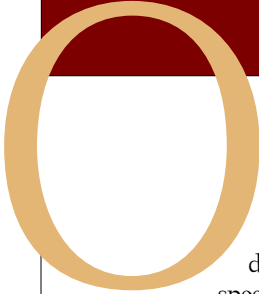


# Hertzberg of the *New Yorker*

The “Talk of the Town” political essayist is the urbane voice of liberalism.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

IN A JANUARY EVENING in 1977, at the old *New Yorker* offices on West 43rd Street, a going-away party was in progress for Hendrik Hertzberg '65, a staff writer there since 1969. Jimmy Carter had been elected president, and Hertzberg was leaving to join his speechwriting staff. “I felt I had been drifting a bit. I was at loose ends, not feeling like a ‘real’ writer, until I lucked into speechwriting,” he says. “That focused me on politics. The life of a young writer in New York in the mid 1970s entailed a lot of angst—going to a shrink, trying to figure out the meaning of life, getting involved in very intense relationships. I wanted to get out of myself, and when the White House thing came calling, I didn’t hesitate for one second.”

Hertzberg was taking a leave of absence from a magazine put out by talented, eccentric, opinionated, hilarious, and sometimes acridly quarrelsome writers, artists, and editors. Yet nearly everyone there seems to have liked Hertzberg, and for his sendoff, pugnacious film critic Pauline Kael dragged the famously diffident editor, William Shawn, from his office to the soiree on the eighteenth floor. Unexpectedly, Shawn sat down at a piano and dazzled the crowd. “He was a really good jazz piano player,” says Hertzberg. “Shawn knew I loved jazz, and he played wonderful boogie-woogie and stride piano. It was just magical.”

Sixteen years later, after sojourns at the White House, Harvard, and the *New Republic*, Hertzberg (known to friends as “Rick”) returned to the *New Yorker*, where he has since become the most stylish liberal political essayist in America. The magazine’s “Talk of the Town” section characteristically opens with a thoughtful reflection on some recent news event (under the red-ink heading “Comment”) usually written by Hertzberg. Many of the *New Yorker*’s 900,000 readers seize upon his witty, perspicacious columns as a kind of weekly map through the trackless turmoil of the news.

“He’s the political voice of the magazine,” says David Remnick, the *New Yorker*’s editor since 1998. “Rick’s writing has a kind of moral tone that is irreplaceable—he has tone control the way Billie Holiday had tone control, and his sentences are as well-timed as the most brilliant joke or song phrasing. Attached to this is his way of thinking, his lack of cruelty or cheapness. ‘Comment’ is the first thing people read when they open the magazine; it has to be just right, and it invariably is.” To author James Fallows '70, who hired him for the Carter speechwriting team, Hertzberg’s “distinctive gift is his nearly unparalleled grace as a writer. Rick is the classic tormented scribe—up all night, pacing—but when they come out, his words fall in a seem-

ingly inevitable order, as if they came to him in a dream. He’s a master of the *mot juste*. When I read him, I think, ‘Godspeed.’ Rick is probably the most consistent and effective liberal voice in the media now.”

That voice lacks much accompaniment. “For the past two decades, the opinion world has had a heavy rightward tilt,” says Fallows. “There’s a huge imbalance.” The “punditocracy” who perch at microphones and pound keyboards includes conservatives such as television’s Bill O’Reilly, M.P.A. ’96, syndicated radio hosts Rush Limbaugh and Oliver North, bestselling author Ann Coulter, and newspaper columnist George Will, all of whom command far larger audiences than any left-of-center commentator. In recent years, conservative polemicists have managed to make themselves more interesting; liberals seem comparatively bland. Hertzberg is a counterweight, both politically and stylistically. He tackles issues in unexpected ways, and “engages you not with the usual tricks of bluster, insult, or hyped-up outrage,” says Remnick, “but rather through wit, historical references, and insight from books.” Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. ’38, Jf ’43, notes his “very urbane polemics. He is interested in the central questions. Too much of liberalism has been dissipated into marginal issues—capital punishment, abortion, homosexual rights—that, while important in themselves, are marginal to the central issues: the distribution of wealth and political power. [Hertzberg] has his eye on the ball.”

Let’s walk with Hertzberg through the most recent presidential campaign, starting with the New Hampshire primary. In January 2000 he tells us that “New Hampshire is shaped like a wine bottle, and most of its million-plus people have settled like silt at the bottom—the bottom, of course, being where political campaigns feed.” As the races gear up in March, he explains that “It is widely assumed that the public has been desensitized to the issue of campaign finance by a general Gilded Age atmosphere, in which the weekend grosses of new movies are scrutinized more carefully than their reviews....The sonorities of the speeches seem ever more irrelevant. Liberalism versus conservatism? This campaign often feels more like Lucent versus Cisco (or mccain2000.com versus a very well capitalized Yahoo from the great state of Texas).”

By convention time, Hertzberg announces that “[P]olitical conventions are no longer troubled by the problem of being excessively interesting,” proving the point by deriding the Republican platform’s banality. Yet, he adds, “The Democrats...will be hard put to come up with anything as boldly stupefying as the argument that the purpose of prosperity is to keep people prosperous. But few doubt that the party that gave us the bridge to the twenty-first century will be equal to the challenge.” When Al Gore

chooses Senator Joseph Lieberman as his running mate, Hertzberg dismisses concerns about Lieberman's religious faith, observing that "Judaism doesn't proselytize, and Orthodox Judaism is harder to get into than Yale." The anticlimactic, agonizing fiasco in Florida provokes his wrath and sets up several of his characteristically portentous closings: "Lincoln's civil war ended in a courthouse," he writes in late December. "This year's pale copy has begun in one, and nobody can be sure that charity will soften its end." Then, a week later: "...the election of 2000 was not stolen. Stealing, after all, is illegal, and, by definition, nothing the Justices of the Supreme Court do can be outside the law. They are the law. The election was not stolen. It was expropriated." Finally, after the Bush inaugural, he notes that "This year's ceremony was bound to be a trifle awkward where both victory and democracy were concerned, given that the one has come at the expense of the other."

The *New Yorker* does not explicitly identify itself as a liberal magazine, though its political leanings have long been clear. In this it differs from the *New Republic*, an avowedly (if unevenly) liberal journal that Hertzberg edited for seven years in two stints between 1981 and 1991. "It's a challenge to preach to the heathen as well as the choir," Hertzberg says, noting that "*New Yorker* readers are drawn to the magazine for aesthetic reasons; you can assume a subtlety of taste and sensibility. It's a common ground you share, one that lets you address issues in a way you hope readers will find congenial. They might hold still long enough to hear out your argument, and if you can express it in fresh enough language, may even reconsider their views."

In a media environment so saturated with commentary, it's a daunting challenge to say something fresh week after week, but Hertzberg succeeds with startling regularity. Typically, he pushes beyond facts to reveal fundamental principles, offering his readers an original framework for analyzing an issue. For example, the *New Yorker*'s September 24, 2001, issue ran a black-on-black cover with the Twin Towers silhouetted against a pitch-dark sky. It opened with a unique edition of "Comment" that took up the entire "Talk" section and allowed several writers, including John Updike '54 and Roger Angell '42, to express themselves on the events of September 11. Hertzberg wrote the lead piece, noting that "In the decade since the end of the Cold War, the human race has become, with increasing rapidity, a single organism....The organism relies increasingly on a kind of trust—the unsentimental expectation that people, individually and collectively, will behave more or less in their rational self-interest....The terrorists made use of that trust. They rode the flow of the world's aerial circulatory system like lethal viruses." He went on to say, "The metaphor of war—and it is more metaphor than description—ascribes to the perpetrators a dignity they do not merit, a status they cannot claim, and a strength they do not

possess." Instead, he recommended the rubric of international crime as the most useful way to deal with global terrorism.

As so often happens, however, the Bush administration disregarded Hertzberg's advice. "The president and the country instead went for a war metaphor, which has many pitfalls," he says now. "The crime metaphor has pitfalls, too—it lacks the feeling of urgency and enormity—but it also has advantages. Crime is something that can never be annihilated, but can be reduced, controlled, and discouraged; it takes place within a large framework of order and civilization. Crime is not committed by sovereign entities—it's committed by outlaws."

"You can frame things," he explains. "I tried to do that during the Florida recount horror, and during the Clinton impeachment—to get people to pull back for a moment, and look at something a little differently, maybe put it in historical perspective."



Hendrik Hertzberg

“Comment,” a bully pulpit with plush furnishings, has its own history. The *New Yorker*, founded in 1925 by the resolutely apolitical Harold Ross, largely confined itself to humor, sports, arts, and culture until it was out of its teens. But as critic Robert Warshaw observed in *Partisan Review* in 1947, “...the Second World War and the atomic bomb have forced the *New Yorker* to become ‘serious.’” In the late 1940s, E. B. White began writing essays on political events under the heading, “Notes and Comment.” Like everything in “Talk,” the pieces were unsigned.

In the succeeding decades, various staff writers and editors wrote “Notes and Comment,” and during the Vietnam War the essays became serious indeed. Hertzberg’s friend and classmate Jonathan Schell ’65 was often their author. “Schell was incandescent during Vietnam and Watergate,” Hertzberg says. When Tina Brown became editor in 1992, she shortened the heading to its in-house nickname, “Comment,” and made it a separate sec-

language so well that by the end of the term he was “thinking in French,” Hertzberg says. “It’s one reason I’m not in favor of bilingual education.”) French politics were hot: the Algerian war was on, and de Gaulle was coming to power. At a demonstration in Toulouse, Hertzberg was tear-gassed for the first time.

He arrived at Harvard in 1961, with John F. Kennedy ’40—both president of the United States and an Overseer—a huge presence in Cambridge. Hertzberg wrote on local and national politics for the *Crimson*, covering the 1962 and 1964 elections. He was president of the Liberal Union (“I drove it into the ground,” he says); he had a jazz program on WHRB and belonged to the Signet Society; academically, he concentrated in government as tutee of Martin Peretz, Ph.D. ’66, who would later play a major role in his life. But Hertzberg’s real field of concentration was the *Crimson*, where he was managing editor.

Even as a boy Hertzberg had been obsessed with newspapers.

Hertzberg’s real field of concentration was the *Crimson*, such an all-consuming passion that he was a stranger to his professors during his last two years.

tion in the magazine—edited by her new hire Hertzberg, who wrote about a quarter of its texts each year. (Brown calls Hertzberg “My *consigliere*. He saved me from so many mistakes, and helped me understand the *New Yorker* culture much more quickly.”) After Remnick succeeded Brown in 1998, he restored it to the “Talk” section (which by then had bylines), and by 2000 had tapped Hertzberg as principal writer.

FRAMED IN WOOD and protected by glass, a large collection of political campaign buttons—going back to Grover Cleveland—hangs on a wall of Hertzberg’s country house on the Hudson River. Displayed in roughly chronological order, the collection forms a sort of tin tapestry of American presidential politics since the 1880s, and suggests that Hertzberg’s entire life could be seen as preparation for his current job. He assembled the m lrange of buttons along with his father, Sidney Hertzberg, and took part in his first presidential campaign at age 9, when he gave out leaflets and buttons for Adlai Stevenson in 1952.

Hertzberg’s father was a secular, worldly Jew, an intermittent journalist (*Commentary*, the *New York Times*), and a partisan of leftist causes; he managed political campaigns for Socialist Party candidate Norman Thomas. Hertzberg’s mother, Hazel Whitman, an historian and educator who taught at Columbia, was a great-grandniece of Walt Whitman. (It is tempting to view Hertzberg’s writing as a literary zygote, fusing poetry and politics.) Both parents were socialists, in the mode of European social democracy, and passionate anticommunists.

In 1949 the Hertzbergs, including young Hendrik and his sister, Katrina, moved upstate from New York City to a hundred-year-old farmhouse with a barn, surrounded by cornfields and woods, in Rockland County. (Katrina now directs after-school programs in Rockland County public schools.) Hertzberg graduated from Suffern High School after a semester as an exchange student in Toulouse, France. (Total immersion taught him the

He recalls a family trip by car from New York to Aspen, Colorado, when he was 9, before the interstate highways had been built. It was “a wonderful trip, on two-lane roads,” he recalls. “I got the newspaper in every town where we stopped. Somewhere, I still have a huge pile of 1953 papers, like the *Toledo Blade*. I was fascinated by the way they looked—layout, typography. When I got to Harvard, this was a real icebreaker—whenever I met somebody I’d rattle off the name of their hometown paper and mention a few details.”

The *Crimson* was such an all-consuming passion that Hertzberg was a stranger to his professors during his last two years. This wasn’t unusual for a managing editor, but in Hertzberg’s case it landed him on academic probation for a semester, which required him to withdraw from extracurricular activities. (He continued to write *Crimson* pieces anyway, under the pseudonym Sidney Hart.) By senior year he had moved off-campus to 8 Plympton Street, next to the *Crimson* building. He could take meals down the block at Adams House, or around the corner at Mr. Bartley’s Burger Cottage. “I’m not sure I ever crossed the street that year,” he says.

One afternoon his telephone rang and a whispery voice said, “Hello, this is William Shawn.” Certain that some friend was putting him on, Hertzberg replied, “Yes, and this is Marie of Romania,” and hung up. But the phone rang again and the same voice said, “No, this really is William Shawn,” and indeed it was. *New Yorker* writer Lillian Ross had seen Hertzberg interviewed on a television documentary called “The Shook-Up Generation,” and Shawn was calling to invite him to talk about writing for the *New Yorker*. (Shawn was well attuned to Hertzberg’s class, which included his son Wallace ’65; eventually, classmates Jonathan Schell, Jacob Brackman, George W. S. Trow, and Dan Chasan also wrote for the magazine.)

For his part, Hertzberg confesses, “My whole career has been so marked by advantages gained from Harvard’s old-boy net-



work that only in the last couple of years have I been getting over the debilitating sense of not deserving anything.” Though he did meet with Shawn, he did not accept a *New Yorker* job in 1965, feeling on the one hand “too green,” and on the other, highly susceptible to the draft. Instead, after graduation he took a draft-deferred position as editorial director for the U.S. National Student Association, and the following year joined the San Francisco bureau of *Newsweek* as a reporter. There, he covered the Beatles’ last concert (Candlestick Park, 1966) and Ronald Reagan’s first run for office, filed stories about rock music’s “San Francisco sound” (Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane), and published the first big national story about hippies, “Dropouts with a Mission,” which he now calls “rather wide-eyed.”

Under pressure from the draft, he enlisted in the navy in 1967 and became an officer posted in New York City. By late 1968, however, his growing opposition to the Vietnam War moved him to apply for conscientious-objector status, a request the navy denied. (Hertzberg’s father, though not a full-fledged pacifist, had been a publicist for the America First Committee that, before Pearl Harbor, opposed U.S. involvement in World War II, and his mother was a Quaker. Today, Hertzberg asserts that he is “not a pacifist now—not by a long shot.”) He mustered out in 1969.

Luckily, William Shawn’s offer was still open, and Hertzberg joined the *New Yorker* as a staff writer, with his first “Talk” piece running that October. Those were the days of the “old” *New Yorker*, and several writers who had known founder Harold Ross—A.J. Liebling, Dwight MacDonald, Joseph Mitchell, and Rogers E.M. Whittaker, for example—were still on the staff. For the next few years, Hertzberg continued writing “Talk” pieces, plus occasional longer stories, including one on John Lennon. “He’s an incredibly good reporter, one of the best in the whole business,” says Ian Frazier ’73, a fellow staff writer at the time. “Rick knows shorthand, and he could take incredibly fast notes. The transcript would turn out as accurate as something by a court reporter.” Hertzberg’s sly humor also enriched his pieces. “Rick has always been funny,” says his sister, Katrina. “From a pretty young age he had a highly developed sense of irony.”

Even excellent work, however, might not appear in the magazine. “The number of staff writers was so large that only about half of what was being written could fit—the odds were no better than even that your piece would run,” Hertzberg recalls. “The backlog was so enormous that Shawn could have filled the magazine for years without ever assigning a new piece. So people stopped writing; it was an easy place to get depressed. In fact, without depression and writer’s block, the magazine couldn’t have functioned.” Under Shawn, writers had so much freedom that they might disappear over the edge. Hertzberg recalls that one staff writer left the magazine to work for *Newsweek*. Three years later, in a hallway at the *New Yorker*, he ran into Shawn, who said, “Oh, I haven’t seen you around lately. Have you been on vacation?”

In 1976 Hertzberg took some time off himself to write speeches for Governor Hugh Carey of New York. It proved an

opportune moment to have speechwriting credentials. Later that year, after Jimmy Carter chose James Fallows as his chief speechwriter, the former *Crimson* president recalled Hertzberg’s stellar reputation: “Rick was known as a warm, humorous person who had no enemies, and was an extremely gifted writer.” Fallows says hiring him “was the most fortunate thing I did while working there. Rick did wonderful things for the country.”

The seven youthful years Hertzberg had spent writing “Talk” pieces proved excellent preparation for the White House job, due to a peculiarity of the magazine’s style. In the anonymous “Talk” pieces, writers often told their stories in the first-person voice of a fictive “we,” an authorial persona who attended art openings, plumbed urban mysteries, and experienced the hazards, thrills, and oddities of life in New York. What this meant, says Hertzberg, was that “I was used to taking on an imaginary identity”—exactly what a writer of speeches is asked to do.

After Fallows departed in 1979, Hertzberg became Carter’s chief speechwriter. He loved the job. “People listen to what a president says—it never falls on entirely deaf ears,” he notes. “It is exciting to be part of a presidency—the highs are incredibly high, the lows are extremely low. It’s an extreme sport.” Hertzberg has attended nine Democratic and four Republican conventions and has written about every presidential campaign from 1964 on-

wards—except in 1980. “That year I was a participant,” he says, “and I enjoyed it. I liked being in the game.”

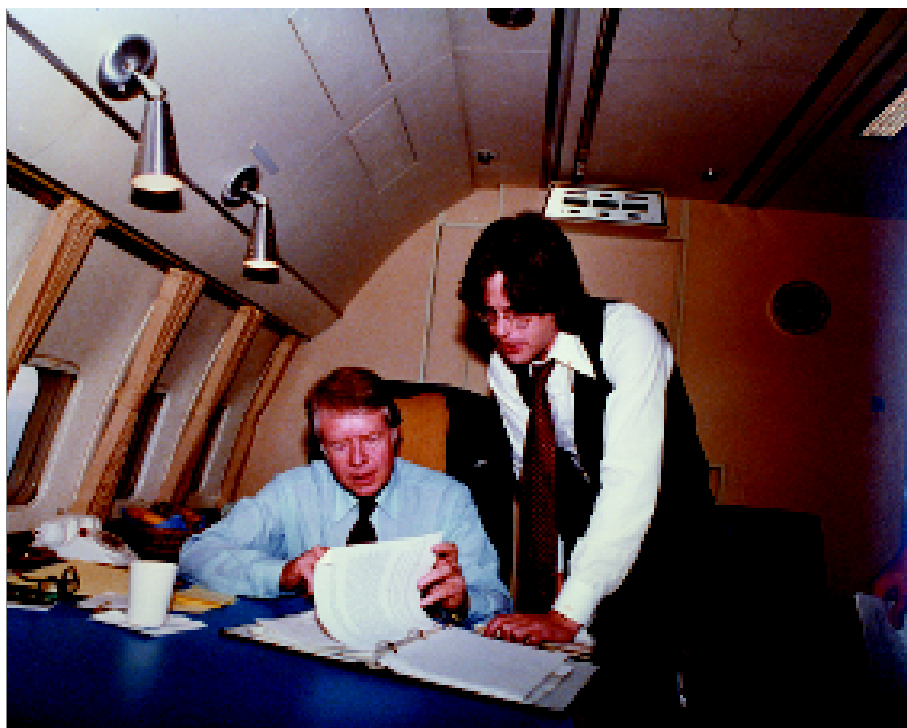
Last fall, when Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize, Hertzberg congratulated his former boss

A writer on politics from his youth, Hertzberg reported the *Crimson*’s 1964 lead election story.



1965 HARVARD YEARBOOK





On Air Force One with President Jimmy Carter. "It's exciting to be part of a presidency—the highs are incredibly high, the lows are extremely low. It's an extreme sport."

via e-mail. Within five minutes, Carter sent back his thanks, adding, "It will be a shame to make the Nobel speech without your help." There are a couple of framed Carter speeches hung in Hertzberg's Upper West Side apartment, including his personal favorite, the president's farewell address of January 14, 1981 (available at <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/speeches/farewell.phtml>). It opens with Carter declaring that he leaves the White House "to take up once more the only title in our democracy superior to that of President, the title of citizen."

CITIZEN HERTZBERG RETURNED TO JOURNALISM. His former government tutor, Marty Peretz, the *New Republic's* publisher and editor-in-chief, hired him to edit the liberal Washington-based weekly. For the next dozen years, Hertzberg and Michael Kinsley '72, J.D. '77, edited the *New Republic* in tag-team manner; Kinsley from 1979 to 1981, Hertzberg from 1981 to 1985; Kinsley again from 1985 to 1989, then Hertzberg from 1989 to 1991. "Our politics are different aesthetically—mine are more touchy-feely and overtly sincere, Mike's are more astringent, skeptical, and sardonic," Hertzberg says. "His specialty is exposing hypocrisy, my specialty is exposing cruelty. There's a different feeling, but we tend to come out at the same place." At any rate, their relay editorships were a fruitful era. Remnick, who wrote for the *Washington Post* in the 1980s, remembers the time as "a high point, a kind of zenith for the *New Republic*."

It was the liberal magazine that conservatives read—avidly. The White House had 20 copies messengered over, minutes after they came back from the printer on Thursday afternoons. In *Sound and Fury*, his book on political punditry, Eric Alterman says that during the 1980s, the magazine was "[T]he single most important repository of ideas and political ideology in the entire [Washington] insider constellation." Hertzberg made many

television appearances with interviewer Charlie Rose, and turned up occasionally on Ted Koppel's *Nightline*.

"I became a political writer when I went to the *New Republic*," he says. "There was no such thing as a piece that didn't get attacked by one or another faction of the editors—and, as a result, everything got sharper." Slammed doors and profanities sometimes spiced the discourse, and on at least one occasion a chair went airborne. Peretz (who, with partners, still owns and runs the magazine) recalls boisterous editorial meetings of around 20 people that were often "quite indecorous. Rick doesn't like arguments, though when he is in one, he will fight."

Tension was endemic. "Twenty years ago he [Peretz] was well to my left. Today it's the other way around," wrote Hertzberg in 1985. The clash was between the magazine's "emerging neo-conservatism and my kind of more traditional liberalism," he explains. "The great thing was that the struggles were political—they were about politics, not office politics." Peretz and other editors often backed the Reagan administration's foreign policies, including the nuclear buildup, hostility to Nelson

Mandela's African National Congress in South Africa, and support for the Contras in Nicaragua. Hertzberg could not brook this, and battled Peretz repeatedly over what was to be published. "There are lots of things in the *New Republic* that I do not believe and would not myself print," Peretz says now. "But when Rick was editor, I was more involved with the magazine than I was with anybody else. I never quite trusted that he wouldn't slip something in that would truly and deeply offend me."

"Rick thinks everyone in the world is at least potentially as civilized as he is. He has not been mugged by reality," Peretz continues. "I think he is just extremely squishy on foreign policy. He thinks foreign policy should aim at bringing out the best in your adversary; I think that's possible with very few adversaries." For his part, Hertzberg characterizes Peretz as "a foreign-policy hawk, a passionate Zionist, a passionate opponent of affirmative action and racial quotas. He's also an economic populist who believes in the welfare state. Marty has a visceral dislike of certain kinds of lefties—many of whom are the kind of lefty he used to be."

By 1985, Hertzberg concluded that for someone of his temperament, "four years of unrelenting ideological struggle is enough." He resigned as editor and accepted a fellowship at the Kennedy School of Government's Institute of Politics, then had two unfunded years at the school's Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics, and Public Policy. He continued writing for *Esquire*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New Republic*, covering the 1988 election from his base in Cambridge. ("A wonderful place to cover a campaign from," he says. "All the candidates came to the Kennedy School, and it allowed me to stay outside the wind tunnel of Washington conventional wisdom.")

In 1989 he returned to Washington, first to write the *New Republic's* "TRB" column, then going back as editor from 1989 to 1991. During that era, the *New Republic* was nominated seven times



for National Magazine Awards and won three, including two awards for General Excellence and one for Reporting, honoring Michael Kelly's Gulf War coverage. Today these honors hang inconspicuously in Hertzberg's *New Yorker* office on the twentieth floor of the Cond Nast Building in Times Square.

ON A WARM FALL MORNING, Hertzberg bicycles three miles downtown to work. He has commuted by bicycle ever since beginning his navy tour of duty in 1967. He used to play squash ("three-dimensional billiards at warp speed") but now contents himself with biking, swimming, some tennis, and summertime pitching duties with the *New Yorker*'s softball team. Physically he resembles actor Warren Beatty; the two men once encountered each other in a hotel corridor, prompting Beatty to do a double take and say, "Wait—I thought I was over *here*."

The sunny Upper West Side apartment that Hertzberg shares with his wife, Virginia Cannon, has an upscale bohemian feel; their four-year-old son, Wolf, spreads his toys liberally across the worn but quite genuine Oriental rugs. (Wolf attends a Montessori preschool; his father believes that "that quality of education ought to be available to any four-year-old.") Bookcases bear evidence of Hertzberg's ancestor, Walt Whitman, and his literary/political hero, George Orwell—he once bought a four-volume edition of Orwell's collected essays, journalism, and letters and read them straight through, doing nothing else for about 10 days. "Orwell was against tyranny in all its forms. There was never a more brilliant anticommunist," Hertzberg says. "And he writes so beautifully. For many journalists, Orwell is their writing god—he certainly is mine."

Cannon, a former *Vanity Fair* editor, came to the *New Yorker* in 1992 and had an office adjoining Hertzberg's. They married in 1998. She edits nonfiction, including film, dance, and book reviews and, along with Remnick, the "Comment" essays. "It should be a recipe for disaster," Hertzberg says. "You'd think it might destroy our professional and personal lives. But instead it has enhanced both. Politically, Virginia is a little to my left, and David [Remnick] a little to my right. She is infallible at spotting something illogical, clumsy, sneaky, or infelicitous. And she suggests many of my topics."

**"The problem is not bad politicians or venal voters. The problem is the mechanics of our peculiar political technology."**

Late in the evening, Hertzberg is likely to be grappling with one of those topics in his office, where stacks of books on the floor rise to desktop height. "He lives undergraduate hours," says Peretz. "I knew you could reach Rick at the office at 2 A.M." Tina Brown says that his office always looked like the room of a student before finals, and Fallows recalls that Hertzberg "never finished anything more than five minutes before it had to be done. We all went home late; Rick often didn't go home." Hertzberg still pulls all-nighters and knows the Cond Nast cleaning staff better than nearly all his colleagues do. "Very late at night, when the world is asleep, there's a sort of calming in the electric field of the city," he says. "Sometimes you do reach a point where your fear of writing a *bad* piece is replaced by your fear of writing no

piece. The lead often takes half my writing time, and many times I end up throwing it out."

Historical perspectives often inform his essays. "I have been paying attention to politics since about 1950," he says. "That would be like someone in 1950 knowing all that had happened since 1899. You spend the first half of your life building up a store of intellectual capital—and you continue to add to that—but in the second half of my life I've started spending my intellectual capital."

Someday Hertzberg hopes to write a book on American politics, which is sure to argue for two particular reforms. "The problem is not bad politicians or venal voters or greedy interests—the problem is the mechanics of our peculiar eighteenth-century political technology," he wrote in 1995. He advocates getting rid of the separation of powers between executive and legislative: "It's a formula for gridlock, stasis, cynicism, irresponsibility, and non-participation. No other serious democracy has it." He also agitates for proportional representation, the system used in Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, the Low Countries, and Eastern European nations, in which voters mark ballots for a party, and the legislature is apportioned accordingly—as opposed to our winner-take-all system of electing a particular candidate to represent a geographical district.

Hertzberg's philosophy rests on the classic liberal view that problems are systemic, that political and economic structures—not flawed individuals or "human nature"—are the root causes of most social ills. "I'm one of those people whose job it is to explain why we do the unspeakable," he says. "For example, isn't it obvious that if a society can remotely afford it, healthcare should be provided uniformly, and provided on the basis of need rather than money? We don't do otherwise because we are cruel and callous—Americans are as kind, and as unkind, as everybody else. The reason is the peculiarities of our political system."

Expanding on the theme of redesigning social structures rather than *Homo sapiens*, he asks, "Who is *na ve* and who is *hard-headed*? Those whose ideas of improvement depend on 'building character,' which is to say improving human nature—the conservatives—or those who want to make it easier for imperfect human beings to damage themselves a little less? If you have gun control, for example, a certain number of murders won't be

committed, though there may be no decrease in the murderous feelings people have. I don't see how you can use social policy to change human nature; but if you reduce the occasions for sin, you'll reduce sin."

Ultimately, though, Hertzberg relies not on abstract principles, but intuition, when making up his mind. "Kindness versus cruelty is nothing like a complete and reliable guide to policy. Good intentions are not enough," he admits. "But I'd like to know a better rule of thumb." ▢

Craig A. Lambert '69, Ph.D. '78, is deputy editor of this magazine. For a further sampling of Hertzberg's work, visit the electronic version of this article on this magazine's website, at [www.harvard-magazine.com](http://www.harvard-magazine.com).