

COMPARATIVE BOOK REVIEW

The Assault On Reason by Al Gore

and

Rumpole and the Reign of Terror by John Mortimer

Hannah Renglich

The international world order is fraught with insecurity and unrest, and within this context, terrorism has evolved as a major threat. Frequently, as in the case of the United States, argues Al Gore, responses to acts of terrorism are performed by governments acting out of fear, and often supported by misinformed populations. *Rumpole and the Reign of Terror* by John Mortimer and *The Assault On Reason* by Al Gore examine the intricacies of this fear response as contrasted with the concept of reason, expounding upon the vices of large scale societal ignorance and an implicit erosion of democracy. In combination, the two works provide an informative critical analysis of the current trends in national peace, security and human rights with greater implications for international politics.

Though they differ in presentation, the works of both Mortimer and Gore examine a central juxtaposition between fear and reason in a post-9/11 world. Each author emphasizes the importance of the conquest of the latter in order to uphold law and democracy. Through satiric reality-based fiction, Mortimer uses the principled character of Rumpole to illustrate a departure from his fear-driven peers and illuminate what seems to be the novelty of rationality in the face of blind emotion. Rumpole is resolutely moral as he attempts to uphold the law even while being criticized by his wife and colleagues, who suggest that "things like jury trials and the presumption of innocence may have been all very well in their day. But times change. History moves on. We need quicker and more reliable results. Modernize, Mr Rumpole" (Mortimer 93). In response to these ludicrous assertions, Rumpole reiterates his staunch values, claiming, "I may be ridiculously old-fashioned...but I prefer to believe Dr Khan is innocent until he's proved guilty" (Mortimer 37). In contrast to Mortimer's paragon of reason and virtue, Al Gore explicitly delineates the failings of George W. Bush, his administration, and its manipulation of public opinion as well as disregard for the institutions of democracy, resulting in the abandonment of reason by the government and subsequently its citizens. Gore's elaboration of the politics of fear is much more blatant, as he devotes the first chapter of *The Assault on Reason* to the topic, beginning with the assertion that "when fear displaces reason, the result is often irrational hatred and division" (Gore 23). In a highly systematic manner, Gore makes the argument that the Bush administration "misused fear to manipulate the political process" (Gore 26), elaborating upon the potency of imagined threats, which when conceptualized, "can activate the fear response as powerfully as would *real* threats" (Gore 31). Both Gore and Mortimer point to fear as a propelling force toward irrational behaviour, such as Bush's manufacturing of fear and deliberate concealment of factual research in the effort to drive forward the war in Iraq. In Rumpole's case, a similar fear of the unknown and presumed state-sponsored propaganda leads characters to condemn a man who has yet to stand trial, let alone to be found guilty. Though the Mortimer and Gore examine the implication of fear for different ends - terrorism and eroding democracy, respectively - each clearly does so in contrast to reason.

Tied to Gore's and Mortimer's thematic focus on fear and reason is the concept of ignorance, which Gore argues is to a certain degree the result of socialization and specific limitations of unidirectional communication media. The wife of Mortimer's protagonist is an excellent portrayal of such societal ignorance. At the same time as she constantly says Rumpole is incapable of understanding things, she herself claims that "terrorists don't need defending. What they need is locking up securely,

or at least turving out of the country" (Mortimer 25). Gore's broader explanation of this phenomenon points to the ability for opinions to be easily manufactured and commodified:

The communication between candidates for national office and American voters is currently based almost entirely on one-way thirty-second television commercials purchased by the candidates at great expense with money donated to them largely by elites, many of whom are interested in purchasing specific policy outcomes with their contributions (Gore 76)

With an understanding that media control and distribution fall to those with large amounts of wealth, Gore writes that it is "the incestuous coupling of wealth and power that poses the deadliest threat to democracy" (Gore 73). Rumpole provides a promising contrast to the 'assumed ignorant public' of Gore's conception, yet he, too, seems to be an exception rather than the rule. With the choice between money and justice, Rumpole forgoes his devoted clients, the Timsons, in favour of the Pakistani Dr Khan's case, even though it is far more controversial and much less lucrative. Around him, however, comments such as "He could always have gone back to Afghanistan or wherever it was" (Mortimer 36) and "He is not like us, Mr Rumpole....We don't blow up innocent women and children" (Mortimer 22) serve to emphasize the severe dearth of knowledge Rumpole's companions possess. Though Mortimer paints him to be the embodiment of reason itself, even Rumpole experiences moments of doubt and suspicion, asking, "Wouldn't an innocent man have boiled over with anger, raged against the authorities, damned the police and showed nothing but contempt for a country which had arbitrarily imprisoned him?" (Mortimer 31). Ultimately, however, his reason trumps all else, and as a respectable lawyer, Rumpole acknowledges, "My beliefs, one way or the other, are completely irrelevant. I shall defend him to the best of my ability" (Mortimer 135).

Though the construction of the social critiques are different in genre, both The Assault on Reason and Rumpole and the Reign of Terror point to the erosion of democracy as threatening the integrity of the state. Al Gore's systematic exposure of the Bush administration's incompetence analyzes the disappearance of participatory processes that are fundamental for democracy, deliberate secrecy, and constant alterations to the traditional power structure in the United States at the whim of the president. With regard to the deafening silence of the citizenship, Gore ascribes blame primarily to non-participatory media, suggesting that an active two-way communication system is the only one that supports democratic principles. Gore writes that "it is astonishing how little outrage is generated by each new effort to impose tighter controls over the information that is made available" (Gore 121), suggesting that the erosion of democracy is aided by the participation vacuum. Gore goes on to devote a chapter to the changing balance of power within the three arms of the American government, continually returning to the idea that anyone who dared question the growing power of the head of state would be practically denounced as traitorous. Mortimer complements Gore's indignation by simply reaffirming Rumpole's stance when rebuked, "We hardly want to get the reputation of being a thorn in the flesh of the government, do we, Rumpole?" [and he responds] 'Don't you, Ballard? Speaking for myself, I can think of no finer reputation'" (Mortimer 38). Similarly, Mortimer expresses his distaste for unquestioning compliance with the government, referring to Rumpole's offer of promotion to judgeship, saying, "To offer me such a bribe as that for betraying my dedication to the basic principles of our legal system was an insult, even in the world of political chicanery" (Mortimer 69). Ultimately, the authors' disdain for democratic disintegration in all its dimensions is clearly expressed in the dissidence of Rumpole as well as Gore's reproachful analysis of the Bush administration.

The two narratives in question provide two unique approaches to the concept of security, with relation to fear and reason, ignorance, and eroding democracy and the effects thereupon of television media and concentrated wealth and power. Yet, Rumpole and the Reign of Terror provides a more accessible exploration of the aforementioned topics due to the acerbic satirical form employed, which makes for a more entertaining read than the often repetitive and methodical analysis offered in The

Assault on Reason. Just as can be detected in An Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore has a tendency toward the self-congratulatory, while concurrently condemning his political opponents, which has the combined effect of diminishing his credibility to a degree. Nevertheless, Gore's writing is well-researched and supported by quotes drawn from a wide spectrum of preeminent scholars, which, while at times seems roughly cobbled together, ultimately serves to enhance his arguments. Mortimer's writing, on the other hand, is a fiction based heavily on reality, which lacks much literary substance or subtlety. It is an amusing story, however, in which the likable protagonist is upheld as the only voice of reason. While Gore seems distastefully to be his own protagonist within his narrative, he redeems his moral authority in part by concluding an otherwise bleak and discouraging treatise with potentially meaningful prescriptions for the renewal of a vibrant democracy. Ultimately, the two works are well-paired and provide complementary insights into systems of democracy and terrorism. When read in combination, they effectively illuminate issues of international peace and security and enable a comprehensive understanding of the current global political climate.

Works Cited

Gore, Al. The Assault on Reason. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2007.

Mortimer, John. Rumpole and the Reign of Terror. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2007.