

THE
BRAINDEAD
MEGAPHONE

ESSAYS

GEORGE SAUNDERS

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To my parents, on the occasion of their
fiftieth wedding anniversary, with gratitude
for their beautiful example.

THE BRAINDEAD MEGAPHONE



1.

I find myself thinking of a guy standing in a field in the year 1200 doing whatever it is people in 1200 did while standing in fields. I'm thinking about his mind, wondering what's in it. What's he talking about in that tape-loop in his head? Who's he arguing with? From whom is he defending himself, to whom is he rationalizing his actions?

I'm wondering, in other words, if his mental experience of life is different in any essential way from mine.

What I have in common with this guy, I suspect, is that a lot of our mental dialogue is with people we know: our parents, wives, kids, neighbors.

Where I suspect we part ways is in the number and nature of the conversations we have with people we've never met.

He probably does some talking to his gods, his ancestors, mythological beings, historical figures. So do I. But

there is a category of people I mentally converse with that he does not: people from far away, who've arrived in the mind, with various agendas, via high-tech sources.

I suspect that you also have these people in your mind; in fact, as you read this (sorry, sorry) I am become one of them.

Is this difference between us and Mr. or Ms. 1200 a good thing or a bad thing? I'm not sure. For now, let's just acknowledge it as a *difference*; a change in what human beings are asking their minds to do on a daily basis.

2.

Imagine a party. The guests, from all walks of life, are not negligible. They've been around: they've lived, suffered, own businesses, have real areas of expertise. They're talking about things that interest them, giving and taking subtle correction. Certain submerged concerns are coming to the surface and—surprise, pleasant surprise—being confirmed and seconded and assuaged by other people who've been feeling the same way.

Then a guy walks in with a megaphone. He's not the smartest person at the party, or the most experienced, or the most articulate.

But he's got that megaphone.

Say he starts talking about how much he loves early mornings in spring. What happens? Well, people turn to listen. It would be hard not to. It's only polite. And soon, in their small groups, the guests may find themselves talking about early spring mornings. Or, more correctly, about the validity of Megaphone Guy's ideas about early spring mornings. Some are agreeing with him, some disagreeing—but because he's so loud, their

conversations will begin to react to what he's saying. As he changes topics, so do they. If he continually uses the phrase "at the end of the day," they start using it too. If he weaves into his arguments the assumption that the west side of the room is preferable to the east, a slow westward drift will begin.

These responses are predicated not on his intelligence, his unique experience of the world, his powers of contemplation, or his ability with language, but on the volume and omnipresence of his narrating voice.

His main characteristic is his *dominance*. He crowds the other voices out. His rhetoric becomes the central rhetoric because of its unavoidability.

In time, Megaphone Guy will ruin the party. The guests will stop believing in their value as guests, and come to see their main role as reactors-to-the-Guy. They'll stop doing what guests are supposed to do: keep the conversation going per their own interests and concerns. They'll become passive, stop believing in the validity of their own impressions. They may not even notice they've started speaking in his diction, that their thoughts are being limned by his. What's important to him will come to seem important to them.

We've said Megaphone Guy isn't the smartest, or most articulate, or most experienced person at the party—but what if the situation is even worse than this?

Let's say he hasn't carefully considered the things he's saying. He's basically just blurting things out. And even with the megaphone, he has to shout a little to be heard, which limits the complexity of what he can say. Because he feels he has to be entertaining, he jumps from topic to topic, favoring the conceptual-general ("We're eating more cheese cubes—and loving it!"), the anxiety-or controversy-provoking ("Wine running out due to

shadowy conspiracy?"), the gossip ("Quickie rumored in south bathroom!"), and the trivial ("Which quadrant of the party room do YOU prefer?").

We consider speech to be the result of thought (we have a thought, then select a sentence with which to express it), but thought also results from speech (as we grope, in words, toward meaning, we discover what we think). This yammering guy has, by forcibly putting his restricted language into the heads of the guests, affected the quality and coloration of the thoughts going on in there.

He has, in effect, put an intelligence-ceiling on the party.

3.

A man sits in a room. Someone begins shouting through his window, informing him of conditions in the house next door. Our man's mind infects: that is, he begins imagining that house. What are the factors that might affect the quality of his imagining? That is, what factors affect his ability to imagine the next-door house as it actually is?

- (1) The clarity of the language being used by the Informant (the less muddled, inarticulate, or jargon-filled, the better);
- (2) The agenda of the Informant (*no agenda* preferable to *agenda-rich*);
- (3) The time and care the Informant has spent constructing his narrative (i.e., the extent to which his account was revised and improved before being transmitted, with *more* time and care preferable to *less*);

- (4) The time allowed for the communication (with *more* time preferable to *less*, on the assumption that more time grants the Informant a better opportunity to explain, explore, clarify, etc.).

So the best-case scenario for acquiring a truthful picture of that house next door might go something like this: Information arrives in the form of prose written and revised over a long period of time, in the interest of finding the truth, by a disinterested person with real-world experience in the subject area. The report can be as long, dense, nuanced, and complex as is necessary to portray the complexity of the situation.

The worst-case scenario might be: Information arrives in the form of prose written by a person with little or no firsthand experience in the subject area, who hasn't had much time to revise what he's written, working within narrow time constraints, in the service of an agenda that may be subtly or overtly distorting his ability to tell the truth.

Could we make this worst-case scenario even worse? Sure. Let it be understood that the Informant's main job is to entertain and that, if he fails in this, he's gone. Also, the man being informed? Make him too busy, ill-prepared, and distracted to properly assess what the Informant's shouting at him.

Then propose invading the house next door.

Welcome to America, circa 2003.

4.

To my way of thinking, something latent in our news media became overt and catastrophic around the time of the O. J. Simpson trial. Because the premise of the

crime's national importance was obviously false, it had to be bolstered. A new style of presentation had to be invented. To wring thousands of hours of coverage from what could have been summarized in a couple of minutes every few weeks, a new rhetorical strategy was developed, or—let's be generous—evolved.

If someone has to lecture ten hours a day on a piece of dog crap in a bowl, adjustments will need to be made. To say the ridiculous things that will need to be said to sustain the illusion that the dog-crap story is serious news ("Dog-crap expert Jesse Toville provides his assessment of the probable size of the dog and its psychological state at time-of-crappage!"), distortions of voice, face, and format will be required.

This erosion continued through the Monica Lewinsky scandal ("More at five about The Stain! Have you ever caused a Stain? Which color do you think would most effectively hide a Stain? See what our experts predicted you would say!"), and dozens of lesser (?) cases and scandals, all morbid, sensational, and blown out of proportion, often involving minor celebrities—and then came 9/11.

By this time our national discourse had been so degraded—our national language so dumbed-down—that we were sitting ducks. In that hour of fear and need, finding in our hands the set of crude, hyperbolic tools we'd been using to discuss O.J., et al., we began using them to decide whether to invade another country, and soon were in Baghdad, led by Megaphone Guy, via "Countdown to Slapdown in the Desert!" and "Twilight for the Evil One: America Comes Calling!" Megaphone Guy, it seemed, had gone a little braindead. Or part of him had. What had gone dead was the curious part that should have been helping us *decide* about the morality

and intelligence of invasion, that should have known that the war being discussed was a real war, that might actually happen, to real, currently living people. Where was our sense of agonized wondering, of real doubt? We got (to my memory) a lot of discussion of tactics (which route, which vehicles) and strategy (how would it "play on the Arab street") but not much about the essential morality of invasion. (We did not hear, for example, "Well, Ted, as Gandhi once said, 'What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans, and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?'")

Am I oversimplifying here? Yes. Is all our media stupid? Far from it. Were intelligent, valuable things written about the rush to war (and about O.J. and Monica, and then Laci Peterson and Michael Jackson, et al.)? Of course.

But: Is some of our media very stupid? Hoo boy. Does stupid, near-omnipresent media make us more tolerant toward stupidity in general? It would be surprising if it didn't.

Is human nature such that, under certain conditions, stupidity can come to dominate, infecting the brighter quadrants, dragging everybody down with it?

5.

Last night on the local news I watched a young reporter standing in front of our mall, obviously freezing his ass off. The essence of his report was, Malls Tend to Get Busier at Christmas! Then he reported the local implications of his investigation: (1) This Also True at Our Mall! (2) When Our Mall More Busy, More Cars Present

in Parking Lot! (3) The More Cars, the Longer It Takes Shoppers to Park! and (shockingly): (4) Yet People Still Are Shopping. Due to, It Is Christmas!

It sounded like information, basically. He signed off crisply, nobody back at NewsCenter8 or wherever laughed at him. And across our fair city, people sat there and took it, and I believe that, generally, they weren't laughing at him either. They, like us in our house, were used to it, and consented to the idea that some Informing had just occurred. Although what we had been told, we already knew, although it had been told in banal language, revved up with that strange TV-news emphasis ("cold WEATHER leads SOME motorISTS to drive less, CARrie!"), we took it, and, I would say, it did something to us: made us dumber and more accepting of slop.

Furthermore, I suspect, it subtly degraded our ability to make bold, meaningful sentences, or laugh at stupid, ill-considered ones. The next time we felt tempted to say something like, "Wow, at Christmas the malls sure do get busier due to more people shop at Christmas because at Christmas so many people go out to buy things at malls due to Christmas being a holiday on which gifts are given by some to others"—we might actually say it, this sentiment having been elevated by our having seen it all dressed-up on television, in its fancy faux-Informational clothing.

And next time we hear someone saying something like, "We are pursuing this strategy because other strategies, when we had considered them, we concluded that, in terms of overall effectiveness, they were not sound strategies, which is why we enacted the one we are now embarked upon, which our enemies would like to see us fail, due to they hate freedom," we will wait to see if the anchorperson cracks up, or chokes back a

sob of disgust, and if he or she does not, we'll feel a bit insane, and therefore less confident, and therefore more passive.

There is, in other words, a cost to dopey communication, even if that dopey communication is innocently intended.

And the cost of dopey communication is directly proportional to the omnipresence of the message.

6.

In the beginning, there's a blank mind. Then that mind gets an idea in it, and the trouble begins, because the mind mistakes the idea for the world. Mistaking the idea for the world, the mind formulates a theory and, having formulated a theory, feels inclined to act.

Because the idea is always only an approximation of the world, whether that action will be catastrophic or beneficial depends on the distance between the idea and the world.

Mass media's job is to provide this simulacra of the world, upon which we build our ideas. There's another name for this simulacra-building: storytelling.

Megaphone Guy is a storyteller, but his stories are not so good. Or rather, his stories are limited. His stories have not had time to gestate—they go out too fast and to too broad an audience. Storytelling is a language-rich enterprise, but Megaphone Guy does not have time to generate powerful language. The best stories proceed from a mysterious truth-seeking impulse that narrative has when revised extensively; they are complex and baffling and ambiguous; they tend to make us slower to act, rather than quicker. They make us more humble, cause

us to empathize with people we don't know, because they help us imagine these people, and when we imagine them—if the storytelling is good enough—we imagine them as being, essentially, like us. If the story is poor, or has an agenda, if it comes out of a paucity of imagination or is rushed, we imagine those other people as essentially unlike us: unknowable, inscrutable, inconvertible.

Our venture in Iraq was a literary failure, by which I mean a failure of imagination. A culture better at imagining richly, three-dimensionally, would have had a greater respect for war than we did, more awareness of the law of unintended consequences, more familiarity with the world's tendency to throw aggressive energy back at the aggressor in ways he did not expect. A culture capable of imagining complexly is a humble culture. It acts, when it has to act, as late in the game as possible, and as cautiously, because it knows its own girth and the tight confines of the china shop it's blundering into. And it knows that no matter how well-prepared it is—no matter how ruthlessly it has held its projections up to intelligent scrutiny—the place it is headed for is going to be very different from the place it imagined. The shortfall between the imagined and the real, multiplied by the violence of one's intent, equals the evil one will do.

7.

So how did we get here? I think it went something like this: Elements on the right (Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, etc.) resuscitated an old American streak of simplistic, jingoistic, fear-based rhetoric that, in that post-9/11 climate of fear, infected, to a greater or lesser extent, the

rest of the media. Remember Bill O'Reilly interrupting/chastising/misrepresenting Jeremy Glick, whose father died on 9/11, finally telling Glick to shut up, cutting off his microphone? And a few months later, Diane Sawyer's strange Mother Confessor interview/interrogation of the Dixie Chicks?

Ah, those were the days.

But also, those *are* the days, and the days yet to come. The basic illness in our media is not cured; it's only that our fear has subsided somewhat. When the next attack comes, the subsequent swing to the Stalinesque will be even more extreme, having, as it will, the additional oomph of retrospective repentance of what will then be perceived as a period (i.e., *now*) of relapse to softness and terror-encouraging open discourse.

Have we gone entirely to hell? No: the media, like life, is complex and stratified, filled with heroes holding the line. (All hail Bill Moyers; all hail Soledad O'Brien, post-Katrina, losing her temper with FEMA Director Michael Brown.) But if we define the Megaphone as *the composite of the hundreds of voices we hear each day that come to us from people we don't know, via high-tech sources*, it's clear that a significant and ascendant component of that voice has become bottom-dwelling, shrill, incurious, ranting, and agenda-driven. It strives to antagonize us, make us feel anxious, ineffective, and alone; convince us that the world is full of enemies and of people stupider and less agreeable than ourselves; is dedicated to the idea that, outside the sphere of our immediate experience, the world works in a different, more hostile, less knowable manner. This braindead tendency is viral and manifests intermittently; while it is the blood in the veins of some of our media figures, it flickers on and off in others. It

frequently sheds its political skin for a stroll through Entertainment Park, where it leers and smirks and celebrates when someone is brought low by, say, an absence of underwear or a drunken evening.

But why should this tendency be ascendant? Fear, yes, fear is part of it. In a time of danger, the person sounding the paranoid continual alarm will eventually be right. A voice arguing for our complete rightness and the complete wrongness of our enemies, a voice constantly broadening the definition of "enemy," relieves us of the burden of living with ambiguity. The sensibility that generates a phrase like "unfortunate but necessary collateral damage" can, in the heat of the moment, feel like a kind of dark, necessary pragmatism.

But more than fear, our new braindeadness has to do, I think, with commerce: the shift that has taken place within our major news organizations toward the corporate model, and away from the public-interest model. The necessity of profit is now assumed for our mass-media activities. This assumption has been shorn of all moral baggage: it is just something sophisticated people concede, so that other, more vital, discussions of "content" can begin.

Now, why aggressive, anxiety-provoking, maudlin, polarizing discourse should prove more profitable than its opposite is a mystery. Maybe it's a simple matter of drama: ranting, innuendo, wallowing in the squalid, the exasperation of the already-convinced, may, at some crude level, just be *more interesting* than some intelligent, skeptical human being trying to come to grips with complexity, especially given the way we use our media: as a time-killer in the airport, a sedative or stimulant at the end of a long day.

In any event, the people who used to ask, "Is it news?" now seem to be asking, "Will it stimulate?" And the change is felt, high and low, throughout the culture.

Imagine a village. A nearby village, having grown a surplus of a certain vegetable that, when eaten, turns the skin red, cuts our village a deal on this vegetable. Within a few months, the average color of the people in our village will have moved toward the Red end of the spectrum. Within that general trend will be all sorts of variations and exceptions: this guy eats as much as he likes of that vegetable but just goes a little Pink; this woman, who can't stand the taste of it, and never eats it, stays the same color as always. But in general, because of the omnipresence of that vegetable, the village is going to become Redder, and at the far end of the Gaussian curve folks will start looking downright demonic.

What, in this model, is the "vegetable"? What is "Red"?

The vegetable that has come to dominate our village is the profit motive.

"Red" is the resulting coarseness of our public rhetoric.

Now, profit is fine; economic viability is wonderful. But if these trump every other consideration, we will be rendered perma-children, having denied ourselves use of our higher faculties. With every grave-faced discussion of the disposition of the fetus within the body of its murdered mother, every interview with someone who knew the lawyer of an alleged close friend of some new Anna Nicole Smith, we become more clownish and bloated, and thereby more vulnerable.

In surrendering our mass storytelling function to entities whose first priority is profit, we make a dangerous

concession: "Tell us," we say in effect, "as much truth as you can, *while still making money*." This is not the same as asking: "Tell us the truth."

A culture's ability to understand the world and itself is critical to its survival. But today we are led into the arena of public debate by seers whose main gift is their ability to compel people to continue to watch them.

8.

The generalizing writer is like the passionate drunk, stumbling into your house mumbling: *I know I'm not being clear, exactly, but don't you kind of feel what I'm feeling?* If, generously overlooking my generalizations, your gut agrees with my gut in feeling that the nightly news may soon consist entirely of tirades by men so angry and inarticulate that all they do is sputter while punching themselves in the face, punctuated by videos of dogs blowing up after eating firecrackers, and dog-explosion experts rating the funniness of the videos—if you accept my basic premise that media is getting meaner and dumber—we might well ask, together: Who's running this mess? Who's making Sean Hannity's graphics? Who's booking the flights of that endless stream of reporters standing on the beach in the Bahamas, gravely speculating about the contents of a dead woman's stomach?

Well, that would be us. Who runs the media? Who is the media? The best and brightest among us—the most literate and ambitious and gifted, who go out from their homes and off to the best colleges, and from there to the best internships, and from there to offices throughout the nation, to inform us. They take the jobs they take, I suspect, without much consideration of the politics of

their employer. What matters is the level of Heaven that employer occupies. The national is closer to God than the local; the large market looks down upon the small; the lately ratings-blessed floats slowly up, impressing the angels whose upward movement has fizzled out, because they work for losers.

There's no conspiracy at work, I don't think, no ill will, no leering Men Behind the Curtain: just a bunch of people from good universities, living out the dream, cringing a little at the dog-crap story even as they ensure that it goes out on time, with excellent production values.

How does such a harmful product emanate from such talented people? I'd imagine it has to do with the will to survive: each small piece of the machine doing what he or she must to avoid going home to Toledo, tail-between-legs, within the extant constraints of time and profitability, each deferring his or her "real" work until such time as he or she accumulates his or her nut and can head for the hills, or get a job that lets them honor their hearts. (A young friend who writes content for the news page of an online media giant, e-mails me: "I just wrote this news headline for my job: 'Anna Nicole's Lost Diary: 'I Hate Sex.'" If anyone wonders why Americans aren't informed with real news it's because of sell-out corporate goons like me who will do anything to never deliver a pizza again.")

An assistant to a famous conservative opinion-meister once described her boss to me, a little breathlessly and in the kind of value-neutral mode one hears in this milieu, as being one of the funniest, most intelligent, high-energy people she'd ever met. I believed her. To do what he does must take a special and terrifying skill set. Did she agree with his politics? She demurred—she did and

she didn't. It was kind of beside the point. He was kicking much ass. I immediately felt a little gauche for asking about her politics, like a guy who, in the palace, asks how much the footman makes.

The first requirement of greatness is that one stay in the game. To stay in the game, one must prove viable; to prove viable, one has to be watched; to be watched, one has to be watchable, and, in the news business, a convention of Watchability has evolved—a tone, a pace, an unspoken set of acceptable topics and acceptable relations to these topics—that bears, at best, a peripheral relation to truth. What can be said on TV is circumscribed, subtly, by past performance, editing, and social cues, and, not so subtly, by whether one is invited back.

This entity I'm trying to unify under the rubric of The Megaphone is, of course, in reality, a community tens of thousands of people strong, and like all communities, it is diverse, and resistant to easy generality, and its ways are mysterious.

But this community constitutes a kind of *de facto* ruling class, because what it says we can't avoid hearing, and what we hear changes the way we think. It has become a kind of branch of our government: when government wants to mislead, it turns to the media; when media gets hot for a certain story (i.e., senses a ratings hot spot), it influences the government. This has always been true, but more and more this relationship is becoming a closed loop, which leaves the citizen extraneous. Like any ruling class, this one looks down on those it rules. The new twist is that this ruling class rules via our eyes and the ears. It fills the air, and thus our heads, with its priorities and thoughts, and its new stunted diction.

This is a ruling class made of strange bedfellows: the Conservative Opinion King has more in common

with the Liberal Opinion King than either does with the liberal and conservative slaughterhouse workers toiling side by side in Wichita; the Opinion Kings have friends in common, similar ambitions, a common frame of reference (agents, expected perks, a knowledge of the hierarchy of success indicators, a mastery of insider jargon). What they share most is a desire not to be cast down, down from the realm of the rarefied air, back to where they came from.

There's a little slot on the side of the Megaphone, and as long as you're allowed to keep talking into it, money keeps dropping out.

Seasons pass. What once would have evoked an eye-roll evokes a dull blink. New truisms, new baselines, arise. A new foundation, labeled Our Basic Belief System, is laid, and on this foundation appear startling new structures: a sudden quasi acceptance of, say, the waterboarding of prisoners, or of the idea that a trial is a privilege we may choose to withhold if we deem the crime severe enough.

9.

At this point I hear a voice from the back of the room, and it is mine: "Come on, George, hasn't our mass media always been sensationalistic, dumb, and profit-seeking?"

Of course it has. If you want a tutorial on stupidity, watch an old newsreel ("These scrappy Southern Yanks are taking a brisk walk toward some Krauts who'll soon be whistling Dixie out of the other side of Das Traps!"). We were plenty able to whip ourselves into murderous frenzies even when the Megaphone was a baby, consisting of a handful of newspapers (Hi, Mr.

Hearst!), and I suppose if we went back far enough, we'd find six or seven troglodytes madly projecting about a village of opposing troglodytes, then jogging down there, hooting pithy slogans, to eliminate it on the fallacious power of their collective flame-fanning.

But I think we're in an hour of special danger, if only because our technology has become so loud, slick, and seductive, its powers of self-critique so insufficient and glacial. The era of the jackboot is over: the forces that come for our decency, humor, and freedom will be extolling, in beautiful smooth voices, the virtue of decency, humor, and freedom.

Imagine that the Megaphone has two dials: One controls the Intelligence of its rhetoric and the other its Volume. Ideally, the Intelligence would be set on High, and the Volume on Low—making it possible for multiple, contradictory voices to be broadcast and heard. But to the extent that the Intelligence is set on Stupid, and the Volume on Drown Out All Others, this is verging on propaganda, and we have a problem, one that works directly against the health of our democracy.

Is there an antidote?

Well, there is, but it's partial, and may not work, and isn't very exciting. Can we legislate against Stupidity? I don't think we'd want to. Freedom means we have to be free to be Stupid, and Banal, and Perverse, free to generate both *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, and *Swapping Pets: The Alligator Edition*. Freedom means that if some former radio DJ can wrestle his way to the top of the heap and provoke political upheavals by spouting his lame opinions and bullying his guests, he too has a right to have a breakfast cereal named after him. American creative energy has always teetered on the brink of insanity. "Rhapsody in Blue" and "The Night Chicago Died" have, alas, common

DNA, the DNA for "joyfully reckless confidence." What I propose as an antidote is simply: awareness of the Megaphonic tendency, and discussion of same. Every well-thought-out rebuttal to dogma, every scrap of intelligent logic, every absurdist reduction of some bullying stance is the antidote. Every request for the clarification of the vague, every poke at smug banality, every pen stroke in a document under revision is the antidote.

This battle, like any great moral battle, will be won, if won, not with some easy corrective tidal wave of Total Righteousness, but with small drops of specificity and aplomb and correct logic, delivered titrationally, by many of us all at once.

We have met the enemy and he is us, yes, yes, but the fact that we have recognized ourselves as the enemy indicates we still have the ability to rise up and whip our own ass, so to speak: keep reminding ourselves that representations of the world are never the world itself. Turn that Megaphone down, and insist that what's said through it be as precise, intelligent, and humane as possible.