

A conversation with Mark Danner

Michael Hanne: We've called this project "Warring with Words" and it focuses on the use of narrative and the use of metaphor, by political actors, by journalists and commentators on politics, and by scholars writing political history and political theory. Our assertion is that narrative and metaphor are to be found everywhere in the discourse that surrounds politics and that both exercise great influence on our thinking and action. What is novel about what we are attempting is that we are bringing the narrative perspective and the metaphor perspective together, because, while there are a number of people writing on narrative in politics and a number of people writing on metaphor, there are not many people writing on both.

You're internationally known for your intensively researched and morally forceful analyses of painful political situations, but, in particular, I wanted to speak to you because I know that you are an extraordinarily impressive creator or fabricator of narratives *and* metaphors for representing political events and policies, but equally that you illuminate and analyze with great rigor the deluded or deceptive narratives and metaphors that political leaders employ to legitimize their actions. So, clearly you are acutely aware of the power of narrative and metaphor.

What I want to do in this conversation is tease out with you some of the ways in which you employ narrative and metaphor, but also how you go about analyzing and critiquing the use of narrative and metaphor by key political actors for deceptive purposes. Can we start with the big picture? Amongst the many roles you play, you are a historian of contemporary events. Just as the academic historian poses questions about the origins of the Second World War, so you pose questions about the origins of the Second Iraq War, the origins of the ongoing misery of life in Haiti, the process by which torture came to be the norm in US military practice etc, etc. You have a preoccupation with tracing and recounting what has happened in some of the most troubled and complex communal and international situations of recent years: the war in Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia, events around the earthquake in Haiti, the Second Iraq War, the Israel-Palestine conflict. So now I come to my first question.

You describe yourself as a storyteller. You said in one interview: 'I try to tell the story, to get it right, and to tell it well.' Can you amplify on your account of Mark Danner as storyteller?

Mark Danner: Well, that's a very large question. That, it seems to me is a primary kind of task, which is trying to put events into some narrative logic for readers who are looking at a situation that is often painful and grotesque, or very strange and frightening. It might involve mass-killing or atrocities of various kinds that to many people are simply incomprehensible. And I think one of your first jobs is to try to make the story itself comprehensible. When I say comprehensible, I mean that we want readers to understand what happens, in a sense, *beyond* good and evil. I want to get beyond the narrative that says, or implies, 'There are simply these bad people, and

these bad people came and killed other people, and isn't that horrible – and of course there will always be evil in the world.'

I suppose I don't really think that is the way the world works. I believe with Solzhenitsyn that people are made up of good and evil: you don't simply have evil people. And when we look at motives - why people do things - we have to look first at ourselves to understand why people act the way they do. That is my goal as a storyteller, to make things comprehensible, particularly horrible things, and vivid, of course; and comprehensible means not only understanding people's motives, but understanding how events unfolded and what made them possible.

MH: The narrative faculty is extraordinary in the sense that we can build into a story - and anyone listening to a story will perfectly well understand – an immense variety of features, which can include character, events, sequence, social and physical context, motivation, causality and so on. Somehow we can absorb all of that, if a story is well told, all in one package.

Mark Danner: That's very true. It is clear we do possess a fundamental kind of understanding that is built around narrative, that in some fundamental way we understand events using a logic of causality that lets us make sense of the world - which is to say, we understand the world in stories. Storytelling: Kant may not have listed it as one of his primary faculties, but I think it is in a sense a primary faculty of human beings. When we look at the world we understand one thing as having caused another. And I agree with you: this mode of understanding can carry with it an immense amount of information. I mean, one thing we can certainly say about stories is that they are extraordinarily efficient conveyors of information. They can carry vast multitudes of facts and impressions and pictures, and that is a remarkable thing.

What a reporter does is *construct* narratives – and yet because of this ideology of “objectivity” in journalism, there is this predisposition to think that people just sort of... *find* stories: that stories somehow already exist in the world and people, good reporters, go out and find them. Of course they're not *creating* them – how could they be? they are “objective journalists,” after all – they are finding them. They don't create stories. No.

But in fact this is not true. I've always been fascinated that you can sit here in New York or California, wherever, and watch the Iraq War, and the news coming from it. You can have very strong opinions. You know precisely what's going on. You know why. You're certain about what's happening. But when you arrive in Iraq, after the corkscrew landing that the plane makes in order to avoid the the missiles and rocket-propelled grenades, and you strap on your body armor and get in your armored car and speed at a hundred miles per hour down that notorious airport road, where all the car bombs have been attacking, into the devastated city; where the store fronts all are closed and the hulks of blown-out cars are everywhere; and you talk to people who don't want to talk to you, read the fear on the streets, listen for the bombs that are going off, the suicide bombings, look for the plumes of oily smoke that come out of

those attacks about the cityscape. And within a day or two days or three days, after you take in this blizzard of sense impressions, of sights, of sounds, of different narratives coming from people you talk to - after a matter of days, you go from the person who knew everything sitting in New York to the person who knows precisely nothing sitting in Baghdad. I find it a voluptuous process, actually, finding your inner ignorance. Having stripped away all this false “knowledge,” you find this inner ignorance and then, with that *tabula rasa* that you’ve managed to achieve by actually going to this place, you begin, slowly, painfully, to construct a picture of what you think, maybe, possibly, is going on. You build that picture on the skeleton of a narrative: a constructed logic tying together events. You put it together out of your own efforts as a reporter, a seeker after knowledge: out of the stories people tell you, out of the things you have seen, the things you’ve heard, the details that strike you as bizarre, and strange, and striking. And those are the motley pile of materials out of which you build the skeleton of a story. And that act of construction is, to me, what is exciting about storytelling.

When you arrive at the question of figuration, of figurative language, part of the need for it arises out of the practical necessity to convey vividly what you are seeing and experiencing: what you are looking at. But part of it, antecedent even to the need to convey experience vividly, is rooted in the effort to understand – to understand what is happening *yourself*. To me the primary narrative function of metaphor is, first and foremost, to understand it yourself: to understand what you are seeing; what is in front of you; how, indeed, it looks. You know, I remember one early morning Baghdad, driving to an interview with the top intelligence official in the American army. She had not given an interview before and she was one of the few female generals in the American army at the time. It was quite a coup to get her to agree to meet with me and I was driving along, thinking about what I would ask her, and an before I knew what was happening an enormous shockwave jerked the entire car up in the air. The explosion – it was so loud I never actually heard it – was conveyed to me only by the absence of sound (it had blown out my ears) and then, after a few moments of utter silence, the tinkling of all windows in their sashes along this main street in Baghdad. A kind of little symphony of tinkling glass emerging out of the blank silence. I remember thinking at the time that that abrupt wrenching jerking movement of the car up into the air could only be compared to a horse bucking. The galloping horse had bucked abruptly, his head and back had been wrenched back, and suddenly you, the rider, rushing forward, are being seized as if in an enormous hand and jerked up. At the time, sitting in the car, feeling my hearing return and trying to catch my breath and figure out what had happened, I was asking myself, ‘What exactly is this like?’ ‘How do I understand what has just happened?’ And the metaphor came out of an effort at self-understanding, before I eventually used it in a description of that morning - and the suicide bomber’s attack on the Red Cross a block away, which had wrenched my car into the air.

MH: So often I think metaphors assist the listener or the reader, who has never had an experience like the one you are describing, so you've got to give them some metaphor, something familiar, such as the bucking of a horse, something they feel they know.

Mark Danner: Yes, absolutely. Metaphor is very often a bridge from the unfamiliar to the familiar. It's one of the reasons Orwell, who wrote about the effective use of metaphors in his great essay, "Politics and the English Language," argued for using what he called "homey" metaphors, to use homey comparisons, which would be familiar to everyone, and Orwell himself would compare things metaphorically to the falling of snow, or the way coffee grounds choke the drain in sink: literally, a most "homey" image. I'm not sure I would entirely agree with Orwell that these are the most powerful metaphors, but I do agree that metaphors are particularly powerful if they are disjunctive enough: if they are both surprising, like the horse, and familiar at the same time. So I think in context you want them to be surprising, to be fresh and striking, but in order for them to convey what you want to convey they have to be, at least to some extent, familiar.

MH: Staying with narrative for the moment, it seems to me that one of the challenges you must face every day, especially when you are writing shorter pieces, is: how do you insert the historical background, the backstory, in a way which will be comprehensible, manageable to your reader or to your listener? How do you handle the long history? I'm thinking of your writings on Haiti, for instance, in which you really do take the reader right back to the slave revolution and before and say you can only understand Haiti today if you look at the history of the last 200 years and more.

Mark Danner: You are quite right. Many of the places I've written about are incomprehensible without understanding the history. And understanding the history is a way, not least, to start to understand the country as Haitians, or Bosnians, or others, understand it themselves. These peoples are steeped in their history, a history about which outsiders generally are ignorant. It's one strong difference in the points of view between how outsiders see them and how they see themselves. Haitians, for example, are deeply aware of their remarkable past. In Haiti the past is everywhere: their astonishing history is central to their worldview; it's who they are. I was fortunate enough, in writing about Haiti for *The New Yorker* and also for *The New York Review of Books*, to be writing 'long form' and thus to have enough space to "do the history," as it were. I remember that, when the second piece in my *New Yorker* series, as edited, was entirely about the history, I worried: would the reader be able to stay with this? Or would it be like that first couple of chapters of a biography that goes back into the family past - a barrier to the juicy parts of the narrative that the reader is tempted to skip? Robert Gottlieb, the remarkable *New Yorker* editor of the time, bless him, was absolutely confident. He reassured me, 'This history is amazing, don't worry about it a bit. It's absolutely compelling. It carries itself on its own interest alone and our readers will appreciate this.' And of course he proved to be entirely right.

Much more recently, I wrote a piece on Haiti for the *Times* op-ed page, quite a long piece for them, which was given over almost entirely to Haiti's history and its intertwining with the present - with the earthquake, in particular - and went into it rather in depth. In a sense, in this case, the history *was* the drama. I was able to do an 1800-word piece about Haiti's history because the present tragedy of Haiti, post-earthquake, was so much in the foreground; thus the history could be put forward, in a sense, as an explanation for a narrative that readers already knew. The history was essentially a critique of the narrative that readers were already familiar with, which was a narrative of Haiti as a fatalistically suffering land, punished by the gods: Haiti as the sacrificial lamb of nations. My intention in treating its history was to show that Haiti's suffering is made not by the gods but by men and women. In order to understand that, you have to see how that came about and in order to see how it came about, you have to understand how we got to the present moment - which is, of course, all narrative. It all comes down, once again, to storytelling. One of the great strengths of writing about Haiti and writing about so many of the other places I have been lucky enough to write about, is that the history is so powerful and colorful, so stocked with remarkable characters, and so infused with an almost inherent drama. When writing about Haiti, I used the phrase 'operatic politics' - this kind of high-colored, intensely dramatic, scene of heroes and heroines, walking heavily and portentously upon the stage of the nation. This has always been the way the country has thought of itself: led by these heroes who trace their lines to the heroes who walked the land in the Napoleonic era, the era of the Great Men who carried off the Great Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave revolution in history which produced the only free black republic of its time. The country remains, in a sense, in the grandeur of the Napoleonic era in the way that it thinks of itself.

MH: In addition to being an outstanding storyteller, you are also an analyst and critic of so many kinds of official storytelling, the conventional histories, of the kind you mention in relation to Haiti, and the official stories of, for instance, the American administration, and it seems to me that involves you in chipping away at a story you've come not to trust and eventually substituting your own story for that. Can you give examples of how you go about that chipping away process, the getting behind, getting around stories that, to you, are clearly not right?

Mark Danner: Do you mean in the process of reporting? Or do you mean...?

MH: I mean the process of thinking through before the reporting.

Mark Danner: Well, I'm not, I suppose, fond of writing that assumes from the beginning that officials are lying. I believe in general that the reader needs to undertake a journey, to follow a path, to realize that there is a difference between what officials are saying and what is actually happening. The sort of piece in which you are showing the difference between what is being said by officials and what the truth is describes a journey from trust to skepticism and then to

certainty about what the story really is, and what its relationship is to the official version. I've done a fair amount of that.

Writing on torture, for example, largely begins with an examination of the official story, whether it's Abu Ghraib or the 'black sites,' and then placing alongside it what happened to people there, for example, in the 'Voices From the Black Sites' piece in the *New York Review*, the story of people who had been tortured in the black sites and who had told their stories to representatives of the Red Cross. I contrasted their accounts to the Red Cross with what had been said publicly by administration officials, including President Bush, and I was in the fortunate position of being able to publish the actual Red Cross document, which had been secret up to then, and thus to use their actual stories. The larger arc of the story was really the narrative of Abu Zubaydah, and to some extent that of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and what they experienced in captivity at the black sites, and to contrast those stories with what had been claimed publicly about how they'd been treated. Their stories were so powerful that one felt compelled to contrast it with the official versions. George W. Bush, then President, helpfully supplied the official version in his speech of Sep 6, 2006 when he delivered a speech from the White House defending torture - a remarkable speech, perhaps the only historic speech he ever gave, which I think will be more appreciated as the years go on. So President Bush supplied - and members of the CIA and others supplied - the contrary story.

In the end, I think the most difficult part of writing that piece was to refrain from appearing in any way sarcastic and to try to set out the story clearly, and let the reader draw his or her conclusions. The vivid power of the foreground became simply a potent argument that undermined the background, which was of course the official version. When I consider some of the other pieces I've done in that general mode, for example, writing about the Downing Street memo and its revelations about the run-up to the Iraq War, I think again that it was a question of restraint - of trying to bring out, carefully and dispassionately, what the texts of the memo actually said and then to compare it in a rather methodical way to what the public, official version of those same events had been, drawn principally, again, from President Bush himself.

There is, I believe, an underlying problem here, what I've called the "frozen scandal." When I was growing up, I remember my political awakening came with the Watergate hearings in the early 1970s, which led to the fall of President Richard Nixon, the first and still the only American President ever to resign. Those were extraordinary events where wrongdoing was uncovered, was revealed initially, by journalists; where a full-scale investigation was undertaken the government, by the Senate and House Congressional Committee, and by the judiciary; and then, as the third step after revelation and investigation, there was punishment - call it expiation. Nixon resigned; powerful White House officials were fired, lost their jobs; some were prosecuted and went to prison. The point is that in this scandal one saw an almost systematic, stately progression leading from revelation to investigation and from investigation

to expiation. Looking back, this was a kind of grand procession from wrongdoing to justice – a kind of American Oresteia, if you will.

As I have written elsewhere, it seems to me one of the characteristics of the present era – call it the post-9/11 era - is that we have the first of those steps, revelation, and sometimes a bit of the second, investigation, but we never do get to the third stage. There is no punishment, no expiation. So we actually go on living with these states of wrongdoing, subsisting in a state of permanent scandal. Torture, I think, is one example of that - perhaps the most vivid. Following the Watergate model, which I took in as a very young man, as a teenager, the writer's role is to reveal, to initiate a process by which the society, through investigation and expiation, goes on to cleanse itself. But what about a situation in which the society, for whatever reason - we can debate that - doesn't *want* to cleanse itself, where it is willing to put up with torture, as long as it's the torture of someone else, where it is willing to put up with lies about weapons of mass destruction. In that case, you are living in what I've described as a case of 'frozen scandal' - a scandal that just sits there in front of us, fully revealed, poisonous, noxious and...permanent. To me, unfolding the narrative, official lies are one thing; but what if revealing them leads to no consequence?

MH: It seems to me that in addition to that story, you've told the story of how torture has become acceptable to the American public as long as the reasons for it are perceived to be right, that there has been a kind of moral shift. That is a parallel story, isn't it? That, in a sense, is the public story. Aren't you exposing that moral shift as much as you are the deceit on the part of the administration?

Mark Danner: I think that's true. What you've identified, I think, is extremely important. In a sense, it's a harder story to tell. To begin with: what is this thing we call 'the public' and how indeed do we determine that it has in fact changed 'its' attitudes? We have public opinion polls, which at the end of the day are very blunt instruments. Forty years ago when Daniel Boorstin in his classic study, *The Image*, coined the term 'pseudo-events' - events created in order *to be* news events - he listed as one of his categories of pseudo-events public opinion polls. Today, interestingly enough, we regard polls as scientific tools of inquiry, but they are, as I say, rather blunt instruments; so the actual telling of the story of that 'moral shift,' as you called it, if moral shift it is, from a public that would presumably have rejected those sorts of interrogation techniques to one that is willing to accept them, is very hard. I've written about it, glancingly as it were, but I don't think I've actually told it with any degree of depth or accuracy.

MH: Can we shift our attention a little in relation to narrative now and focus on the way in which you have suggested the political commentator or journalist necessarily uses strategies learned from imaginative writing, imaginative literature. You've talked about your father telling you stories from Homer and so many others. Can you say more about that and particularly how you pick and choose among the strategies the ones which *are* legitimate and the ones which *aren't* legitimate in what you call 'fact-based writing', non-fictional writing?

Mark Danner: Well, one can give examples of things that would be wrong: one, obviously, is to write a sentence that in fact is not true, that conflicts directly with the facts as you know them. Such sentences comprise a tiny category of all the sentences you are likely to write about a given subject. There are many ways to be misleading, to give an exaggerated impression, without actually coming in direct conflict with the known facts. To put it another way, there are all sorts of flavors of the subtly ‘not-true,’ beyond the clearly not true. So we’re talking here much more in the realm of the arts than of the sciences. We find ourselves with these strange divisions, strange categories: fiction and non-fiction, for example – a very oddly drawn distinction, I think. Calling a piece of writing ‘non-fiction’ is akin to calling an object ‘non-alive.’ Identifying some writing as ‘non-fiction’ doesn’t really tell you what that writing *is*. Because at the end of the day, fact or fiction, we are talking about writing and there is an enormous variety of that. At one time or another the writer of fact-based texts finds himself using many, many, perhaps most, of the techniques of the fiction writer – in order to convey a vivid impression of place, to construct and maintain narrative suspense, to make clear the causal joints of narrative, to sketch and color in pictures that compel and affect the reader.

All of these techniques form part of the toolbox of the fiction *and* the non-fiction writer. The single clarifying difference is that in the work of the non-fiction writer there should not be sentences that distinguish themselves as not according with the facts, that are not true - and such sentences, as I say, form a very small sub-group. Look at ‘genre-busting’ works such as *The Emperor* by my old friend Ryszard Kapuściński, which is a book that has long been criticized for not being ‘true.’ To me *The Emperor* is a brilliant work of writing, and I am sensitive to criticisms of it that claim parts of it do not accord with the facts; but I am not sensitive to criticisms that it is not really an authoritative work on Haile Selassie. It’s not meant to be an authoritative work on Haile Selassie; it’s meant to be a meditation on power and many other things. There exist biographies of Haile Selassie and *The Emperor* isn’t one of them. Or look at *Heartburn*, a novel by Norah Ephron, a friend who has just died, alas – they are both gone now – which tells the story of an affair, a real affair, thinly disguised, which ‘everyone’ in Washington knew about, that ended the marriage between Norah and Carl Bernstein, the great journalist and exposé, along with Bob Woodward, of the Watergate Scandal. Norah and Carl were well known as a couple, they had a very public break-up, and she wrote a novel about it - a *roman à clef*, and it may well be true that many more sentences in that piece of ‘fiction’ were true, that is, true to the facts of what happened in that affair, though the names were changed, than in Kapuściński’s non-fiction study of Haile Selasse, even though Kapuscinski’s was a non-fiction book, and what had happened leading up to the end of his rule in Ethiopia.

So these categories are indistinct, changeable, metamorphic: they rely on implied rules that are made to be broken. I think what we use as writers are very similar tools; the fiction writer can create characters, can use models, but can take as many liberties as he or she wants, and the non-fiction writer obviously can’t; but many of the techniques that underlie the

creation of the story - the techniques of plotting, the building of suspense, of description and exposition and so on – all draw from the same universe of tools that we use in the creation of effective storytelling.

MH: I was thinking especially of the issue of character. I know you have interviewed the former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, for instance, and I wondered whether there were issues about the depiction of character, the handling of character in your writing, as opposed to what the novelist can do, for instance, ways in which the novelist can get right inside the character and that you can't. You can make a whole lot of suppositions and observations, but you can't get right inside a character, can you? How do you handle character?

Mark Danner: I think again there is a degree of restraint you try to impose on yourself. Dr. Karadzic was such an overflowing, overwhelming character, with this huge cascade of hair sprouting from his head, from his ears, his nose, and with an irrepressible boisterousness and, I regret to say, charm. You know, he asked me, regarding the market massacre, which I had witnessed two days before in Sarajevo – a mortar shell launched by Karadzic's men had killed, dismembered, eviscerated, sixty-eight people – he asked me, 'Did you check for ice in their ears?' Karadzic was implying that the massacre had been trumped up, that the corpses were actually bodies that the Bosnian intelligence people had taken out of the morgue to create this kind of a fake massacre. I was stunned by this, didn't know what to say. Karadzic was just in another world – call it, since we were talking about fiction, the world of magical realism. And you are right: I didn't try to look inside his head. But I did draw from his biography certain facts that I thought were rather fascinating: for example, about his aspirations to be a poet, about his attempt to take the world of Sarajevo poetry by storm. When Karadzic made his debut, his first big reading in Sarajevo, he was kind of laughed off the stage, or so the legend has it; and many people drew from this a rather simplistic narrative: Karadzic in besieging Sarajevo and raining shells down on his former colleagues and neighbors was wreaking his revenge on Sarajevo for the Sarajevans' rejection of him, for their disdain. I think you can just report that without seeking to assert that you know it to be a fact. So I don't know whether my portrait of him could constitute a fully described and realized and believable person. It mostly relies on outward description of him and also what other people told me about him, including of course Dr Ceric, Karadzic's training analyst. Because Karadžić of course was a psychiatrist. I do recall vividly how at Sarajevo's Kosovo Hospital, with the shells raining down from the Serb gunners in the hills, Dr Ceric shook his head ruefully and told me, 'Ah, Radovan. Radovan always had a problem with his sense of personal grandiosity.'

MH: I think we can probably all agree with that! Can we move on now to discussion of your deployment of metaphor. Within and among the extraordinary stories that you tell are a number of metaphors which illuminate your argument like lightning flashes. You construct or come up with extraordinarily vivid and persuasive and illuminating metaphors. I'll give you just three or four examples if I may. Writing of 9/11 you say: 'To Americans, those terrible moments

stand as a brightly lit portal through which we were all compelled to step together into a different world.’ That seems to me an extraordinarily illuminating metaphor. You talk elsewhere of the ‘hydraulics of politics’ - the idea of politics being a plumbing system is wonderful. And then an almost casual metaphor you throw in: you are talking about the threat-matrix, the security presentation that is made to the President each morning. You say it is a document ‘listing every threat directed at the US that has been sucked up during the last 24 hours by the vast electronic and human vacuum cleaner of information that was US intelligence.’ And then the blind-man-in-the-cage metaphor. You say: ‘It is possible for most people to live their lives without taking note of these practices at all except as phrases in the news – until, every once in a while, like a blind man who lives, all unknowingly, in a very large cage, one or another of us stumbles into the bars.’ Those are, as I say, fantastically vivid, illuminating metaphors. Do you simply find those, do they just come into your head, or do you perform some quite hard imaginative work before you come up with each of those metaphors.

Mark Danner: Goodness, I don’t really know. I think the ‘portal’ metaphor occurred to me as a metaphor of transfiguration. The imagery surrounding 9/11, and in particular the physical transformation of the towers, was so striking to me. You have these impossibly huge structures that I remember being built when I was a kid - these astonishingly huge buildings. I remember the first time I finally saw them when I was sixteen or seventeen: how enormous they seemed: not only their height but their size. These vast towers were transformed in an instant or two into... smoke; into these great plumes of smoke heading up into the sky. It always seemed to me such an unimaginable, almost religious moment of transfiguration. And I think the idea of metamorphosis lay behind that image: you know, a portal through which you walk and in so doing become something else. That is what I was trying to convey in that image, that we are now, having walked through that portal, in a state of exception, a state of emergency, and that we have become so accustomed to it that we no longer notice. So I think the ‘portal’ metaphor fit in with a larger metaphorical structure with which I was, consciously or not – and who knows where these ideas actually originate - approaching 9/11.

The ‘hydraulics of politics’ is a phrase I’ve used, I think, often to bring out the kind of sub-system of needs and desires that really drives our political reality. There is a phrase that professional politicians use: ‘Policies don’t win elections, constituencies win elections.’ I’ve always loved that phrase, because intellectuals, in discussing politics, tend to talk about policies: ‘When it comes to Obama and his health-care policy’ they’ll begin, and then move quickly to: ‘he sold himself for political gains, when he didn’t push for a public option.’ The discussion almost instantly centers on integrity and authenticity - which, to me, almost always gets it completely wrong, because politics usually isn’t about that. It’s about interests and constituencies, about appealing to people whose support you need, and whose interests are tied to yours by the ‘hydraulics of politics’ - the underlying sub-structure which is the means by which the vital life-giving water actually gets from one place to another.

Another example of this phrase comes from post-invasion Iraq, when you heard constant chatter from American occupation officials about ‘democracy-building’ and economic liberalization and empowering the Shia and so on. The key problem of political hydraulics, though, was how to transform the Sunni, the sectarian minority that had long led Iraq, into a loyal opposition – which is to say, an opposition that was secure and thus was willing to accept a non-violent role in the new Shia-led dispensation. By their actions – including abruptly dissolving the Iraqi army, and de-Baathifying all governing institutions – it is clear leaders of the American occupation not only had no idea how to solve this basic problem of political hydraulics but failed even to recognize its centrality. (We can add that the very same problem – how to reassure a ruling political minority of its security so it will leave power – currently faces us in Syria, where the Alawi regime of the Assad family is fighting to cling to power.)

As for the ‘blind-man-in-the-cage’ metaphor, I think I’d had that image somewhere in my mind for a long time: How do you convey the idea of secret limitations? To me the remarkable thing about our current ‘state of exception’ is that most Americans don’t even notice it and that’s what makes its prolongation possible. If people noticed it and were aware of it all the time and it obstructed them in some way, the state of exception probably could not survive. So the idea of being in a cage, being somehow restricted, but not knowing that you are – blinded to the bars surrounding you - seemed to me to convey that idea. For all of these images, I think the question comes down to: ‘How do you convey something vividly to readers in a way that will stop them, arrest them, make them think?’ You seek an image that is somehow arresting and that will succeed in conveying a central truth. You are suffering under a regime that is restrictive, and whether you see it or not, it continues to exist.

I wish I could be more illuminating on the actual genesis of ideas like this. I have to go back to what I said earlier, which is that metaphor, before it becomes a tool of expression, is a tool of conception, of understanding. A lot of people, of course, have written about this. In classical times, metaphor was thought of as a rhetorical strategy that was essentially decorative but I think in our own day we understand it much more as a tool of apperception as well as expression and I think all the examples you’ve asked about are images which came to me as means of understanding before they became ways of expressing.

MH: I found another example, which, I think, probably illustrates just what you are saying here. You say in one of your essays: The Bush administration believed Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and felt they ‘needed only to dramatize it a bit to make it clear and convincing to the public, like cops who, certain they have the killer, plant a bit of evidence to frame a guilty man.’ Now I think that’s the kind of metaphor which is just going to make the reader think: ‘Wow! Yeh, that’s it. That’s just what it is like.’ In fact that’s a simile, of course, not just a metaphor, but extraordinarily illuminating. Something else you do is quote people whose metaphors you approve of and think are valid: Menachem Begin saying that ‘terrorism is about dirtying the face of power.’ And then you say that the American response to 9/11 sought above

all to 'wipe clean that dirtied face.' You also quote an intelligence official who said that the task of defending the country was: 'like playing goalie in a game in which the goalie must stop every shot, in which all the opposing players and the boundary lines, and the field are invisible.' It's a flash of understanding, a conceptual metaphor.

Mark Danner: I think it's true, when you find a metaphor that's powerful, like the Begin one, it's irresistible. One characteristic of metaphor, of course, is that it conveys an enormous amount of information in a very small number of words. It has, as it were, a kind of explosive value, the hidden bombs in language; an effective metaphor has a kind of inherent power and the Begin metaphor of 'dirtying the face of power' is a good example of that. The extended 'goalie' metaphor is wonderful because it brings home so clearly the feeling of vulnerability that gripped national security officials after 9/11, the notion of being blindfolded and waiting for the shot to hit you - and also, of course, there is an eerie echo in that image, which I bring out in the same passage. The official I was quoting also mentioned a feeling of having loud rock music, Led Zeppelin, I think, playing all the time, and it's fascinating, because we are talking here about both hooding and blindfolding and loud music - the very techniques that were used on prisoners - and comparing that to the constant vulnerability and exposure felt by US officials facing the threat of a second attack. There is a fascinating 'mirroring' going on there, which I find rather intriguing. What was the first image you quoted?

MH: The Bush administration framing Saddam Hussein, as a cop framing a guilty man.

Mark Danner: What I love about that image is that it's not only vivid on its own terms but it's an example of a figurative passage that serves to show the motivations of people, that shows they had reasons for acting beyond just inherent deviousness, or evil. I am always interested in answering the basic question of 'Why did these people do what they did? What was their motivation? What were they thinking?' The notion of cops convinced of the justness of their cause planting evidence to make sure the criminal doesn't beat the case in court suggests answers to those questions.

I did a public dialogue recently at Boalt Hall at Berkeley with my old colleague Raymond Bonner, a wonderful reporter, who along with Alma Guillermoprieto did the original reporting on the massacre at El Mozote, which I wrote about in my first book. Ray recently published a powerful book about capital punishment in which he describes a particularly horrible example of cops framing a guy, managing to convict him of a crime he didn't commit and get him on to death-row in this awful case in Georgia. That, indeed, was a case of the cops framing what they thought was a guilty man - and why did they do it? Not simply because they were nefarious human beings and wanted to kill this innocent man. They believed sincerely that he had done it and they thought: 'Why should we let the fact that there is a lack of evidence admissible in the courtroom lead to a further injustice, which would be releasing a guilty man? If we frame this guilty man, we therefore we get justice.' I think in the case of the war in Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, many Bush administration officials believed precisely the same thing. If we

have to exaggerate the evidence we have of these weapons, what does it matter? Saddam has them - and even if he doesn't have them, he's going to get them again soon. So in their view the underlying justice of the case was there from the beginning: therefore we're not really making up evidence, we're simply doing something that will lead to a just outcome. I've disagreed with some people on the Left - I remember an interview on Air America, a shortlived liberal radio network here, with Janeane Garofalo, who was just so convinced that Bush officials *knew* there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I've always thought this argument was completely irrational. If they had known there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, they wouldn't have used them as their major argument in the case for war. So I do love that metaphor, of the cops framing a guilty man, because it does bring one to the same point - which is that in both cases the people committing injustice believed that it was the way, eventually, to get to justice.

MH: Just as you are an outstanding teller of stories and an analyst and critic of defective and deceptive stories, so you are also both a wonderful exponent of metaphor and a debunker of misleading metaphors. You've already mentioned the article 'To heal Haiti, look to history, not nature,' and you start that article with a series of metaphors which you then show to be deceptive: 'Haiti is everybody's cherished tragedy,' 'the great earthquake struck the country like a vengeful god,' 'Haiti has taken its place as a kind of sacrificial victim among nations, nailed in its bloody suffering to the cross of unending destitution.' And then you say 'No! It's not any of these. It's actually history we have to go to. Don't be satisfied with inadequate or presumptuous metaphors.' And I think that's an extraordinarily important and valid process that you go through there: the debunking of metaphors with which people have wrongly become satisfied.

Mark Danner: Well, I think it is true that metaphor is an extremely powerful tool to shape our thinking. These tools are often used with great effectiveness by politicians - think of 'the 'War on Terror,' for example, or the 'War on Drugs' or the 'War on Poverty.' We could go on. Such phrases are used by politicians to great effect because they can be immensely powerful and that power is used to convey an impression that is false or overly simplistic. We find the same stories - there are a limited number of plots in the world - in the narratives we tell ourselves to explain various places. The 'cursed land,' for example, or the 'land cursed by nature and by God' is a particularly powerful variant of that story, that of the 'suffering land.' This image goes back at least to Sophocles, to Thebes under Oedipus, for heaven's sake, in which the curse has been handed down. Or I suppose one could go further back, beyond Thebes and Oedipus to Egypt and Moses, and beyond that to Gilgamesh and his 'cursed city.' So I think, in writing about Haiti, a country trapped and imprisoned in such metaphors, one must sometimes begin by trying to identify these images and then go on to smash them, to show how misleading they are and how they tend to embody an interest that the press may have in telling a story, in trying to find an inherent drama in the story, a drama that's powerful and moving and satisfying, and also of

course simplistic and misleading. History very often is complicated while these little parables of good and evil are simple and easy to tell and satisfying. So I do agree that many times in trying to tell a story accurately and vividly you have to clear away the detritus that's before you, the heaps of stories and images that are lying there on the ground, obscuring the view of what's really in front of you. Haiti is a place that everywhere you look is obscured by heaps of stories and heaps of metaphors. So that little essay about Haiti and history did begin with an attempt to clear away that detritus and offer some clarity and logic. In place of the metaphor, the idea was to offer a causal, logical view of history, and how that trail led from then to now.

MH: Talking of metaphors used by politicians to manipulate their audiences, I don't know whether you saw a recent quote from Bashar al-Assad in which he compared the activities of his security forces to the work of a surgeon. He said "When a surgeon... cuts and cleans and amputates, and the wound bleeds, do we say to him your hands are stained with blood? Or do we thank him for saving the patient?"

Mark Danner: It's a stunning analogy. Of course, there is a long history to that particular metaphorical construction. It goes back to the Cold War and no doubt beyond in its application to insurgencies in general: the comparison of an insurgents to a cancer and the logical implication that you must cut out the cancer in order to save the patient and thus heal the body *politique*. I heard generals in El Salvador use the same image. In many areas where you had insurgencies during the Cold War the figure was used as a kind of explanation – an excuse for killing children, for example: though these children may seem innocent, they are still part of the same cancer, destined to become malignant, and thus they must be excised. So Bashar when he uses this figure is working along one branch of a venerable rhetorical tree. By now the image is very well elaborated.

MH: Particularly so in that he has a medical background himself, as he was training as a consultant ophthalmologist when he was in London. It's a particularly sick irony.

Mark Danner: Yes, he is a doctor, it's true, and thus joins a number of doctors, including Duvalier and Karadzic among others, who became dictators. Bashar never thought that he would actually have this job, of course, and perhaps it perplexes him that he finds himself in this position, trapped fighting in the most ferocious way for the survival of a regime from an office he clearly never wanted for himself.

MH: How do you think narrative and metaphor in the sort of context that we are discussing relate to each other? For instance, does narrative generate metaphor, or does metaphor generate narrative? There's a good deal of discussion about this among theorists in the narrative field and the metaphor field. Or is it sometimes one way and sometimes the other? Can I give you an example? When you are talking about Haiti, you do seem to want to use the metaphor 'to *heal* Haiti.' Now 'healing' entails a whole lot of possible narratives and kinds of narrative. Is it the narratives you discover and put together in relation to Haiti that generate the metaphor of 'healing' or is it the metaphor that generates the productive narratives that might

follow, or are they somehow just so intimately involved with each other that you can't separate them?

Mark Danner: I think perhaps there is a kind of feedback loop operating there, though in truth I don't know, with the one you cite in particular, where the starting point was, or whether one could be identified. Behind the figure 'healing Haiti' we can set out a number of equivalencies: Haiti as 'the sick patient,' Haiti as 'diseased by poverty,' Haiti as 'passive sufferer' of a malady contracted from outside. As so often that kind of capital metaphor has beneath it all sorts of predicate assumptions. The headline writer in particular prizes a metaphor like that with such a compacted, dramatic potential to draw the reader in, for it contains within it a wealth of predicates while producing in readers' imagination a plethora of potent images: sick patient, lurid sickness, morbidity, you name it. It's a vivid comparison, though, again, I am not sure whether you can say that one produces the other or vice versa. I don't know whether I chose that headline, I don't think I did actually. I'm not sure I would have chosen the verb 'to heal,' had it been my choice.

MH: I'm sure you know Robert Reich's book, *Tales of a New America*, of 1987, in which he outlined what he called the four morality tales which he saw as underlying American politics at that time, and which he entitled 'The mob at the gates,' 'The triumphant individual,' 'The benevolent community,' and 'the rot at the top.' His very striking insight was that these narratives embodied bedrock beliefs of Americans and were upheld by both liberals and conservatives, serving equally as resources for both sides, even if they were understood quite differently by the two sides. So, the story of 'the benevolent community' is interpreted by liberals to justify the maintenance of a social welfare system to care for those who get into difficulty, and by conservatives to mean that, since we will always look after our neighbors, there is no need for a general social welfare structure funded by taxation. Do you have any thoughts on such bedrock national narratives?

Mark Danner: I have enormous respect for Bob Reich and I remember when he was working on that book, I was working at *The New York Review of Books*, where he was first publishing many of those ideas. Reich was then a regular contributor and as an editorial assistant I used to take down his galley corrections. Of course various other writers have worked in this area. George Lakoff, the great linguist and my colleague at Berkeley, writes about the different uses of what he calls framing, but his point is in many ways quite similar to Reich's. Americans certainly have cherished ideas about themselves that each political faction, if we wanted to divide them into two, shares but interprets quite differently. Ideas about how America acts in the world - the greatest power in the history of the world and so on - reveal certain assumptions about the United States that Americans share but express quite differently and those differences can be vivid and consequential. The US as an 'exceptional power,' for example, the idea of American exceptionalism, which has now become a kind of whip with which to flog President Barack Obama, because he is perceived by Republicans not to be

sufficiently enthusiastic about the idea of America as the great exceptional power. I can't help finding this a bit amusing, the notion that if you want to be a legitimate leader in the United States, you must not only accept the idea of America as a great power but proclaim it as 'exceptional.' Or as Madeleine Albright put it during the Clinton administration, 'America is the indispensable power,' which I remember well since a friend of mine, James Chace, the wonderful biographer of Dean Acheson, came up with that phrase and supplied it to Albright. The 'indispensable power,' the 'indispensable nation,' is, I think, a remarkable notion, but it is an assumption shared by almost all Americans. Beneath it is this unquestioned assumption of overwhelming, unlimited power, which, no matter how many times it is proved wrong - as it has been rather frequently during the last decade - those of almost all political persuasions in America are loath to relinquish.

MH: To round this conversation off, in the Coda to your book, *Stripping Bare the Body: Politics, Violence, War*, you quote a Bush administration official, whom you identify as almost certainly Karl Rove, talking about how political commentators are in the 'reality-based community' whereas those who work for the empire 'create our own reality,' concluding that, 'We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left just to study what we do.' You clearly hope and believe that you and other political commentators can do more than that. You are a little more optimistic than that... I hope?

Mark Danner: I do believe we can do more than that, though, to be candid, the events of the last decade, in particular atrocities like torture that remain "frozen scandals," have chastened a bit that optimism. The Karl Rove quote about the 'reality-based community' - pointing to academics and journalists as people who are trapped in the reality-based community, as people who haven't recognized how power changes facts - is to me the signal, the capital quote of the Bush era, and perhaps of the era we are still living. The notion that power is the all-important thing, that power can change reality, can change facts. In the same piece, I believe, I point to the moment where President Bush awarded the Medal of Freedom, the highest award the US can bestow, on George Tenet, Paul Bremer, and to General Tommy Franks. It was an astonishing image: the president putting the most distinguished medal on the Director of Central Intelligence who had presided over the failure to detect the September 11 attacks, and also the failure of claiming that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the *casus belli* of the Iraq war; on the director of the Iraq occupation authority, who had presided over an enormous fiasco that included a huge insurgency and civil war; and on the general who had led the invading army into Iraq, into this quagmire, and had failed to plan in any way for the occupation that was to follow. All of them were being recognized - by the president, in a public, televised ceremony - for having achieved these brilliant victories. And I remember watching this ceremony televised and thinking, 'This is the illustration of Karl Rove's quotation about the imperial power creating reality, rather than recording it.' In the same essay, or the same speech - it was originally delivered as a commencement address at Berkeley - I quoted Orwell, who

remarked that 'From the totalitarian point of view history is something to be created rather than learned.' I remember thinking that Orwell's point was rather similar to Rove's. This is not to say that the US is a totalitarian power but it is to say that the attitudes about power here expressed are the same. Power can create 'facts' and those in the reality-based community Karl Rove was disdainful are not unable to identify what the real facts are but simply impotent when it comes to convincing the public that there's a distinction between what they are writing and what the administration is saying.

As I have said, when it comes to torture and other lingering scandals, that situation persists. What if you point to obvious wrongdoing and no one pays attention? What if people read what you write and then say, 'You're right, very heroic. Thanks - great article!' But in fact at the same time the President who actually presided over the torture of prisoners writes in his memoirs that when he was asked, by his Director of Central Intelligence, whether he would permit waterboarding of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, his answer was: 'Damn right!' (his exclamation point). What if the President, the Vice-President, and other officials of the former administration go on proudly proclaiming the waterboarding and other techniques they ordered used on prisoners in those interrogation rooms on the other side of the world, techniques which are now identified as illegal by the current president and attorney general and other officials of the current administration? How exactly does that situation persist? And how can people who write about such things, once they have done the work of exposing them, go on and do anything else, if the exposure leads to no consequences - which is precisely the situation we are in right now?

So the Karl Rove quotation about the reality-based community takes on a slightly different cast, which is that we can write it, we can say it, we can gesture toward it, but the reality that they created persists and the reality that we perceive and try to point to coexists with it but is unable to supplant it. I think is a remarkable fact. It's as if we are living in a science-fiction movie where you have two worlds existing side by side, one of them mocking the other. And the question is: 'What is the consequence for someone who's trying to write about those two worlds and finds himself trapped behind the glass, pounding on it, finds himself trapped in the reality-based community?' So I do believe that Rove's is the signal quote of our time and we are still living under its shadow.

MH: I'd really like to give you rather than Karl Rove the last word. Narrative is a competitive device, isn't it? One story can trump another story, can't it? Getting people to understand your story rather than the contrary story that has been told - it's not only in the law court that that is seen as crucial, but presumably in your field as well. So does it come down in part to who tells the best story?

Mark Danner: Well, that's an interesting way to put it. It is one of those questions that leads quite inexorably to a further question which is: 'How do we define "the best story"? What is the best story? Is the best story defined pragmatically as the story that ... wins out?' What then is

the intellectual content of calling it 'best'? Are we simply saying: 'Well, the best story is the one that triumphs'? To find out what are the characteristics that the best story has and whether those are something inherent in the story itself, or whether it's a fact that the person with the biggest trumpet who can put the most power behind his story is the one who triumphs. If that is the way we define it, we are perilously close simply to acknowledging that 'history is written by the winners.' One of the fascinating things about officials of the Bush administration in particular was that they understood very well who their audience was and they acted accordingly. They didn't, in a sense, care what *The New York Times* said – I'm exaggerating a bit for effect here, but not much. What they cared about was getting their message out to those they perceived to be their audience. It's the first administration in my lifetime that was able to act with that kind of discipline. The Bush people believed that the best story was the story they could tell to convince a certain number of people who supported them. So we are brought back to your deceptively simple-sounding question: Is that the best story?

MH: Well, I was hoping and, on the basis of all you've said before, that it would be the story which had the greatest degree of truth and the greatest degree of humanity to it. I'm sure that's the kind of storytelling that you are always attempting, isn't it?

Mark Danner: As my mother would say: 'Your lips to God's ear.' I fervently wish it were true that the best story, the story that triumphs, would always be the story that has the most truth and the most humanity. How beautiful to have faith and conviction that the story with the most truth and the most humanity wins out in the end. Perhaps we saw that play out in Iraq, for example. In a piece from Baghdad early on during the war I wrote eventually Americans would realize this war was a disaster because that is what was happening on the ground and that truth could not be kept from people for ever. This was in essence a statement of faith in just that principle that you have set out. The true story would triumph. People would perceive the truth and, indeed, in Iraq they eventually did – though it took a long time and many deaths. But other stories, some of which you and I have talked about, like the story of post-9/11 torture, would seem to convey the opposite message. And if you look at a place like Argentina, a story I was very interested in as a very young man, while I was still at university and the 'dirty war' there was still raging, you find that thirty years later more people, Argentine military officers, are being convicted of torture. This is an extraordinary thing and perhaps suggests - certainly one could take it to suggest - that your definition of the best story, the story destined to triumph, as the story with the most truth and the most humanity is the correct one. In the long run that is the story that will triumph: I would love to believe that. Of course one is immediately confronted with Keynes's tart observation that 'In the long run, we are all dead.' How long is the long run? How many lifetimes must we wait for truth to win out – and after how many of those lifetimes can we still be justified in calling it a triumph?