

.rant

by David Barringer

Left Wanting

The design of liberal magazines sends the wrong message.

I believe magazine design can embody liberal principles, such as underdog sympathies, cultural tolerance, and the expansion of individual rights. But I have the impression that not a single liberal magazine is giving it a go. Why are liberal magazines so conservative?

Three reasons: Lack of money. The desire for stability. And design-phobia.

Liberal magazines from *The American Prospect* to *Washington Monthly* don't have money, nor do they want to appear to have money. "No political magazine in America has ever made money because advertisers don't want to be in contentious magazines," says Milton Glaser, who has worked on several redesigns of *The Nation* over the years. "It's important for these magazines to appear frugal."

But a lack of money doesn't excuse lazy design any more than it would excuse lazy journalism. "Money doesn't always give you results," argues Mirko Ilic, who has illustrated covers of *The Village Voice* and, with Glaser, wrote the book *The Design of Dissent*. "A designer with ideas, passion, and very little money can do it." And there is a cost for insisting on posing in a shabby suit. "Many liberal magazines take transformative aspirations and render them lifeless on the page," says Brian Awehali, editor of the low-budget, radical-left *Lip Magazine*.

Frugality of appearance will presumably evoke ascetic intellectualism. Many political magazines are thin, printed on cheap paper, and obey a structure familiar to anyone who has marched through the *Marine Corps Gazette*: two-column layouts of dense type and one or two inset photographs. Serious photojournalism is rarely featured, and illustrations are restrained,

if they exist at all; a Danish newspaper will take heat for printing satirical cartoons, but an American political journal won't. American editors must believe that while stories may look like frogs on the page, when kissed by the reader, they'll become princes in the mind. But a reader has to work up the appetite to kiss a frog.

The humble look of liberal magazines may also have its roots in a nostalgic nod to the soapbox orator. "For me, the pages of *The Nation* and *The Progressive* were like your local park," says James R. Petersen, former editor of *Playboys* "Forum," an eight-page op-ed insert modeled on political magazines. "You knew who was on the soapbox, and you kept coming back."

Liberal magazines try to express their political commitment through design stability. "It's in the nature of ideological magazines to suggest constancy," says Glaser. "Trends change, but they want to tell you that their ideologies don't." A conservative design of a conservative magazine achieves a coherent result. But freezing liberal ideas within a stagnant structure contradicts the message, so that you sympathize with Ilic when he says, "There are no liberal magazines. Left-leaning media bend over backwards to please the center."

Design-phobia can afflict even the best editorial minds. "The edit staff has strong journalistic skills, but the art of magazine-making—clarifying information, supporting stories visually—is not particularly valued," says Jandos Rothstein, design director of *Governing Magazine* and author of *Designing Magazines*, forthcoming from Allworth Press. Editors regard the real estate of the blank page as too valuable to surrender to gratuitous imagery. But what's gratuitous about

photos of Abu Ghraib or the first Iraq war's so-called Highway of Death?

Today's upstart magazines deny the liberal label and are less concerned with the great American liberal experiment than with expressing an anti-corporate critique and satisfying a civic-minded, but not necessarily political, youth culture. But they take design seriously.

"I grew up reading *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, and *Z Magazine*, and I was disappointed," says Jason Kucsma, founding co-publisher of *Clamor*, the self-billed DIY guide to everyday revolution. "I wanted to work on a magazine that was politically radical and aesthetically engaging."

Readers deserve to be challenged, not tasked with *deja vu*. Of course, some people only trust the familiar. Perhaps a conservative resistance to change is an expression of the American style of governance, the balance of powers keeping political transformation behind the curve of culture. The job of the liberal magazine may be to mark a symbolic place, to mimic a community without asking its readers to incur the cost of participating in one.

But liberal design could yet invigorate a liberal magazine. Directed evolution, rather than stagnation or revolution, could shape the magazine's identity over time, working, like a personality or a government, for political change while grudgingly admitting to a change in itself. Maybe I've composed a mission statement for a magazine that doesn't yet exist. In the meantime, liberal political magazines champion conservatism by design.

David Barringer's newest novel, due out this year, is American Home Life.

