

Whether the subject was Iraq, Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, or his family, Michael Kelly wrote with power, grace, indignation, and good humor. Here are excerpts from his work over the years.

A riverine city owes itself to its river. The tempo of the river becomes its tempo, the river's coloring its coloring. At its source, in the highlands of southeastern Turkey, the Tigris River is as swift and clear and bright as a baby's eye, but after it has made its way through the great pan of dirt that is the heart of Iraq, after it has picked up the waters of the Kabur, the Great Zab, the Little Zab, and the Uzaym—after all that, by the time it reaches Baghdad, it is a dull, dreary thing, as much soil as water, as thick with sediment as Arabic coffee....

The civilization of man began and flourished in the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates; it was here that man formed the first farming communities, discovered gods, and later God, developed written symbols to convey ideas, made money and a system for its use, built the first planned cities, invented laws, and learned how to brew beer. No land in the world is richer in places that tell the story of early humanity.

—*Martyrs' Day*, 1993

Watching Bob Dole campaign for the presidency is a curious and dislocating experience, like showering clothed or eating naked.... He is a sort of nega-candidate—someone whose essential being runs counter to the whole hideous business of what a candidate must do, day after day, to get elected.... Dole hates it so much that he can hardly bring himself to go through the motions, and even then he cannot resist uttering subversive remarks, in a kind of sidelong running commentary, that make it clear that he's aware of the sham of what he's doing. He campaigns as if he were a man literally beside himself.

—*The New Yorker*, August 1996

We are a nation in which there are fewer and fewer people, and they are older and older people, who accept what every 12-year-old in [Bosnia] knows: That there are things worth dying for, and killing for.

So, we will let [Saddam] Hussein stall us until he has hidden what weapons of mass death he needs to hide, and then he will let the U.N. inspectors back in, and we will live with that. Or we will inflict some suffering on Iraq, and kill some people, but not too many, because the people—our people, not theirs—will not be able to stand the pictures. And we can live

with that too. But one of these days, somebody—the North Koreans come to mind—is going to start a real war. And we will find out what we can really live with.

—*The Washington Post*, November 19, 1997

If you were to take your view of reality from the movies, television, the theater, literature and journalism, you would think that family life in the United States is one never-ending exercise in dysfunctionality.... This is odd. Popular culture is supposed to describe popular reality. The reality of American families is one of a mostly successful search for conventional happiness....

Most husbands and wives love one another. Most of them consider one another best friends; most of them are faithful, or at least mostly so (neglected housewives who startle house painters with indecent proposals are as rare in life as they are common in *Penthouse*). Most husbands never batter their wives, and most wives never remove parts of their husbands with household cutting implements, nor do they set their beds afire. Most parents would rather die than sexually abuse their own, or any, children. Most children grow up to honor their parents, and most parents grow old in the comfort that they have, in the raising of their children, created something of irreplaceable value. It's a wonderful life, and art used to imitate it.

—*The Washington Post*, December 24, 1997



MARTIN CORNELL

Life, as Edna St. Vincent Millay said, is not one damned thing after another, but the same damned thing over and over again. The latest crisis with Iraq, which dominated Washington this week and will reign over next week too, seems at first glance to meet this description. The most frequently heard bit of conventional wisdom is to compare the matter to the déjà vu comedy *Groundhog Day*. That is a comforting notion—endless recurrence is irritating, but at least things aren't getting worse—but it is false. What appears to be the same scene repeating itself masks a grim degradation. Things are getting worse, and they got a lot worse this week.

—*National Journal*, January 17, 1998

I believe the president. I have always believed him. I believed him when he said he had never been drafted in the Vietnam War and I believed him when he said he had forgotten to mention that he had been drafted in the Vietnam War. I believed him when he said he hadn't had sex with Gennifer Flowers and I believe him now, when he reportedly says he did.

I believe the president did not rent



COURTESY OF THE KELLY FAMILY

Michael Kelly with his parents, Tom and Marguerite, and his three sisters: Meg (left), Katy (bottom center), and Nell (top center).

out the Lincoln Bedroom, did not sell access to himself and the vice president to hundreds of well-heeled special pleaders and did not supervise the largest, most systematic money-laundering operation in campaign finance history, collecting more than \$3 million in illegal and improper donations. I believe that Charlie Trie and James Riady were motivated by nothing but patriotism for their adopted country....

I believe Paula Jones is a cheap tramp who was asking for it. I believe Kathleen Willey is a cheap tramp who was asking for it. I believe Monica Lewinsky is a cheap tramp who was asking for it.

I believe Lewinsky was fantasizing in her 20 hours of taped conversation in which she reportedly detailed her sexual relationship with the president and begged Linda Tripp to join her in lying about the relationship. I believe that any gifts, correspondence, telephone calls and the 37 post-employment White House visits that may have passed between Lewinsky and the president are evidence only of a platonic relationship; such innocent intimate friendships are quite common between middle-aged married men and young single women, and also between presidents of the United States and White House interns.

—*The Washington Post*, February 4, 1998

I used to watch television news, but at some point between the time CBS married Westinghouse, NBC married General Electric and ABC married Mickey Mouse, I sort of lost interest. More and more, I find the really interesting reports on the events of our times on National Tom Radio.

National Tom Radio is written, directed, produced, and aired by Tom, who is 2½, and it is concerned solely with events and people of interest in the life of Tom. Generally speaking, it broadcasts daily and continuously from about 6 or 7 in the morning to somewhere between 8 and 10 at night. NTR begins each day with an update on overnight events—sleeping conditions, snoring reports, dream coverage and analysis, followed by early-morning weather.

But it may be fairly said that NTR never really sleeps. When events warrant, NTR does not hesitate to fulfill its duty to inform its listeners, no matter what the hour.... So dedicated is NTR to its duties that it actually sleeps with its two principal listeners (between its two principal listeners, to be precise).

I recently experimented with wearing one of those Breathe Right strips on my nose. At about 3 a.m., I woke in a moment of searing pain to catch an urgent NTR bulletin: "Mommy, Mommy, I pulled off daddy's nose Band-Aid!" What could have been more concise, objective, informative and factual? Timely, too.

—*The Washington Post*, January 20, 1999

The Marxist ideal is at last reached. We live, finally, in a classless society: No one has any class at all....

I have always been, wherever I worked, among the three or four worst-dressed men. It was a small thing, to go to the office wearing an ill-fitting, secondhand sports coat and no tie, but it was not so small to me. And it was about as rebellious, really, as I cared to get; I never wanted to pierce a thing. In the new culture of no class, I cannot compete. No one can. What is an adolescent to do when even to enter the ranks of rebellion against the conventions of class requires an act of self-mutilation once reserved for the hardier of the Hell's Angels? Indeed, what are the Hell's Angels to do?

And it all marches on. I know that Casual Friday is only a stopping place. When they introduce Boxer Shorts Wednesday, I will have to go out and buy my first three-piece suit. In the end, we will all be driven to this. My sons will wear bowlers, and they will blame me.

—*The Washington Post*, August 11, 1999

A walk in the woods with a 4-year-old (more or less verbatim):

"Carry me. Please, carry me. Please, carry me. I really need you to carry me. My legs are very tired.... Just a little bit, OK? No, not that way. Shoulders, carry on shoulders. OK, I'll hold your hair, and I'll pull it this way when you should go this way and that way when you should go that way. Right?"

"It's very muddy. Why is it muddy? What makes mud? It's very slippery, right? Why is mud slippery? When sand gets wet it's not slippery, right? Why isn't sand slippery? If it rains some more, there will be more mud, right? Will there be a tornado? If there is a tornado, we will go in the basement, right? Because in a tornado, you go in the basement, right? Why aren't there tornadoes here? There are some tornadoes here, right? One or two, probably. If there is a tornado while we are walking, we'll go home and go in the basement, right?"

"This hill is very hard to go up, right? Why do people pick up dog poop and not horse poop? Why are horses bigger than dogs? Why is there a fence here? Why is there a tractor here? Why did somebody leave the tractor here? Why is the tractor broken? Why doesn't somebody fix the tractor? Somebody should fix the tractor, right? Probably somebody will come and fix the tractor tomorrow, right? Why don't we have a tractor? Probably we used to have a tractor, right? When we move to Boston we will get a tractor, right? Why won't we get a tractor? We should get a tractor. I really need a tractor...."

"I don't want to go home. Why do you want to go home? It's not raining anymore, so we don't have to go home. Anyway, they don't have tornadoes here, right? No, I don't want to go home. I really need to walk some more. Let's go just a little more. OK?"

— *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2000



COURTESY OF THE KELLY FAMILY

Mike with wife Madelyn and sons Tom (left) and Jack.

On Monday, as a nation on tenterhooks bated its breath, the Republican Party revealed what it has in mind for its 37th national convention, to be held in Philadelphia from July 31 through August 3. Here is the agenda, as outlined by convention Co-chairman Andy Card:

The general theme of the convention will be "Renewing America's Purpose Together." The Monday night theme will be "Opportunity With a Purpose." The Tuesday night theme will be "Strength and Security With a Purpose." The Wednesday night theme will be "Prosperity With a Purpose." The Thursday night theme will be "President With a Purpose." These themes were chosen, I assume, because the GOP's focus groups thought that "Pablum With a Purpose," "Vapidity With a Purpose," "Bloviation With a Purpose" and "Harrumphing and Bumphing With a Purpose" were too high-toned.

There are any number of ways that this thing could be made even a tiny bit interesting. One would be to replace "Purpose" with "Porpoise." I'm not sure which show I would rather watch, "Opportunity With a Porpoise" or "President With a Porpoise." I guess I would watch them both. — *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2000

I have been for some days at the shore, in the company of many of my fellow middle-aged Americans who are wearing not a lot of clothes, and I have a report. My fellow middle-aged Americans, we are some kind of fat.

I don't mean we are getting a bit thick around the middle, or that we are pleasantly plump, or that we are zaftig, or Rubenesque (we are Reuben-esque), or settling into our bodies. I mean we are fat, fat, fat. It's true: As a people, we have never been this fat. Probably, no people has ever been this fat. We are billowing immensities of avoirdupois, great, soft bins of finest quality lard, a nation of wide loads wallowing down the highway of life. We have thighs that look like sacks of Parker House rolls. We have stomachs that can shelter entire kindergartens from the glare of the noonday sun. Our bottoms dwarf the seats of our poor suffering chairs as the mind of God dwarfs the mind of man. We do not walk; we shake, jiggle and roll. We are Moby-Dick, the great white whale; we are Dumbo; we are countless refutations of the claim that no man is an island.

— *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2001

There is something to be said for the compulsions of the fathers. Men, as has been frequently noted, have their failings. The urge to make things right is their counter-failing, their allegory to women's urge to nurture. The male urge is of course ridiculous. Who can fix the world, even for one child? But its ridiculousness makes it great. In every life, there should be someone who believes that whatever goes wrong must be fixed, and if not fixed, must at least be made to go away.

So, happily, it was for me. In the house where I was lucky enough to grow, the weather was always balmy, rain or shine. And life was always good, good or bad, and the children were always successes, succeed or fail. And the experiences were always marvelous.

— *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2001

I spent the last days of the first Gulf War's phony peace in Baghdad.... On the whole, I'd say the phonicness quotient is down this time.... The lessons of the campaign in Afghanistan, adding to the lessons of the campaigns in Kosovo and Bosnia, have sunk in. ...

No one argues much now about whether these [American] forces are capable of crushing even very serious opposition, and almost no one argues that Iraq offers serious opposition. Rather, the argument concerns whether the employment of this almost unfathomable power will be largely for good, leading to the liberation of a tyrannized people and the spread of freedom, or largely for bad, leading to imperialism and colonialism, with a consequent corruption of America's own values and freedoms. This question is real enough and more: Probably the next hundred years hinges on the answer.

— *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003

*Washington Post* excerpts reprinted with permission.