On a January day in Paris, in 1895, a ceremony was enacted in the courtyard of the École Militaire, on the Champ-de-Mars, that still shocks the mind and conscience to contemplate: Alfred Dreyfus, a young Jewish artillery officer and family man, convicted of treason days earlier in a rushed court-martial, was publicly degraded before a gawking crowd. His insignia medals were stripped from him, his sword was broken over the knee of the degrader, and he was marched around the grounds in his ruined uniform to be jeered and spat at, while piteously declaring his innocence and his love of France above cries of “Jew” and “Judas!” It is a ceremony that seems to belong to some older, medieval Europe, of public torture and autos-da-fé and Inquisitions.

Yet it took place in the immediate shadow of the monument of modernity, the Eiffel Tower, then six years old, which loomed at the north end of the Champ-de-Mars. The very improbability of such an act’s happening at such a time—to an assimilated Jew who had mastered a meritocratic system and a
city that was the pride and pilothouse of civic rationalism—made it a portent, the moment where Maupassant’s world of ambition and pleasure met Kafka’s world of inexplicable bureaucratic suffering. The Dreyfus affair was the first indication that a new epoch of progress and cosmopolitan optimism would be met by a countervailing wave of hatred that deformed the next half century of European history.

The Dreyfus affair never goes away, and is the subject of a brave new book by the novelist and lawyer Louis Begley, “Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters” (Yale; $24). Brave because Begley wants to use the occasion not for French-bashing, or for reciting the enduring history of European anti-Semitism, bleak as it is, but as a pointed warning and reminder of how fragile the standards of civilized conduct prove in moments of national panic. The Dreyfus affair matters, he believes, because we have, in the past decade, made our own Devil’s Island and hundreds of new Dreyfuses—the Dreyfus affair matters because we’re still in the middle of it. Begley, as he recounts the story of the Parisian fin-de-siècle legal drama, also spends many pages showing that among the prisoners in places like Guantánamo are many Dreyfuses—innocent, as he was, and, on the whole, much worse treated. He wants to arraign Americans, and particularly those who fetishize the Dreyfus case without grasping its principles: that every accused person should be able to face his accusers in a fair trial, and that national panic makes bad policy and false prisoners.

Yet a parallel can be potent without being, point by point, persuasive: Dreyfus was not the Faceless Foreigner but the Enemy Within. Far from being faceless, he was all face: the haters never tired of describing and drawing his hideousness. “His face is grey, flattened and base, showing no sign of remorse . . . a wreck from the ghetto,” the journalist Léon Daudet wrote. That hideous degradation ritual is at the heart of
the Dreyfus affair; it was meant to be public and demonstrative—this is what happens to faithless Jews. The degradation of the prisoners at Guantánamo was essentially private and utilitarian: talk or we’ll subject you to unspeakable humiliations.

The Dreyfus affair matters not because of the parallel with our time but because it was one of the first tests of modern pluralist liberalism and its institutions—a test that those institutions somehow managed to pass and fail at the same time. In France a century ago, the system finally worked, as they used to say after Watergate. The good guys rallied around, the courts did their job, Dreyfus was vindicated and came home to his family. Yet what the system exposed as it worked was, in a way, worse than the injustice it remedied. It showed that a huge number of Europeans, in a time largely smiling and prosperous, liked engaging in raw, animal religious hatred, and only felt fully alive when they did. Hatred and bigotry were not a vestige of the superstitious past but a living fire—just what comes, and burns, naturally.

The typical modern media melodrama involves the courtroom: from Scopes to O.J., the dramatic proscenium of a trial gives structure to the spectacle of modern life. The Dreyfus affair, in some ways the first of those dramas, held France spellbound in part because it included not one but at least six trials; to keep track of them—the trials and courts-martial of Dreyfus defenders and accusers, as well as his own—is exhausting. Just last year, though, George R. Whyte published in paperback his remarkably complete documentary compendium, “The Dreyfus Affair: A Chronological History” (Palgrave-Macmillan; $37); the best extended narrative in English is still Michael Burns’s account in “Dreyfus: A Family Affair,” published back in 1991.

Alfred Dreyfus came from Alsace, which was part of his luck and then part of his tragedy. In 1870, the armies of Prussia
and Germany invaded France and routed the government of Napoleon III. As spoils of war, the Prussians took most of Alsace and Lorraine, the northeastern provinces; the figure of Strasbourg in the Place de la Concorde was draped in black (and remained that way until after the First World War). This meant that the Jews of Alsace were both frustrated foreigners and beloved native sons. Even though Alsace and Lorraine were only dubiously “French” in the first place, their loss drove Frenchmen mad.

Above all, many Frenchmen thought that France had lost the war because it had turned away from the faith. For the Paris of Dreyfus’s time was really a city of two towers—a city of two towers—across the city from the Eiffel Tower, the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur, with its monumental bell tower, had been slowly rising since the eighteen-seventies, as a sort of counter-monument, done in a gargantuan Romanesque manner then seen as the true mystical style of Franco-Catholicism. It was dedicated explicitly to the expiation of the sins of 1870 and the redemption of France by a restored Catholic Church. Apollinaire used the two towers—one the shepherd of modern life, the other the fountain, the bleeding heart of the past—to structure his vision of the city in his great poem on Paris, “Zone.”

A saner response to the war had been to reform and democratize the French Army, by making its officer ranks meritocratic and national rather than aristocratic and narrow. Dreyfus, as a Jewish son of Alsace, took advantage of these reformist impulses, and came to Paris to become an artillery officer.* He did not fit the model of the traditional duelling and debauching officer, all scars and debts, but represented a new model, of the officer as bourgeois family man. He eventually settled with his wife and two children in a grand apartment on the Avenue du Trocadéro.

It was in that city of two towers, one finished and one rising,
that, in the fall of 1894, Dreyfus became the accidental victim of a stupid plot, which was not, in its origins, anti-Semitic. The French Section de Statistique—the Army’s intelligence service—had an agent within the German Embassy: a cleaning woman who every night emptied the wastebaskets of the military attaché, Lieutenant Colonel Maximilien von Schwarzkoppen, and brought the torn-up papers to her government. From the scraps, the spies reassembled a shocking memorandum, the bordereau, in which a French officer offered to sell military secrets. The nature of the secrets to be sold seemed to point to an artillery officer, and suspicion fell on Dreyfus, not least because he made regular visits to his family in Mulhouse, then still in German hands. With the normal prejudice of the secret police in favor of their own suspicions, the Statistique had Dreyfus arrested. As always, pseudo-science came to the aid of paranoia: the Statistique called on a “graphologist” for an opinion, and he testified that the lack of resemblance between Dreyfus’s writing and that of the bordereau was proof of a “self-forgery,” and prepared a fantastically detailed diagram to demonstrate that this was so.

The bordereau had actually been written by another officer, Major Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy—one of those subjects in the history of espionage who are so obviously guilty that only the geniuses of counter-intelligence could look past them. Like Aldrich Ames and Guy Burgess, Esterhazy had done everything short of wearing a nametag on his shirtfront reading “Spy.” Staggered by gambling debts, he was the debauched son of an illegitimate daughter of an illegitimate claimant to the Hungarian royal line, and had written to a mistress at length about his hatred of the French Army. Just as no one in the C.I.A. asked why Ames had the money for a sports car, no one in the Statistique seemed inclined to wonder if a man notorious throughout the Army for being a drunk in perpetual debt might
be a likelier candidate to have sold secrets than a Jewish family man.

Then black comedy was piled on stupidity. It turned out that Schwarzkoppen, the German military attaché, had begun an erotic affair with Major Alessandro Panizzardi, the Italian military attaché—it was not called the gay nineties for nothing—and that they wrote to each other in an allusive and sinister-sounding private code. One of their letters, stolen from a second source, included a reference to someone whom Schwarzkoppen called “this scoundrel of a D.,” and who had offered “plans of Nice”—though the whole thing may have been a bantering reference to another lover. (The letter ends, to give a taste of the whole, “Don’t exhaust yourself with too much buggery.”)

Despite its obviously louche tone, this letter was submitted to the judges in a “secret dossier,” which Dreyfus and his lawyers were not allowed to know about, let alone see. (One of the smaller ironies of the affair is that it involves the collision of two subcultures, ambiguous Jewish identity and the obliquities of gay “coding,” that did so much to make the modernist sensibility.) But on that evidence—a handwriting identification admitted to be based on an absence of resemblance, and a single initial in a playful lover’s note—Dreyfus was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

If anti-Semitism didn’t start the Dreyfus affair, it fuelled it. The accusation was first kept secret, but as soon as it was made public the secrecy itself became an occasion for assault: the Army was protecting a traitor Jew. First, loudest, and nastiest among the explicitly anti-Semitic enemies of Dreyfus was Édouard Drumont, whose book “Jewish France” had already, in the eighteen-eighties, been a huge success. Drumont’s book was above all an anti-immigrant manifesto. He was responding to the waves of Jewish immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe
who had arrived in France during the previous twenty or so years, bringing with them, he argued, values and a faith alien to Christian France. In a tone familiar from today’s anti-Muslim polemics, and using the usual toxic cocktail of absurdly inflated numbers, hysterical overstatement, and guilt by association (many anarchists were Jews), Drumont managed to convince readers that France’s real crisis was the decline of Christianity. This had happened under the demoralizing pressure of modern art and culture, which was, of course, Jewish culture: the culture of bankers and speculators and atheists and decadent artists. It seemed perfectly natural—a heartbreaking irony, in retrospect—to suspect that Jews would sell out France to their spiritual home in Germany.

Drumont’s hatred was of a somewhat new kind: where for Voltaire the Jews had been evil as a relic of antiquity, for Drumont they were evil as a herald of modernity. Before, the Jews’ refusal to change was a sign of their iniquity; now their appetite for change was the sign. The more eagerly a Jew attempted to escape from Judaism, the more Jewish he revealed himself to be—a snaky shape-shifter with no allegiances to anything except clan. The Catholic Church, in turn, seized on Drumont’s ideology, and a virulent anti-Semitism became, especially in the pages of the Catholic newspaper La Croix, the new tonic note of even respectable French Catholicism. This coalition of hatred of immigrants and Catholic reaction did not put Dreyfus in a cage. But it helped keep him there.

It’s hard to remain dry-eyed when reading about Dreyfus’s next five years. Overnight the most despised man in the country he worshipped, he was torn from his wife and children and sent to rot on a tiny, desolate island in the Atlantic, in a prison altered to prevent him from ever seeing the ocean that surrounded him. (It must also be said, with Begley, that his treatment was by modern American standards benevolent. Convicted of the worst
crime imaginable, selling out France to the Germans, he was still given almost all the books he wanted to read from and all the paper he needed to write on, and he used both.) Because of his always cold and correct demeanor, and in part because the regime of silence that was imposed on him at Devil’s Island left him for the rest of his life with a rasping voice, the idea has been spread that Dreyfus was an essentially mediocre, if gallant, man. The image is far from the truth; awkward and uncharismatic he may have been, but Dreyfus was what we now call deep, a serious and cultivated soul. In captivity, shackled to his bed at night, he saved his sanity by reading: he read Tolstoy, Nietzsche, the French classics, and made intelligent notes on them. More than anything, he read Shakespeare. He worked his way through all the great tragedies—eventually and laboriously teaching himself to read them in the original—and found in those stories a sense of life and a language adequate to his own condition. He copied out Othello’s lines on honor, and sent them to his wife, Lucie.

He was, as far as he knew, utterly alone and friendless. In truth, he had one supreme ally at home—his brother Mathieu, who had stayed in the family textile business, and was Alfred’s main support. Mathieu worked brilliantly and tirelessly for his martyred brother. Pretty much everyone in authority had an uneasy sense that Dreyfus had been railroaded, and many who had no particular liking for Jews still felt that anti-Semitism was something worse than false; they thought it was vulgar. Early on, Mathieu made a key ally of Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, the vice-president of the French Senate, who strongly intimated that he knew that Mathieu’s brother was innocent but could not say why. (The reason for his confidence came out later: in an incident that one would think possible only in the Internet age, one of Esterhazy’s stockbrokers had seen the bordereau reproduced in a newspaper, and at once recognized the
handwriting of his ne’er-do-well client.)

Mathieu displayed a kind of genius in seeing that the case for justice was more persuasive than the case for vengeance—that it was necessary to take the position that an injustice had been done by error, rather than that an evil had been done on purpose. The barrier to his brother’s vindication, he grasped, was less anti-Semitism than the perceived assault on the honor of the Army.

For beneath the affair was a great historical transformation. Before the eighteen-seventies, European armies were understood to be made up of desperate men who couldn’t find a better job and stupid officers who couldn’t inherit a better place. Though a useful tool of empire, the army was hardly revered as an institution. But, with the late-century growth of the “open” and then of the mass-conscription army, the European army became something more than an instrument: it became the spine of honor, the sword and shield of the nation. It would not do to question its integrity, to suppose that the army was a human institution made up of good men and bad, and more inclined than most, through the habit of blind obedience and the nature of its mission, to do the wrong thing unless closely watched. Many on the anti-Dreyfusard side were prepared to admit, sotto voce, that the case against Dreyfus was not very strong. But, given that Germany posed an existential threat to France, an attack on the French Army was an attack on the nation’s future. The same forces of reform that had opened the Army to Dreyfus and raised it to a national sacre were now conspiring to keep him locked up. That was the heart of the affair, and of Mathieu’s dilemma; he had to find a way to liberate his brother without challenging the honor of the Army—which was, despite it all, still as sacred to his brother as to everyone else.

The unmaking of the Dreyfus case is a very long story—so complex, and taking place at such a snail’s pace and in such
wayward directions, that almost no one has ever been able to relate it simply. Essentially what happened is that the evidence of Dreyfus’s innocence that Mathieu unearthed became too overwhelming to deny, and progressive politicians came into power who were ready to act on that evidence. There were nearly as many reversals as advances. A lieutenant colonel, Georges Picquart, was put in charge of the Statistique, and soon realized, thanks to an intercepted telegram, that Esterhazy was the real culprit. When he announced this in a report, he was promptly cashiered and transferred to the fringes of empire by panicked superiors, and then imprisoned on trumped-up charges of revealing other secrets. (Picquart is one of the truly admirable figures in the story—anti-Semitic by inclination and background, he was a friend of Mahler, and, above all, a dutiful officer, who had followed the facts, despite the consequences.) Meanwhile, another member of the Statistique, Joseph Henry, began to forge, crudely, new documents that pointed to Dreyfus—though it’s unclear whether he did this in conspiracy with Esterhazy or out of a conviction that Dreyfus was guilty and a feeling that it did no harm to put a thumb on the scale of justice.

It was then, too, around 1898, that the affair became the Affaire, the preoccupation of all educated France. It suddenly took in not just the Army and the Jews but the central question of modern French history: nation or republic? Was one’s loyalty to be given to the nation as a repository of a heritage, mystical and ethnic in nature, or to a set of abstract ideals achieved by reason and available to all? These arguments split the upper and the educated classes—dividing even the Impressionists, the anti-Dreyfusards Degas and Renoir drawing daggers with Pissarro and Monet.

Stirred into movement by Mathieu, the entire liberal establishment, frightened and feeble at first, began to enlist in
the cause; the great left-wing politician Jean Jaurès joined, then the publisher and future Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, then the novelist Émile Zola—none of them Jewish, but with a certain self-interest in seeing the right done down, and, above all, with a passion for republicanism and a sense that it could not survive this parody of justice. They insisted that they were asking France to be faithful to its own declared rules. Esterhazy, in a typically reckless though well-calculated move, demanded a court-martial, which, held in secret, ended, predictably, with his acquittal.

It was this trial, not Dreyfus’s, that caused Zola, the morning after, to publish “J’Accuse,” in a daily newspaper that Clemenceau ran—detailing all the evidence of Dreyfus’s innocence and (breaking, at last, with the playbook) arraigning the Army for deliberately covering it up. Zola was tried for criminal libel, and at his trial Clemenceau eloquently addressed what Mathieu had always seen was the problem: “Above all beware of this line of the reasoning . . . : ‘It is possible that Dreyfus was convicted illegally, but it was justly done; that is enough.’ . . . It is a serious error. . . . See to it that the supremacy of the law is undisputed, and through the law rid our hearts of this respect for reasons of state that is absurd in a democracy.” (Zola was convicted, and fled the country, until the government fell and a pardon arrived.)

At last, the appeals worked their way to the top of the French courts, and a second Dreyfus court-martial was ordered. Dreyfus was snatched from his parched exile and brought home. Ignorant through his long isolation that anyone outside of his immediate family was even aware of his martyrdom, he sat down in his prison cell at Rennes, where the new court-martial was to take place, and read the transcripts of the secondary trials, and discovered that men of accomplishment had risked their welfare for his vindication. He wrote later, “A deep feeling of gratitude
and admiration arose in my heart for all the courageous men, scholars and workers, great or humble, who had thrown themselves valiantly into the struggle for the triumph of justice and truth, to uphold principles which are the legacy of humanity."

The fix was still in, of course, and, despite the overwhelming evidence, Dreyfus was convicted again—but with a reference to “extenuating circumstances.” This was what psychiatrists used to call “a cry for help.” It meant that though the Army couldn’t be seen to overturn its own verdict, it knew that it was wrong. The newly installed, liberal government immediately offered Dreyfus an amnesty, which would see him freed, albeit not yet reinstated in the Army, on the tacit condition that he not protest too hard any longer about his innocence.

Understandably, the activists who had risked their reputations on Dreyfus’s vindication argued against assenting to an amnesty, and for continuing to appeal the case, despite the risk of further imprisonment. Poor Alfred was uncertain about the right way to act. It was left to the clearheaded Mathieu to convince them all that the immediate amnesty was as close to an admission of wrongdoing as you could hope to get. (Meanwhile, the right-wing loonies claimed that “extenuating circumstances” was really a reference to an “annotated memorandum”—the Obama birth certificate of the day—that contained notes in the Kaiser’s handwriting gleefully savoring his Jew collaborator, a memorandum that couldn’t be shown in open court out of fear that it could start another war.) Behind all this, the hopes for the upcoming Paris Exposition of 1900 were probably central to the government’s panic. The Zola trial had awakened consciences—and a certain amount of French-bashing—in England and America. The new Exposition put the prestige of France, and income for Paris, on the line, and continued persecution of Dreyfus might have kept some foreigners away.
Dreyfus was lionized by the left, and went home to the grand apartment. Bit by bit, the entire web of injustice was unwoven: subsequent trials not only reinstated him in the Army but gave him (and Picquart) promotions and, eventually, the Légion d’Honneur, the highest decoration in France. In 1905, the Roman Catholic Church was more or less disestablished in France, and equality among Protestants, Catholics, and even Jews imposed, largely because of the grotesque role that the Church and La Croix had played in the persecution of Dreyfus. When the First World War broke out, Dreyfus went on to serve as an artillery colonel in Paris and at Verdun. He died in 1935, a man honored and respected both as a soldier for France and as a martyr for freedom.

In this sense, what’s oddest about the Dreyfus affair is its unequivocally happy ending. A good man was the victim of a horrible injustice, decent people rallied to his side, the bad guys responsible for it were exposed, the good guy got to come home and was honored by the same people in the same place where he had been dishonored. If the beginning of the Dreyfus story is Maupassant, and the middle Kafka, the end is Victor Hugo, a victory of the romantic, progressive imagination: wrongs can be righted; in the long run things work out for the best. Dreyfus’s restoration to bourgeois comfort was so complete that a famous Paris story has him saying placidly at a dinner party, when told about a rumored adulterous affair in his circle, “Well, what I always say is: where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

The trouble was that, like most happy endings, the happy ending was not the end. The good guys won in a way that only made the bad guys worse. As with Watergate, the immediate outcome of the affair gave a misleading impression of unanimity; in truth, while the good guys thought the other guys had absorbed it as a lesson, they had merely resented it as a defeat. Though Dreyfus won his place back, in 1908 he was the
victim of an assassination attempt by a follower of Charles Maurras, who had succeeded Édouard Drumont as the leading authoritarian anti-Semite in France. In any modernized country, the backward-looking party will always tend toward resentment and grievance. The key is to keep the conservatives feeling that they are an alternative party of modernity. (This was Disraeli’s great achievement, as it was, much later, de Gaulle’s.) When the conservative party comes to see itself as unfairly marginalized, it becomes a party of pure reaction, which is what happened to the French right after Dreyfus. Instead of purging the anti-Semites, people on the right decided to rally behind them. They came to hate the idea of the Republic itself. When Maurras was sentenced for collaboration after the Second World War, he cried, “It’s the revenge of Dreyfus!” It wasn’t true. But Vichy had been four long years of the revenge of Drumont.

Three “readings” of the affair, all by Jews, have long contested its meaning; Begley raises all three. The first is Theodore Herzl’s, which gave birth to modern Zionism. Herzl had been present at the Dreyfus degradation on that January day, as a journalist for a Viennese paper, and if one moment engrained his sense that Jews could never find a safe home in Europe this was it: “It has been established that justice could be refused to a Jew for the sole reason that he was a Jew.” Dreyfus, the perfect case of attempted assimilation, “signifies a strategic position which . . . is already lost.” This insight, repeated and made programmatic in the Zionist project, was seemingly vindicated by what happened during the Second World War, when the members of the Dreyfus family, who had fought for France so often and so patriotically, were, like all French Jews, forced into hiding; Alfred’s favorite granddaughter, Madeline, a Resistance fighter, was deported by the Vichy state and died at Auschwitz, age twenty-five.

Herzl’s reading was that the affair marked the end of a
credible idea of assimilation; Marcel Proust’s was that it marked the end of a credible idea of aristocracy. The Dreyfus affair acts as a kind of earthquake in “Remembrance of Things Past,” destroying Proust’s belief in a natural merger of the educated middles, mostly Jewish, and the aristocratic heights. Proust’s ideal was the aesthete’s version of the progressive dream, Manet’s version of Mill: the bourgeois would be encircled by the wise and the witty and the wellborn, and their petty prejudices would fall. This happy merger of intellect and grace, symbolized in Proust by the figure of Swann, the Jewish flâneur with a love for Vermeer, is, as Proust says, “retarded” by the affair. It largely accounts for the difference in tone between the melancholy but high-hearted world of the early chapters in Proust’s series, where Swann is free to roam between the Faubourg Saint-Honoré and the demimonde while still being a trusted Jew among the Boulevard Jews like Proust’s family, and the straitened and suspicious social circumstances in the last books. Proust had always expected his aristocrats to think stupidly; he just didn’t expect so many to behave so shabbily.

Yet these sad readings are not the only plausible ones. Léon Blum, the Socialist politician who began his public career during the affair and, in 1936, became the Prime Minister of France, insisted that the Dreyfus affair was the moment that truly established the emancipation of the Jews, and their right to play a full role as citizens—it was what allowed a Jew like him to become Prime Minister. (The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, born Jewish in Lithuania, liked to quote his father: “A country that tears itself apart to defend the honor of a small Jewish captain is somewhere worth going.”) The real meaning of the affair, for the French left, lay in its vindication of the rights of man and of an ideal of cosmopolitan citizenship, open to all. Certainly, France’s republican governments have been far more inclined to entrust Jews with power than any other modern
state. After Blum, there was Mendès-France, the most admired Prime Minister of the Fourth Republic, and today, in the Fifth Republic, the President, his foreign minister, and his national-security adviser are all, by Vichy’s definition and most others, Jews. In this view, the persistence of anti-Semitism is not an argument against cosmopolitan citizenship; it is an argument against the persistence of anti-Semitism.

Begley, for his part, asks why Dreyfus wanted to go back into the Army that had betrayed him. As well ask why Rosa Parks didn’t just stop riding buses. The Dreyfus family had suffered as Jews and understood that they suffered as Jews; they still lived out their lives as French men and women, and had no ambition except to continue to live their lives as French men and women. How can French Jews accept French law and lore, and not be haunted by the Drancy internment camp? It is a condition of being modern that our double and triple identities look weird from the outside but are the only kinds that feel authentic from the inside. The passionately nationalist Québécois who listens exclusively to Metallica and AC/DC; the Muslim fundamentalist with the satellite dish—from outside, we wonder how they reconcile the contradictions. But they don’t have to reconcile the contradictions in order to cope with reality. The contradictions are themselves the form that a reconciliation with reality takes.

Of all the readings of the Dreyfus case, the sanest still seems to be the reading of the French socialists and liberals, almost none of them Jewish, who first took it up passionately: an innocent man had been railroaded by villains, who took advantage of ethnic prejudice in a Catholic country. It was done in defiance of the plain rules and traditions and procedures of the country’s own military order and judicial system, and had to be remedied by them. After some time, though with less clarity than one would have liked, and with more fudge around the edges than was ideal, this was done. The lesson to be learned
was the lesson that Clemenceau had tried to teach the jury at Zola’s trial. The urge to protect the nation from its enemies by going around the corner to get them is natural, but what you get is usually not the enemies, and, going around the corner, you bump into something worse. Breaking the law to defend the nation ends up breaking the nation. Sometimes long stories have short morals.

*Correction, December 1, 2009: Dreyfus did not attend the French military academy, as originally stated.

ILLUSTRATION: LEONARD DE SELVA/CORBIS
Trial of the century is an idiomatic phrase used to describe certain well-known court cases, especially of the 20th century. It is often used popularly as a rhetorical device to attach importance to a trial and as such is not an objective observation but is the opinion of whoever uses it. As attorney F. Lee Bailey and The Washington Post observed in 1999 on the eve of the closing century