

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

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By the time you read this issue of *Reflections*, the 2004 Presidential election will be over, although as in 2000, the final results may not be known. The struggle for the hearts and votes, if not minds, of the United States electorate has been forged through the various narratives each candidate has woven of his disparate and often disjunctive life. Kerry, in particular, has himself offered up to his foes the material for competing narratives of his life: Was he a war hero or an unpatriotic dissembler? Did he stand up to the then enemy or give them aid and comfort during his post war declarations of outrage over American atrocities? Early on he made his Vietnam narrative the linear engine of his campaign (I did it then, I can do it now); his opponents have told a more twisted story and turned this narrative against him. Yet in one sense his story can be read as all of a piece—his character emerged in each situation, differently shaded, but consistently courageous. Insofar as Kerry's story about Vietnam is the story of a generation's journey from idealism to protest, he fully illustrates the postmodern conception of the *self* as consisting of multiple and partial *selves* in flux. His rhetorically shifting positions on the Iraq war parallel the complex braiding of his Vietnam narrative. In neither case does he acknowledge any inconsistency, apparently fully comfortable with his own understanding of himself as dynamic, fluid and responsive to the immediate situation. What holds the fragments together is his narrative about the ways they are connected. In this, Kerry exemplifies the life we live privately, with our various unstable selves made coherent by our self-designed narratives, forging the coherence and the connections for ourselves and our audiences. This is the postmodern understanding of the human personality: it is in our ongoing narrative that we

attempt to bridge past selves with current ones and anchor both to our future actions.

But all this is uncomfortable to much of the electorate. George W. Bush is much more the traditional personality, seemingly unified and linear, driving toward a worthy goal (protecting our country), without the complex side trips that we are loathe to acknowledge in our own lives and dislike in our leaders. Since he did not have the advantage of an early war story to tell, his public narrative has been far shorter, beginning on September 11, 2001. His plotline was straightforward, even simple: I have fought the terrorists who did this to us ever since. In an implicit acknowledgement that the past counts and should fit coherently into our current presentation of self, a DVD released in the weeks before the election, titled "George W. Bush: Faith in the White House," ties Bush's past selves, into a narrative of a man saved from his misspent youth and early middle age by faith and a clear moral conviction about the right thing to do in all circumstances. This righteousness may seem an annoying quality to those living with the complexity of the postmodern, not to mention post 9/11 world. But it is quite appealing, even necessary, to a large proportion of the American electorate. John Kerry has a movie too, "Going up River- The Long War of John Kerry," that tells the story of his Vietnam days. The movie's ad proclaims, "Some Men are Changed by History...Others Make It." While the movies in each case were made by others, it is clear that both men were eager to present to the American electorate what they want most: a man whose past and present offer a kind of unified field theory of grittiness and consistency—one who will protect us from harm. By the time you read this, it will be clear whose story was found most compelling.



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