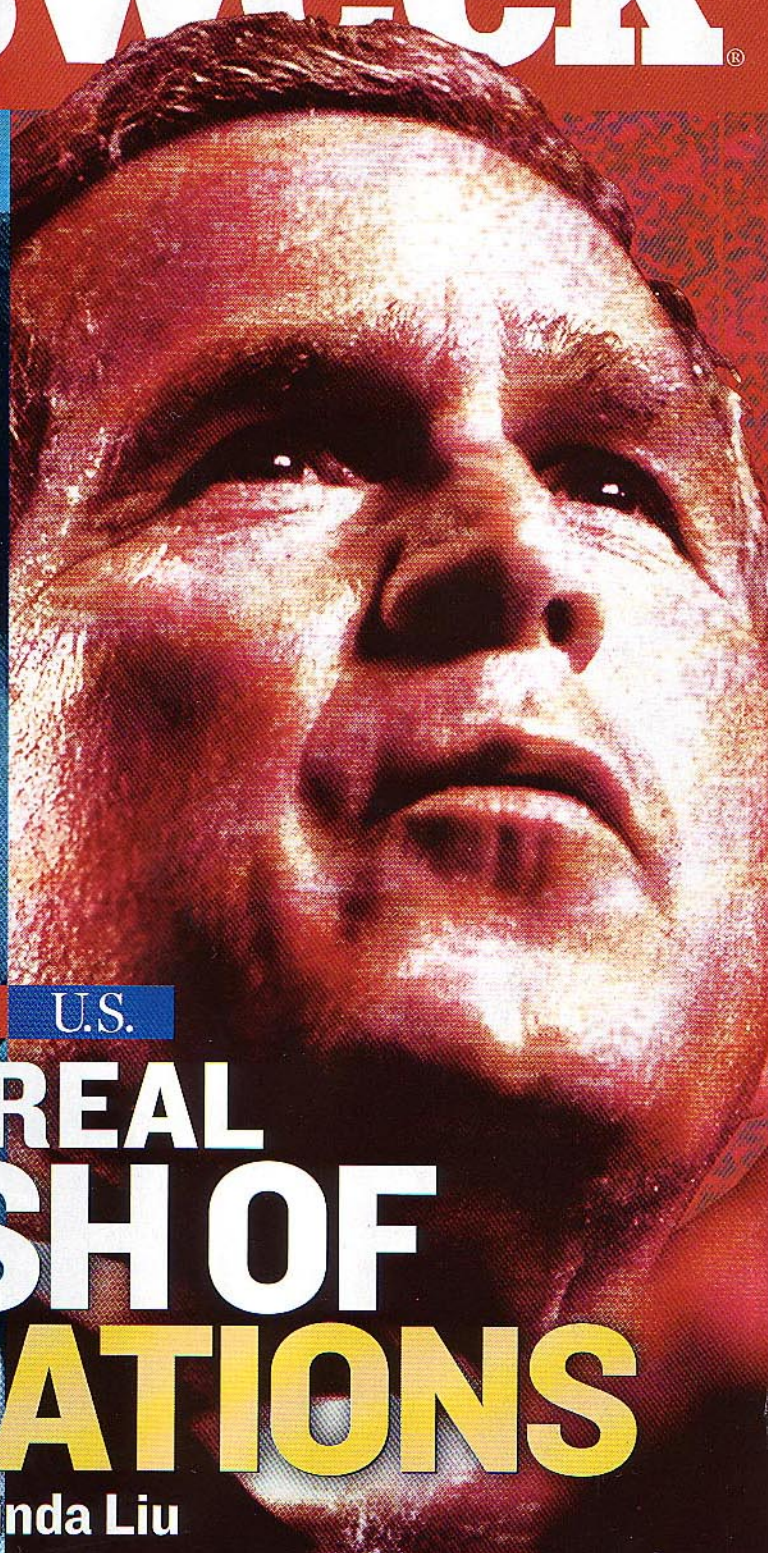
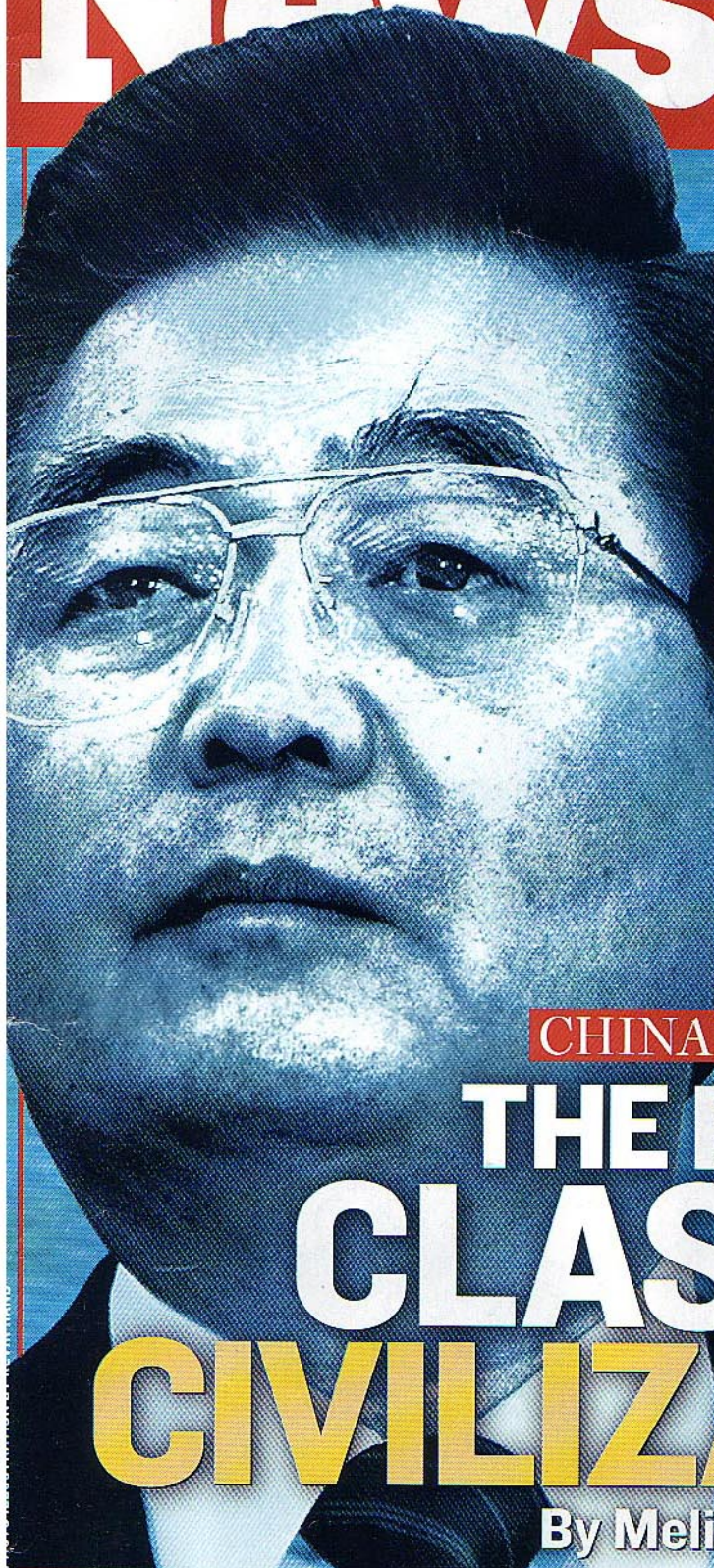


RUMSFELD: THE GENERALS' REVOLT



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CHINA U.S.

THE REAL CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

By Melinda Liu



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Voices in the Darkness

Essays by Iranian intellectuals reveal the complexity of life caught between the mullahs and modernity.

BY ANDREW NAGORSKI

BEYOND THE HEADLINES spawned by Iran's nuclear ambitions, beyond the confrontation between Iranian political and religious leaders and Western governments trying to devise some way to keep them in check, there's a more basic question: what is this country called Iran and what do its people want? Lila Azam Zanganeh, the editor of *"My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices"* (132 pages. Beacon Press), warns that there are no easy answers. After all, she writes, Iran is "at a surreal crossroads between political Islam and satellite television," and is both "religiously sclerotic" and full of young people "ravenously eager to embrace modernity along with a certain avatar of the American dream."

But this slim volume, with contributions from 15 Iranian artists and intellectuals, many of whom now live in the West, offers intriguing glimpses of that complex reality and the emotional turmoil it engenders. While most of the authors would agree with writer Reza Aslan that the Islamic republic is a "mullahcracy" or, as he puts it, "a bizarre hybrid of religious and third world fascism," they are uneasy when Westerners make similar sweeping characterizations. Photographer Shirin Neshat, for example, protests against por-

trays of Iranian women as victims, but then argues they are especially creative and strong precisely because they have to do constant battle with oppression.

There's a near-lyrical quality to many of these essays and interviews that transcends such seeming contradictions. Take Mehrangiz Kar's chilling essay about mannequins. The human-rights lawyer charts the growing power of the fundamentalists through the fate of these objects in store windows: first, a few inches were added to their skirts; next, they lost their hair as veils became compulsory and "mobile Islamic moral courts" demolished unveiled mannequins, and, finally, the dolls in the windows were beheaded, since the authorities considered their lips and eyes unduly provocative. All of which paralleled the complete rollback of women's rights in Iran. "The ideal woman for fundamentalists was a woman who did not have eyes to see, a tongue to speak, and legs to run away," Kar writes. At the same time, though, she sees a growing grass-roots movement among women to regain their individual identity and freedom. She points to the subtle signs such as women finding ways to make fashion statements with brighter clothing, while still wearing the obligatory chadors.

'SURREAL CROSSROADS': Young Iranians flout the rules on holding hands in public

In a society where so much is forbidden, there are the inevitable double lives. Iranians tell their compatriots living abroad that they're missing "a sexual revolution behind closed doors, where young Iranians drop ecstasy, host backroom orgies, and generally put Amsterdam to shame," writes journalist Azadeh Moaveni, author of the memoir "Lipstick Jihad." Maybe so. But most of the descriptions here suggest that the illicit parties are sad affairs, and that the regime has been more successful in destroying romance than sex. Literary scholar Naghmeh Zarbafian discovered that the Iranian translation of Milan Kundera's "Identity" is stripped of its love scenes, but words like "copulate" and "rape" haven't been censored. In other words, anything mildly erotic is taboo, while the mechanical and violent is fine.

And yet anyone who has sampled the rich offerings of recent Iranian films, with their compelling ordinary characters and all-too-human emotions, senses that so much more is happening. "My Iran bears little resemblance to the Iran that is portrayed in the daily news," says Abbas Kiarostami, one of the country's leading directors. "And I have faith that my films are closer to the reality of Iran—that is, to its social, cultural, and spiritual heart." While the government has stopped distributing his films, new technology—DVDs—means that he still has an audience. Other contributors point out that the Internet is not just a source of uncensored information but also offers a platform for many forms of artistic expression, such as photography exhibits that wouldn't have a chance elsewhere.

In contrast to Kiarostami, who decided never to leave, many Iranians are like the young man briefly mentioned in one of the essays, who yearns for the West to ease its visa restrictions "so that his brain could also be drained." The majority of the voices in this book represent Iranian exiles who remain profoundly ambivalent about the country they have left behind as they try to explain it to their new compatriots in the United States or elsewhere. All of which raises one more question: how does a country produce so many highly intelligent, creative people and at the same time elevate the fundamentalists and demagogues who rule and terrorize them? This collection doesn't answer that question, but it certainly puts it into sharper focus. ■

