can be sure that protected areas will be changed in the answering.

Dave Harmon is Deputy Executive Director of The George Wright Society. The views expressed in “Box 65” are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the GWS. *Reminder:* This column is open to all GWS members. We welcome lively, provocative, informed opinion on anything in the world of parks and protected areas. The submission guidelines are the same as for other GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM articles—please refer to the inside back cover of any issue.