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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Journalist's 'Actual Responsibility'

By ROGER COHEN
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NEW YORK — Shortly after World War I, the great German sociologist Max Weber gave a lecture in Munich in which he turned his mind to journalism.



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

Roger Cohen

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“Not everyone realizes,” Weber told students, “that to write a really good piece of journalism is at least as demanding intellectually as the achievement of any scholar. This is particularly true when we recollect that it has to be written on the spot, to order, and that it must create an immediate effect, even though it is produced under completely different conditions from that of scholarly research. It is generally overlooked that a journalist’s actual responsibility is far greater than the scholar’s.”

Yes, journalism is a matter of gravity. It’s more fashionable to denigrate than praise the media these days. In the 24/7 howl of partisan pontification, and the scarcely less-constant death knell din surrounding the press, a basic truth gets lost: that to be a journalist is to bear witness.

The rest is no more than ornamentation.

To bear witness means being there — and that’s not free. No search engine gives you the smell of a crime, the tremor in the air, the eyes that smolder, or the cadence of a scream.

No news aggregator tells of the ravaged city exhaling in the dusk, nor summons the defiant cries that rise into the night. No miracle of technology renders the lip-drying taste of fear. No algorithm captures the hush of dignity, nor evokes the adrenalin rush of courage coalescing, nor traces the fresh raw line of a welt.

I confess that, out of Iran, I am bereft. I have been thinking about the responsibility of bearing witness. It can be singular, still. Interconnection is not presence.

A chunk of me is back in Tehran, between Enquelab (Revolution) and Azadi (Freedom), where I saw the Iranian people rise in the millions to reclaim their votes and protest the violation of their Constitution.

We journalists are supposed to move on. Most of the time, like insatiable voyeurs, we do. But once a decade or so, we get undone, as if in love, and our subject has its revenge, turning the tables and refusing to let us be.

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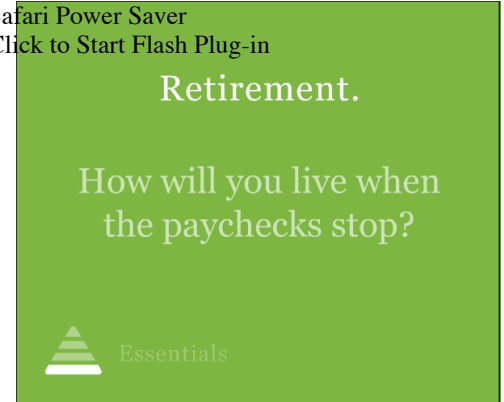
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The Iranian Constitution says that the president is to be elected “by the direct vote of the people,” not selected through the bogus invocation of God’s will. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Revolution, said in 1978 that: “Our future society will be a free society and all the elements of oppression, cruelty and force will be destroyed.”

The regime has been weakened by the fragrance of its lie, now only sustainable through force. No show trials can make truth of falseness. You cannot carve in rotten wood.

I was one of the last Western journalists to leave the city. Ignoring the revocation of my press pass, I went on as long as I could. Everything in my being rebelled against acquiescence to the coterie around President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose power grab has shattered the balances of the revolution’s institutions and whose goal is plain: no eyewitnesses to the crime.

Of course, Iranians have borne witness — with cellphone video images, with photographs, through Twitter and other forms of social networking — and have thereby amassed an inefaceable global indictment of the usurpers of June 12.

Never again will Ahmadinejad speak of justice without being undone by the Neda Effect — the image of eyes blanking, life abating and blood blotching across the face of Neda Agha-Soltan.

Iran crushes people with its tragedy. It was unbearable to go. It remains so. Images multiply across the Web but the mainstream media, disciplined to distill, is missed.

Still, the world is watching. As we Americans celebrate the Declaration of Independence, let’s stand with Iran by recalling the first democratic revolution in Asia. It began in 1905 in Iran, driven by the quest to secure parliamentary government and a Constitution from the Qajar dynasty.

Now, 104 years on, Iranians demand that the Constitution they have be respected through Islamic democracy and a government accountable to the people. They will not be silenced. The regime’s base has narrowed dramatically. Its internal splits are growing with the defection of much of the clerical establishment.

One distinguished Iran scholar, Farideh Farhi, wrote this to me: “So I cry and ask why we have to do this to ourselves over and over again. Yet I do have hope, perhaps for purely selfish reasons — because I don’t want to cry all the time, but also because of the energy you keep describing. We have a saying in Persian, I assume out of historical experience, to the effect that Iran ultimately tames the invaders.”

That transported me to Ferdowsi Square, on June 18, and a woman who, with palpable passion, told me: “This land is my land.”

She called Ahmadinejad “the halo without light” — a line from the anthem of the Iran demanding its country back, the Iran still saying “No” by lifting its unbending chorus into the night.

From far away, I hear it, and this distance feels like betrayal — of those brave rooftop voices and of a journalist’s “actual responsibility.”

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