

Fairfield County Interview

Written by DAVID LANDER

Photographed by LONDON SHEARER ALLEN



Peter and Susan Osnos Take On Serious Issues, With Words and Deeds

"The 20th century was, in important respects, a century of tremendous advancement for the human race," former defense secretary Robert S. McNamara and Brown University professor James G. Blight note in a new book, "Wilson's Ghost." After citing increased life expectancy along with much higher levels of literacy, productivity and income, the authors summon up an alarming statistic. Despite such gains, they state, in the century just past, "160 million human beings were killed in violent conflict."

Mr. McNamara and Mr. Blight teamed up to write their book, which suggests ways to avert a similar or even more catastrophic scenario in the current century, because they feel "a responsibility to redeem, in some measure, the lives of those who died violently" in the previous one. They were aided and abetted by their publisher, Peter Osnos, who lives in Greenwich with his wife, Susan. Peter and Susan Osnos are both dedicated human-rights advocates and are fulfilling obligations they feel to their neighbors everywhere on the planet through different but parallel careers.

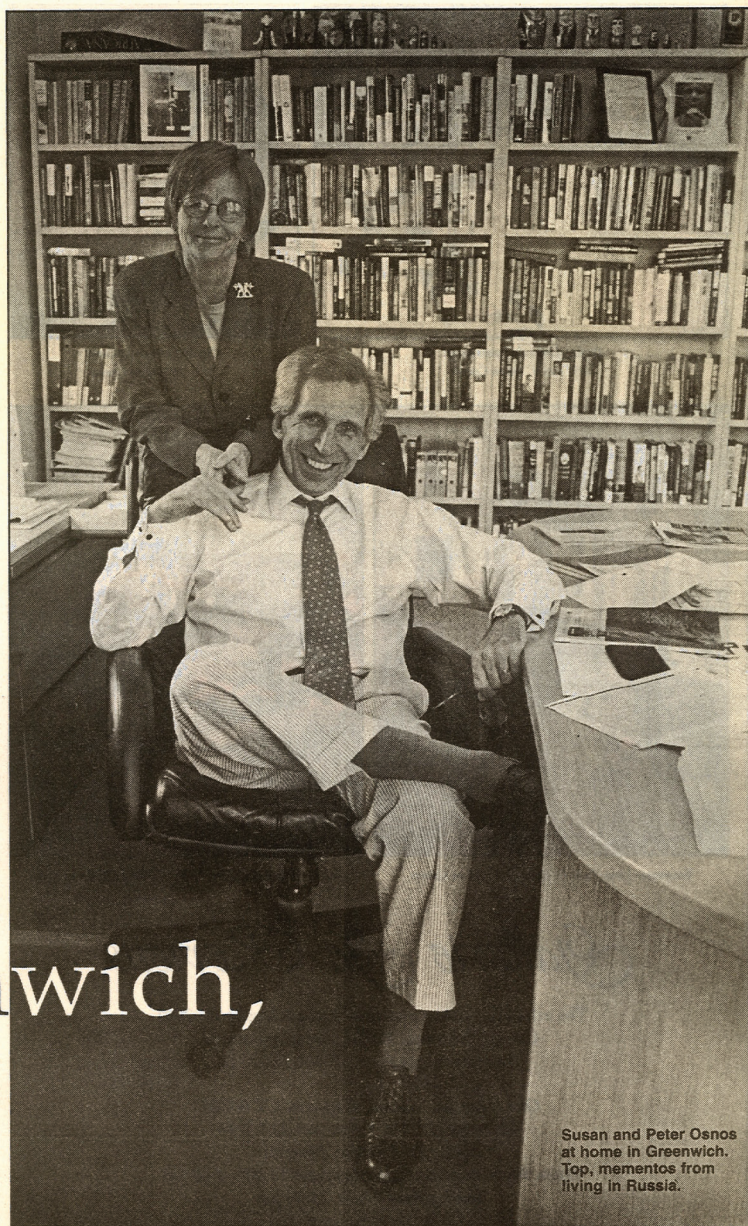
Peter Osnos, 57, is founder and president of PublicAffairs, a four-year-old publishing firm devoted to, as Newsweek magazine put it, "serious books [for] readers who want substance, not froth." The company is sometimes compared to National Public Radio because it serves the same audience, and Mr. Osnos is proud that it can do so while holding its own as a viable, for-profit corporation. Mrs. Osnos, after spending 16 years on the staff of Human Rights Watch, now consults on media strategy and other organizational matters with smaller nonprofit groups devoted to similar concerns. One, called Human Rights in China, comprises fewer than a dozen Chinese living here in exile.

Both Peter and Susan Osnos, who have two grown children—their daughter, Katherine, 26, teaches first grade in San Francisco, while their 24-year-old son,

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Peter Osnos,
PublicAffairs publisher

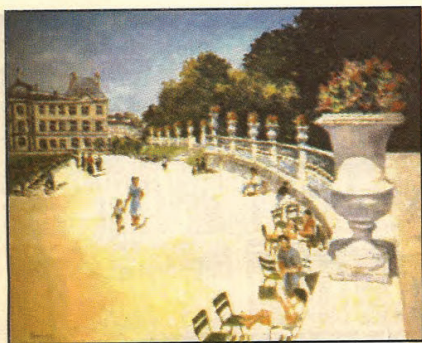
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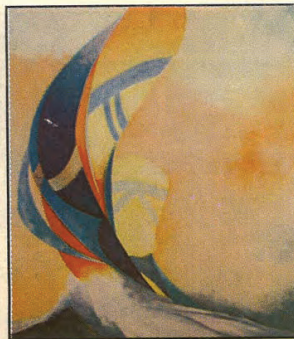
Susan and Peter Osnos at home in Greenwich. Top, mementos from living in Russia.

In Greenwich, A Noble Mission

You are cordially invited
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Le Gala Français III
A Group Exhibition Featuring
Gaveau ≈ Bouyssou
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Friday, July 20, 2001 ≈ 6 PM to 9 PM



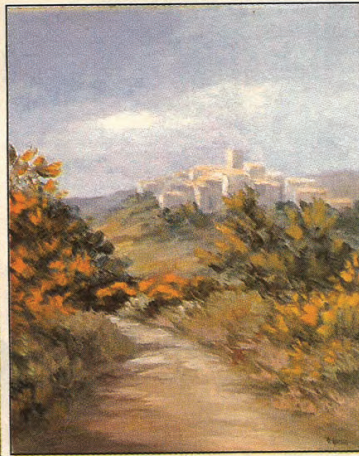
Bardet—Jardin du Luxembourg
18.5" x 21.5" Oil on Canvas



Claude Gaveau—Le Cume
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Bouyssou—Vieux Paris ≈ 18" x 21.5" Oil on Canvas



Zarou—Village de Flayosc ≈ 23.5" x 28.75" Oil on Canvas

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The exhibition will be presented through August 19, 2001
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SUSAN AND PETER OSNOS

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Evan, is a Chicago Tribune reporter based in New York—have been able to view the world from an unusually wide spectrum of vantage points. Before getting into book publishing, Mr. Osnos spent 18 years at the Washington Post, where he was, at different times, Indochina bureau chief, Moscow correspondent, foreign editor, national editor and London bureau chief. He met Susan in 1970, when both were based in Vietnam. At the time, she was one of four original staff members of Lawyers Military Defense Committee, a group that made pro-bono civilian legal counsel available to U.S. servicemen there.

Mrs. Osnos, daughter of a career Foreign Service officer, was born in Morocco in 1947 and spent most of her childhood in Eastern European countries, including Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. She was graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 1969 and left the following year for Vietnam, where she met Peter, a graduate of Brandeis and Columbia School of Journalism. The couple married in 1973 and a year later left for Moscow, where they lived for two years. They subsequently moved to Washington and, in 1982, relocated to London, remaining there until 1984.

While in Moscow, Mr. and Mrs. Osnos met Robert Bernstein, chief executive officer of Random House. "Bob was personally responsible for many books of political dissent and argument that challenged tyranny around the globe," Mr. Osnos wrote in a publisher's letter that appears in every one of his books and that also pays homage to the journalists I.F. Stone and Benjamin Bradlee, all three of whom "have served as mentors to countless reporters, writers, editors and book people of all kinds, including me."

Mr. Bernstein brought Mr. Osnos in 1984 to Random House, where he worked with authors including Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin. He was eventually named publisher of the company's Times Books unit, which he left in 1996 to piece together a business plan for his own firm.

Robert Bernstein also played a role in Mrs. Osnos's career. He founded Human Rights Watch, which recruited her the same year her husband went to work at Random House.

A conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Osnos happened to fall on Memorial Day, which made the McNamara-Blight book, one that repeatedly invokes the memory of tens of millions killed in armed conflict, an appropriate topic of conversation.

The volume, one of nearly three dozen PublicAffairs books published annually, was also newsworthy—it was scheduled to appear in stores that very week, and its publication coincided with the 85th birthday of the Kennedy appointee whose tenure as defense secretary corresponded not only with the Vietnam War but with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. In "Wilson's Ghost," Mr. McNamara remembers the confrontation between John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev over Soviet missiles on the island as "the most intense, frightening and dangerous experience of my life."

People like Mr. McNamara and Professor Blight, Peter Osnos maintains, are part of "a core, a community of people who are very much engaged in their worlds—locally, nationally and internationally—and who are responsible for shaping the way our society reacts to problems."

"That engagement is what drives us forward," reasoned Mr. Osnos, who contends that it is a potent force transcending any temporary political reality. The men and women who are motivated by it, he asserts, constitute "one of the great strengths of America" and will prevail regardless of "the leader of the moment."

To Mr. Osnos, who is a director of Human Rights Watch, "The human-rights movement is an absolutely crystal-clear expression of the importance of engagement."

Both he and his wife have had the opportunity to

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Susan Osnos,
Human-rights activist

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observe the movement's progress at close hand. For one thing, in the very first years of their marriage, Mrs. Osnos's diplomat father, Albert W. Sherer Jr., negotiated the Helsinki Accords. Signed in the Finnish capital on Aug. 1, 1975, the major diplomatic pact contained a pledge by all 35 signatory nations to respect the fundamental freedoms and human rights of their citizens. The Osnoses call that section of the accords a "template" and think of it as a blueprint for one of modern society's most important ethical propositions.

Since the signing of the Helsinki Accords, Mr. and Mrs. Osnos have watched momentum for human-rights causes grow around the world. The advocacy process works "on two levels," Mrs. Osnos explains. "One is government-to-government," she said. "The United States will criticize China for its human rights record, for example. A lot of the prodding and energy comes from non-governmental organizations."

In a more perfect world, Susan Osnos suggests, leading governmental and nongovernmental leaders would work together, as was the case when Martin Luther King Jr. was active in the nation's pulpits, podiums and streets while Lyndon Johnson, a staunch supporter of

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Susan Osnos

civil rights, pursued similar goals from the Oval Office. She said she feels that the current administration should do more for human rights, but she is gratified that there are now thousands of organizations "all over the world, monitoring the performance of government at the most local levels as well as on a larger scale." This is a recent phenomenon, she points out, stressing it wasn't very long ago that "people would get killed if they tried to create organizations on the ground."

Even as local human-rights groups put pressure "from below, on their own governments," Mrs. Osnos says, "an organization that's international, like Human Rights Watch, can make the White House squirm, because they're very good at getting press attention." Mrs. Osnos, who joined the organization as its communications director and held that post for the next 13 years, delineates its media strategy by saying, "The key was to find some pressure point." When, for example, "American money was being given to the Salvadoran Army, which was using that money to fund the death squads, which were leaving bodies at the side of the road," her aim was "to make that connection in the mind of the American public, from their tax dollars to the bodies."


"This was not about promoting Human Rights Watch, the organization," she emphasized. "It was about putting this information into the debate." The approach was successful. "Over a period of about four years, you could watch public opinion go from no interest whatsoever to 'Not with my tax dollars, you don't.' And the faucet got turned off."

In the immediate future, Mrs. Osnos predicts, much of the human-rights focus will shift from fostering freedom of association and freedom of speech to freeing workers who labor in conditions that border on, or even cross the line into, slavery. "The reality is that, for probably the next decade, the biggest human rights issue is going to be labor rights," she says. "With all of these countries being used as large factories, the protection of workers is a very serious issue."

Mrs. Osnos recommends addressing that issue by appealing to consumers. "If you say to somebody, 'Look at your feet,' and they're wearing Nikes, and whoever made their Nikes was being paid seven cents a day in conditions that are beyond belief, consumers will respond," she said. "There's ample evidence that's the case."

"I think the American people are fundamentally very decent and very generous," Susan Osnos affirmed. "They don't want to contribute to behavior like that." ♦


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