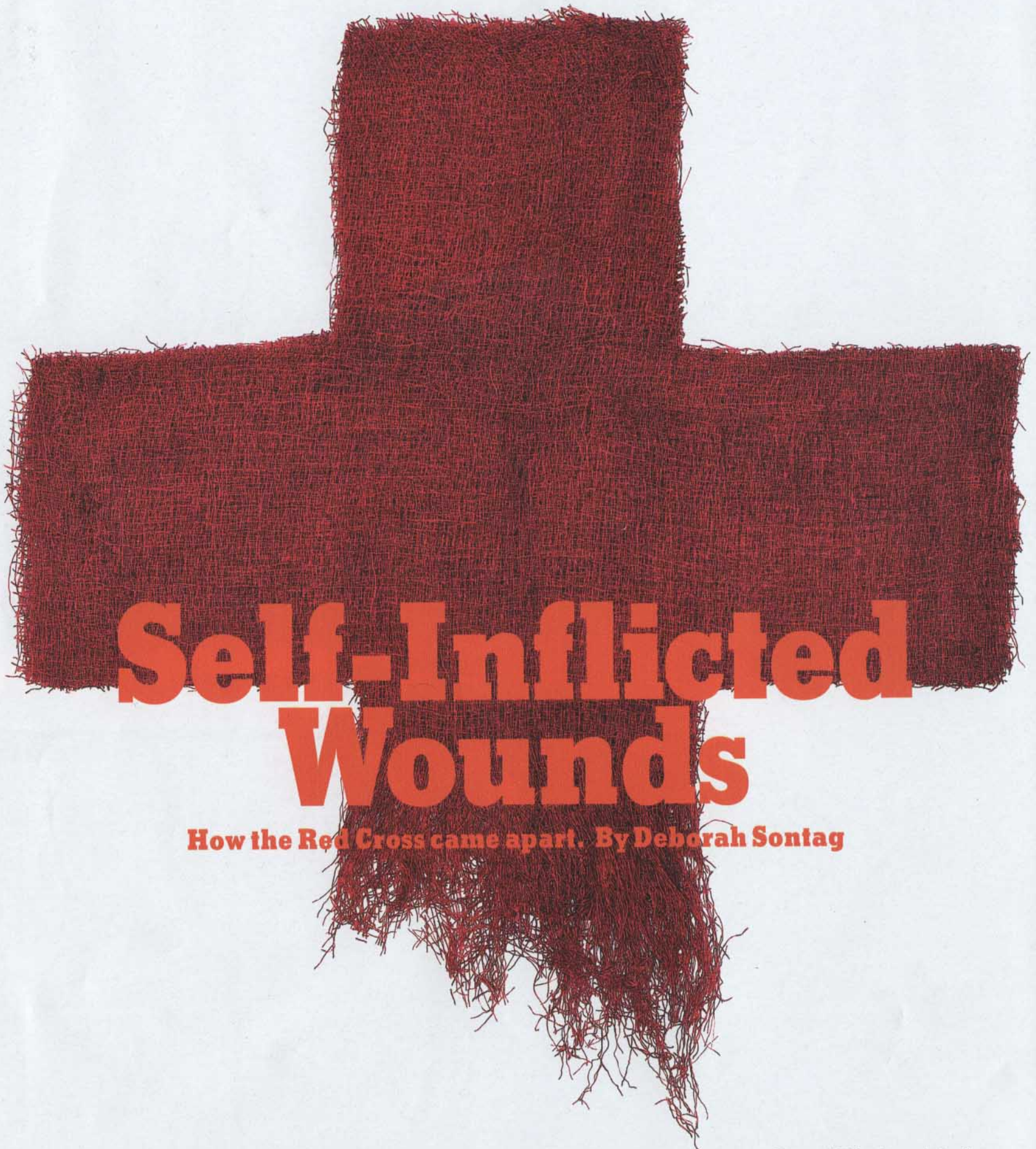


# The New York Times Magazine

DECEMBER 23, 2001 / SECTION 6



## Self-Inflicted Wounds

**How the Red Cross came apart. By Deborah Sontag**

Looking Like Halle Berry · The Cabernet Cult · Ali Remembers · Miami's 2,224-Pound Blocking Machine

## roll's roles

## Verb's informal sense achieves heroic status.

**T**odd Beamer was a passenger on the doomed Flight 93, taken over on Sept. 11 by terrorists who intended to use the aircraft as a missile to destroy the White House or the Capitol. He had a telephone line open to an operator in Chicago, who reported hearing him recite the Lord's Prayer before leading a group of heroic passengers to rush the suicidal hijackers. Then Beamer said: "Are you guys ready? *Let's roll.*"

President Bush recalled that moment in the eloquent peroration of a speech in Atlanta last month. "We will always remember the words of that brave man expressing the spirit of a great country," he said. "We will no doubt face new challenges, but we have our marching orders. My fellow Americans, *let's roll.*"

A song with that title was promptly distributed to radio disc jockeys. In a Philadelphia football stadium, a fan called "the sign man" unfurled a banner with the words "*Let's roll ... out*" to tumultuous applause. "The words are everywhere," reported Britain's *Guardian*. "They have become America's favorite, bitersweet and articulate bumper sticker."

The phrase in its currently popular sense means "let's get going; let's move." The original sense of *get rolling* had to do with the wheels of conveyances, horseless and otherwise, and dates back to the 16th century. The crashshooter's *roll 'em* was introduced early in the 20th century, and the moviemakers' command to cameramen, "*roll 'em,*" (answered in an old joke by "anytime you're ready, C.B.!") was first recorded in 1939. Five years later, in his novel "The Man With the Lumpy Nose," Lawrence Lariat wrote: "'Do me a favor and go home and write it! McEmons stood over the reporter menacingly. '*Get rolling!*'" (I have an editor like that.) But the specific phrase *let's roll* in its current meaning was first cited in the 1952 novel "The Tightrope," by Stanley Jules Kauffman: "'*Let's roll, dreamer,*' said Perry."

In 1950 and 1951, the blues artist Cecil Gant (aka Private Gant, the G.I. sing-sation) came out with two songs that brought *roll* onto the music scene. "We're Gonna Rock" was a remake of a lesser-known 1947 song by Wild Bill Moore, which repeated the words "We're gonna rock, we're gonna *roll*" for most of the song. The second was "Rock Little Baby" (the title bottoms on "rockabye your baby"), which included the line "Rock little daddy, send me with a rock and a *roll.*" By June 1951, the disc jockey Alan Freed promoted the revolution in popular music that became known as *rock 'n' roll*. The phrase "*Let's rock and roll*" was an excited call to dance to that music. Later — and this is the etymological conjecture of a confirmed fox-trotter — with the *rock* clipped out, the phrase became a more general exhortation to nonmusical movement or action.

In a related development, as transition-hungry writers like to put it, a new sense of *to roll up* wheeled into the lexicon. It was expressed this month by ABC's Sam Donaldson: "It looks like the Taliban is being *rolled up.*" The verb phrase *roll up*, which might have begun in the showroom of a carpet salesman, later became the action of arriving in a carriage or automobile, and now has the meaning of "to defeat" or "to conclude" (expressed by film directors in a noun form as "that's a wrap"), akin to the military meaning of "to mop up" (though no soldiers say "that's a mop").

*Roll out*, remembered not so fondly by former military recruits as the command to get out of bed, has also gained a new meaning as a noun: "a type of release in which a film gradually plays in an expanding number of theaters." This method of distribution differs from the usual nationwide release. Ira Konigsberg, author of

the 1997 Complete Film Dictionary, informs me of the metaphoric origin: "The growing appearance of the film is much like the expansion of a carpet when it is *rolled* out. A synonym is *platforming*."

The old verb *roll* — from the Latin *rota*, "*wheel*" — like Ol' Man River, is unstoppable, creating new meanings as it goes, recently elevating itself by association with a historic moment. With the poet Byron, we can wish it ever more power: "*Roll* on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean — *Roll!*"

### PERILS OF PARLOUS

These are *parlous* times. Make that observation in a speech, and each member of your audience will frown and nod, joining in the general worriment. One or two misfits will be wondering, "Does the speaker mean *parlous* or *perilous*?"

In The International Herald Tribune, the historian Roger Buckley writes darkly about "the *parlous* prospects for the economy." Bloomberg News was told by a spokesman for Cathay Pacific Airways that the airline industry "is in a *parlous* state worldwide." The ABC anchor Peter Jennings was quoted

If they sound alike and look alike and mean the same thing, then who needs both?

by Mark Jurkowitz of The Boston Globe as saying, "We are in *parlous* economic times."

The word is not related to *parley*; it has nothing to do with the French *parler*, "to talk." *Parlous* has the same meaning as the word it sounds like: *perilous*. The Latin *periculum*, akin to *peritus*, "experiment," means "risk." But *perilous* is beyond "risky," scarier than the general "dangerous" or the unavoidable "hazardous"; it is "fraught" (meaning "full of, laden") "with peril."

If *parlous* means "*perilous*," who needs both? The two forms of the same word have been battling it out for seven centuries, and today we're going to declare a winner.

*Parlous* is a delicious example of linguistic syncopation. Every ragtime or jazz enthusiast knows that when you syncopate (from the Greek for "cut short"), you begin a note on a weak beat in the bar, sustaining it into the accented part, thereby shifting the accent. In grammar, you syncopate by snipping a word short or by skipping one or two syllables in the middle. Examples: *fo'c'sle* for *forecastle*, and *Chumley* for *Cholmondelay*. They don't order *Worcestershire* sauce in *Wooster*, Mass.

Usually the shorter and easier forms win, and *extrality* is likely to overtake *extraterritoriality*. However, *parlous* has an arch, archaic ring and carries a touch of the pompously bookish (like *fraught*), while *perilous* has a straightforward, sailor-take-warning feel. You won't be incorrect if you try to impress your friends with the syncopated form of *perilous*, but if you do, it's at your parl. ■