

THE NORTH
COAST

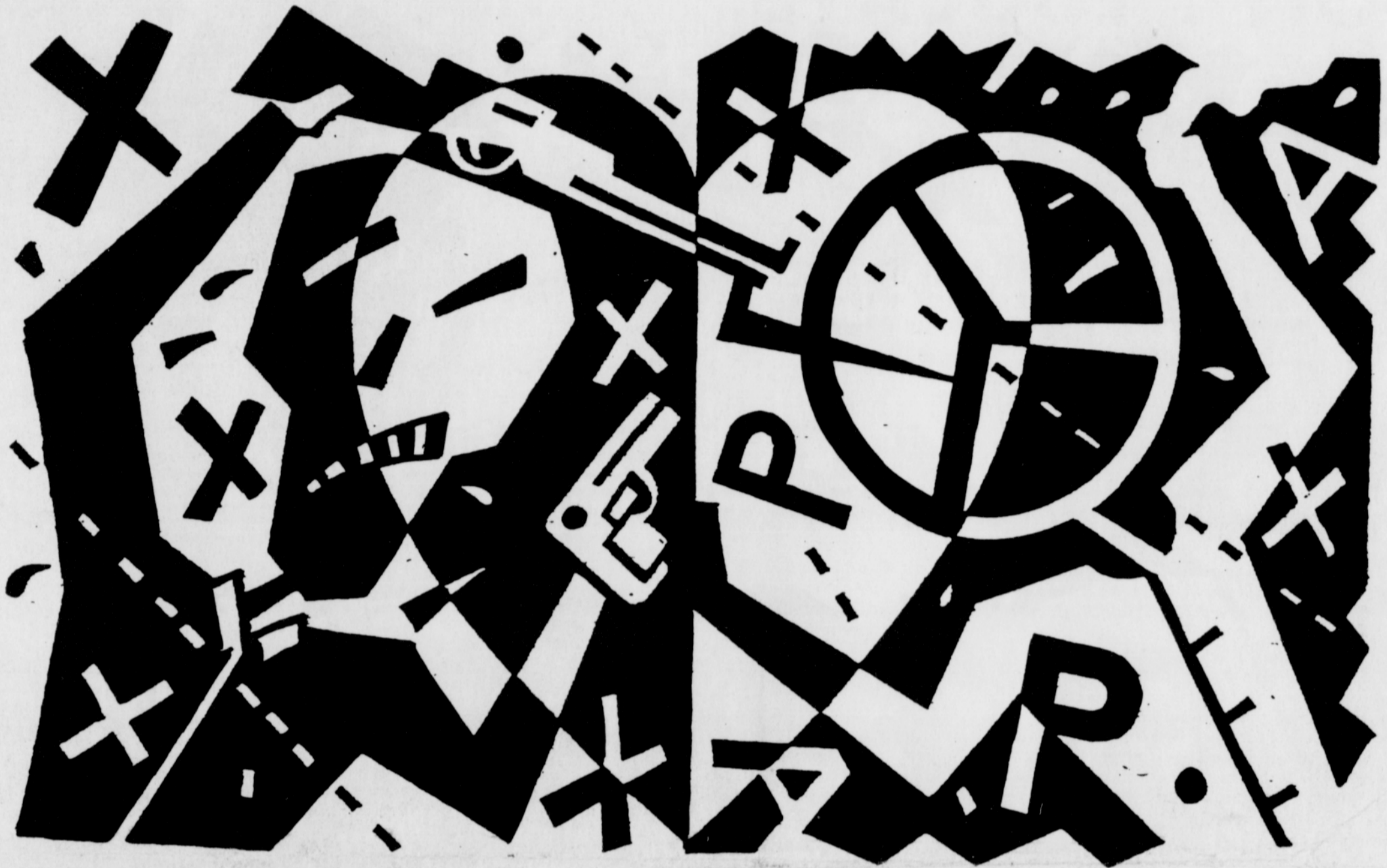


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In a dark time the eye begins to see.
- Theodore Roethke



DAVID McLIMAS

TALES OF ARABIAN NIGHTMARES

Just when the world was taking off its helmet and emerging with a sigh of relief from its cold war bunker a nation attacks another in the savage old way. In response dozens of other nations rush their armed forces to the battle zone in fear of losing their heartlines of oil which the invasion threatened, justifying their warlike reaction with pieties of maintaining peace. It all seems to imply that humankind simply cannot resist folly at the threshold of sanity.

The poets might be right after all. The prospect of peace is more irrational than the dark brooding desire for murder each of us hosts like a malevolent gene. Humanity's penchant for sinister error, folly, mass psychosis and loathsome horror gives us our sense of humor, our appreciation of the comedy of inescapable personal death.

One can sense the almost palpable sense of relief among world leaders who mobilize their militaries for war in the old familiar way, uncertain as they must be with the political geography of the brave new world of peace unexpectedly presented by the collapse of communist power.

It is instructive to note how quickly propaganda machines respond to the crisis, erasing the ambiguities of everyday civilization to present immediate contrasts devoid of shades; extremes overpower dialogue. It is us against them, good versus evil, black and white the only acceptable colors of public conversation.

The Iraqi dictator who sent his heavily mortgaged army into a neighboring country the size of an average city parking lot but rich enough to bankroll the invading force, is compared to the century's worst citizen, Hitler. The American President meanwhile assumes the mantle of the first Roosevelt and dispatches a very big stick of military might to the Middle East, in particular to Saudi Arabia which acts as nervous host to the hordes of Western crusaders who are determined to protect the indispensable Saudi oilfields. The Iraqi leader howls for a holy war against the satans gathering at his borders and makes temporary peace with his

enemy Iran against whom he fought a war for almost a decade at a mutual cost of a million live. This frees at least half of his army for use against the massive buildup of American and European forces, which are assisted by a few wary Arab contingents.

Prejudice, always waiting with its intolerant leer, leaps into the dialogue. Whatever people in the Middle East might be calling the sudden influx of Westerners, some words immediately current in the United States to describe the diverse types of humanity in the Arab lands are "ragheads" and "desert niggers." Sidewalk philosophers assure listeners that rabid religious beliefs and hotheaded emotions are Middle Eastern traits. Faithless and shifty are other descriptions.

There is, of course, a great risk that the myriad and agonizingly insoluble problems that have destabilized the Middle East since the withdrawal of Western colonialism might consolidate into one large conflagration as a result of the return of Western armies to Arab soil, and the Iraqi leader just might be able to whip up enough heat among the anxious populations to light the torch. But fire is not what concerns the gathering clouds of troops: toxic gas is their immediate worry. The Iraqis have used it before, on Iranians and dissenting Kurdish tribes in their own country. Suddenly producers of counter-chemical devices enjoy celebrity status.

In the meantime a blockade is thrown around Iraq. No oil out; no food in. One element in all this movement and countermovement is seldom expressed. The possible cost in human lives. Barrels of blood are offered in exchange for barrels of oil. The world has a glut of human blood. Oil, though plentiful at present, is non-renewable and will probably dry up sometime in the next century.

It is apparent that although the oil age is nearing its end old habits resist change and conservation. We send forces to protect oil interests yet we have had much time to develop alternative sources. Our leaders and the powerful oil companies are hostile to change and

continue to squander dwindling fuel supplies in the old reckless way, demanding that we go with them, and in a sense we are helpless not to because they control the resources and means to develop new sources of energy. The irony is that our nations seem determined to fight over what is left of fossil fuels and dump immense quantities of what can hardly be spared into huge war machines geared to replenish themselves on the spoils.

And of course the present crisis has put pressure on opening up new oil reserves such as those in the Alaska wilderness and offshore areas of Oregon, Washington and California.

Particularly distressing is that the world's attention has abruptly changed from prospects of peace at the winding down of the cold war to immediate possibilities of bloody conflict that might result in the use of nuclear weapons — though no one is certain who if anyone in the Arab world might possess them. (Israel, yes.) The media, which only yesterday was rhapsodic with the peaceful convergence of former enemies now saturates us with military details in the obsessive manner of World War II.

Whatever comes of the current crisis it should be remembered that the great dangers it has aroused are partly the result of weapons sold to every Middle Eastern faction with a buck by the very nations rushing to preserve their oil supplies. The United States and the Soviet Union, along with France and other Western arms traders, armed the Iraqi dictator and made possible his now threatening power.

Paul Fussell wrote in his book "The Great War and Modern Memory" that "The drift of modern history domesticates the fantastic and normalizes the unspeakable."

An American military nurse interviewed in Saudi Arabia said that she was homesick and nervous about the prospect of combat. "I don't want to die for an oil well," she said.

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER