The World, the Nation and The Nation

"T"he week has been singularly barren of exciting events." The first sentence in the lead column of Volume I, Number 1 of The Nation, for July 6, 1865, drew an idyllic open parenthesis for a stream of political and literary consciousness that has coursed over 120 years of tumultuous history. Surely no week has been as uneventful as the first. The convulsive Reconstruction era was beginning the year The Nation was founded in New York City by a group of Abolitionists. In its first century the magazine would engage the issues and join the debates of a youthful nation ascending the heights of empire to the summit as a superpower: the concentration of wealth in great trusts, the war with Spain, interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean, the great world wars, the New Deal age of reform, the flowering of a culture of commitment, the struggle for black equality, wars of strategic colonialism and the cold war, with its threat of nuclear annihilation. We have confronted our world and filled our pages with a native vision of democracy and a sensibility rooted in the American tradition of dissent. Now, as a milestone is passed, The Nation devotes this 120-page anniversary issue to the American nation as others see it, describe it, worry about it, love it. It is a view through open windows of communication across national and ideological frontiers. It is also a peek at the magazine through the narrow keyhole of surveillance, a history of The Nation as seen by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The contrast between the perspectives on the nation expressed by the contributors to this issue and those on The Nation contained in the F.B.I.'s voluminous files, prized out of the Bureau with the help of the Freedom of Information Act, is instructive. The contributors represent a diversity of cultures and political convictions, but they share a respect for the "revolutionary republic" that Willy Brandt reminds us this country was once considered to be. They imagine what E.P. Thompson describes as a possible future in a defrosted world in which art, as E.L. Doctorow hopes, will "find a postnuclear politics of transcendent fiction." Some are exiles, seeking to restore democracy in their homelands; others belong to that society of dissident cultures of which Salman Rushdie speaks. The F.B.I.'s picture of The Nation, on the other hand, exudes a contempt for dissent and for the vision and programs that animate it.

Although our contributors may look ahead to the reconstruction of a global order along democratic and egalitarian lines—much as The Nation's founders argued for the democratic reconstruction of American society after the Civil War—they all have to contend with the realities of a cold war that has shaped the world. Margaret Atwood sees the colossus to the south as a myopic Mr. Magoo, alternately condescending and cavalier to its neighbors. Carlos Fuentes finds the United States "profoundly incoherent and hypocritical" when it professes democratic ideals and engages in imperial actions. Michael Manley regards the United States, just a hop and skip away from his troubled island in the Caribbean, as being in thrall to "a political ideology that gives primacy to military power."

Their characterizations of this country portray it not as just another evil empire but as an immensely powerful organizer, director, meddler and potential terminator that must be opposed every time it attempts to circumscribe the independence of others. How that can be done is not always easy to see. In the cold war atmosphere, which has lasted for forty years despite occasional periods of thaw, opposition to America's foreign policies has invariably evoked accusations of treachery and has often led to severe political repression. The F.B.I.'s surveillance of Oswald Garrison Villard began when he agitated against U.S. military intervention in Mexico, three years before he purchased The Nation. An agent's report in 1922 states that Villard is again under suspicion because of "his attitude in connection with the Government's conduct of Haitian affairs"—that is, his vigorous opposition to the American occupation of that island. In the 1950s, when reporter Fred J. Cook produced his comprehensive and devastating investigation of the F.B.I. in a landmark Nation special issue, the Bureau launched a massive campaign to link him to the international communist conspiracy—the "Dreaded Menace," in Atwood's ironic words. The campaign failed, but the chill winds of the cold war have had an effect on dissent in the nation and The Nation. Too many have become aware of the prurient eye on the other side of the keyhole.

Despite their justified complaints, our invited critics share another assumption about America, stated or implied, that offers a basis for hope about the future. "The constitutional defenses of information and the press in the United States, and the active exercise of those rights, have been critical to the whole world, and may yet prove critical to its survival," Thompson asserts. The Nation stands behind those defenses as any journal of critical opinion and opposition must. Despite the hostility of a J. Edgar Hoover or the antipathy of the administrators of Ronald Reagan's justice, a structure survives to protect the discourse of dissent. Without a press of opposition, the cry of the people (to borrow Penny Lernoux's evocative phrase) would not be heard; not the Southern blacks in the Reconstruction era, not the invaded Mexicans in 1915, not the victims of McCarthyism in the 1950s or the Central Americans who today feel the scourge of American arrogance. Nor will the voices of the new internationalists, who are already framing the debates of the post-cold war world, be raised without a forum and the support that a critical culture alone can supply.