

FORGIVE US OUR SPINS: Michael Moore and the Future of the Left

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6 The Right-Wing Media and Its Critics

On November 6, 2000, the day before the American presidential election, Michael Moore was a successful filmmaker who'd worked in television and had written a left-populist, lowbrow book of political entertainment, *Downsize This!*. He'd stirred up a lot of people and gained a fan base with his first film, *Roger & Me*. He'd made a bit of money, and this gave him something of a platform. He'd created the Michael Moore brand. But could he really be said to be influencing the way Americans think, or a major figure on the political scene? Certainly few on what passes for the left in the United States would have identified him as a national spokesman for their causes, although perhaps he could be counted on, in general, to be in tune with the left agenda.

The stolen election of 2000 was to change all that, and serve as a focus for liberal outrage. But the election alone couldn't have done it. Michael Moore is a presence in American media culture because he is the only populist demagogue who has been able to consistently challenge the right's growing media monopoly.

Before turning to the 2000 election, it's important to understand the right-wing media and its domination of the American political scene.

For all the right-wing hysteria about the "liberal media," what actual liberal positions do the mainstream media express? As in the political realm, there is no serious discussion about a national, single payer health care plan, or the social benefits of progressive taxation, or the benefits of international law and multilateralism, or the danger of looming theocracy, or the counterproductive savagery of the death penalty. These ideas and issues, important and serious in much of the rest of the developed world, simply are not covered by the "liberal media." The traditional media give the right-wing and the non-partisan view, and right-wing media such as the Fox network and Rupert Murdoch's tabloids take a partisan, Republican, hard-right line on all of these issues. Republicans often mistake criticism of a Republican president for left-wing bias, but it is the job of the press to keep an eye on the party in power, and the press has been far kinder to George W. Bush than it ever was to Bill Clinton. And Clinton wasn't even a liberal.

The major, supposedly liberal media has never dared to go after Bush for his deficient character, for his agenda of class warfare, for the deeply institutionalized corruption of his administration. In 2000, newspapers nationwide endorsed Bush over Al Gore by about two to one, and failed to adequately cover major negative stories about Bush, such as his insider stock trading, his use of family influence to find a safe place in the Texas Air National Guard that kept him out of service in Vietnam, and his abandonment of his responsibilities to the Guard as soon as his obligatory service became inconvenient to him. By contrast, press and television were merciless to Al Gore in 2000, hounding him over allegedly saying that he had invented the internet – something he in fact never said

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or claimed.¹ And in the run up to war with Iraq, the “liberal” *New York Times*, with reporter Judith Miller’s (later discredited) series on Saddam Hussein’s efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, did more than any other national paper to get the Bush administration’s claims into public debate.

The fact that CBS, at the height of the 2004 campaign and in an astonishing example of unprofessionalism and incompetence, broke a story about Bush’s national guard service based on memos from the 1970s that turned out to be fake was a great coup for the right, and allowed right-wing commentators to discredit the accusations while ignoring the fact that the fake memos contained information about Bush that had been supported by many people who knew him during the period in question. As a bonus, Republicans got to gloat about the “liberal media.” But in not following up on the truth of the accusations contained in the fake memos, this “liberal media” abdicated its responsibilities and did the work of the right. The “liberal” media also never adequately investigated the provenance of the anonymously delivered fake memos. Given how helpful these very clumsy forgeries were to the right when they were unmasked, and given that we now know that Bush mastermind Karl Rove is a man who is willing to go so far as to expose a covert CIA agent when it serves his political purposes,² it might have been interesting to ask questions about the origin of the memos.

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Focusing on examples of right-wing bias in the media is less interesting than looking at how, over the last forty years, American conservatives have been increasingly successful at dominating the public discourse. This was no accident. The story has been told many times by people who are concerned with the state of the American news business, most recently and powerfully by Eric Alterman, David Brock, and Joe Conason in separate investigative works. Here’s a condensed version.

There is a lot of money and organization behind the American media’s shift to the political far right, and a lot of history. Lyndon Johnson’s crushing defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964 (the defeat was so bad that Goldwater’s speechwriter, Karl Hess, could only find work after the election as a night-shift welder in a machine shop) was a clarifying event for an American conservative movement that had previously been factional, regional and, since the New Deal, marginalized. In planning a comeback, its partisans realized that the key to their political ambitions lay with domination of the press – or what is now called the “media.”

A new generation of conservative thinkers, organizers and funders stepped forward who

¹ What Gore actually said was that he, as a legislator, had supported research that led to the internet; a claim that is absolutely and verifiably correct.

² The best overview of the interactions of reporters and officials, and of the politics and calculations of the Rove/Libby/Plame affair, is Nicholas Lemann’s “Telling Secrets: How a Leak Became a Scandal.” *The New Yorker*, November 7, 2005.

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were focused on winning the political war of ideas. Some of the most influential of these were William F. Buckley Jr., Richard Mellon Scaife, the Trotskyite-turned-reactionary Irving Kristol, and Phyllis Schlafly, who in the early sixties was the president of the Illinois Federation of Republican Women, and later the founder of the right-wing Eagle Forum. They varied in their political philosophies, but they all agreed that conservative voices were little heard in American public discourse, although most Americans would probably find some of the ways they defined “conservative” a little unorthodox. Schlafly believes that the Republican party of the 1940s to the 1960s was infiltrated by “kingmakers” apparently aligned with the sinister DeBilderberger Conference, whose purpose was the support of global communism.³ (Ann Coulter, by the way, insists that there has been some sort of liberal news blackout on Schlafly.⁴ It’s hard to see where Coulter gets this idea; Schlafly has been a media, political and cultural celebrity since the Goldwater campaign. Coulter may be correct in calling her brilliant, but it’s things like

³ See Schlafly’s Goldwater campaign exposé of elitist intrigue, *A Choice, Not an Echo* (Pere Marquette Press). Schlafly believes that all the Republican candidates between 1936 and 1960 were secretly chosen by a clique of “New York kingmakers.” Her description of the “kingmakers” and DeBilderbergers is fascinating. It includes all the classic elements of conspiracist paranoia: a secret society of the powerful, many of them working for the exact opposite cause than the one they profess in public; a counter-narrative, universal framework for reported events that fits the observable facts and explains how things *really* are, even though the framework is itself bizarre; the exposure of lies and betrayal on an enormous and hitherto completely unsuspected scale; all backed up with lots of fine-grained detail that just couldn’t possibly be imaginary or misinterpreted. Schlafly writes that she “stumbled” onto evidence of a “secret meeting” of the DeBilderberger Group at St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, held in 1957. There were supposedly 69 participants (note the exactitude that confers credibility): high-ranking American officials both Democratic and Republican, leaders of American and international business and industry, foreign politicians, European royalty, and powerful representatives of the American press, including *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger (who, naturally, wrote nothing about the event.) The whole affair was paid for by the ketchup magnate H. J. Heinz II and David Rockefeller. Although Schlafly stops just this side of accusing the DeBilderbergers directly, she points out that the participants (who supposedly included such hardcore Reds as McGeorge Bundy, George Ball, Robert MacNamara, Paul Nitze and George F. Kennan) are heavily weighted toward the “liberal foreign viewpoint... to the exclusion of persons with a pro-American viewpoint” (p. 107). She refers to the DeBilderberger group as “kingmakers,” and then goes on to mention the “New York kingmakers” (who are described earlier in the book and included, among others, Thomas Lamont, a senior partner at J. P. Morgan and Co.; Thomas Cochrane, also of J. P. Morgan; and Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors – p. 30) as the authors of a plan to keep communists in power throughout the world. Why would such captains of capitalism secretly work for communism? Because American aid programs are profitable for the brokers and administrators who run them: “for pocketbook reasons, [they] are extremely anxious to prevent any curtailment of the foreign giveaway program. This might come about... by the collapse of the communist system which is the sole excuse for the foreign aid program.” (pp. 114-115. .)

⁴ See Ann Coulter, *Treason*, p. 45. Coulter also contrasts Schlafly’s supposed seriousness with Gloria Steinem’s supposed un-seriousness in mentioning that the party favors at a Phyllis Schlafly lunch were copies of General David Graham’s book on the “Star Wars” missile defense system, *We Must Defend America and Put an End to MADness* (Regnery Publishing 1983), whereas the party favors at a Gloria Steinem gathering were condoms (p. 52). But “Star Wars” not only doesn’t work, it *can’t* ever work; it is a fantasy that would make us less secure, and its purposes are political, not military (if you want to understand Star Wars, read Frances Fitzgerald’s magisterial work, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War* (Simon and Schuster, 2001.) Condoms, on the other hand, save lives in the real world.

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Schlafly's description of the DeBilderbergers that have earned her a reputation, in some circles, as an eccentric, paranoid obsessive.)

The members of the new conservative vanguard set about building a movement that would rectify this perceived lack of conservative access to the media. Their work was greatly helped by a young reporter named Kevin Phillips, whose 1968 book *The Emerging Republican Majority* laid out the blueprint for absorbing Southerners alienated from the Democratic Party by civil-rights laws and racial integration, a strategy that was embraced by the mainstream conservative movement and that has persisted in the political DNA of the New Right.⁵ Ronald Reagan, as a presidential candidate in 1980, went to Philadelphia, Mississippi, the scene of an emblematic 1964 triple homicide of civil rights workers, and made a speech about "states' rights." His message could not have been clearer to the white southern voters who rallied behind that phrase as the legal foundation for Jim Crow segregation.

Richard Mellon Scaife and a cadre of rich industrialists, such as the Coors family and the oil mogul E. Howard Hunt, were the money behind the conservative movement; Buckley's *National Review*, founded in 1955, quickly became the flagship publication of the organized, newly national hard-right in the United States. Buckley, along with Kristol, gave the movement intellectual heft, although "intellectual" may be too strong a word. His writing, wrapped in scholarship and erudition, purports to be an idealistic call to arms in the cause of individual liberty, and he has placed this endeavor "athwart history." Yet beneath a veneer of libertarianism, and despite an enormous amount of blather written on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of *National Review* on Buckley's alleged philosophical vision, it's hard to discern any deeper objective behind his agenda than a desire to impose religious values on secular society,⁶ and to preserve the class

⁵ More so in the right-wing "think tanks" than in the Republican Party itself. The American Enterprise Institute presently boasts Charles Murray as a Fellow. Murray's widely-discredited book *The Bell Curve* (co-authored with Richard J. Herrnstein; Free Press, 1994) argued that intelligence varies genetically by race. But the mainstream Republican Party would not nowadays touch people like Murray with a ten-foot pole. As demographics and voting patterns have shifted, and as American society moves away from racial polarization, the Republican party is finally abandoning race baiting as a strategy, just as the northern wing of the Democratic party began to do in the 1940s and 1950s. It is encouraging that Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman has recently apologized for the Republican "Southern Strategy" (See Anne E. Kornblut, "Bush and Party Chief Court Black Voters at 2 Forums," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2005). While it is certainly a class-based party (in the broad sense defined by an elitist ideology rather than by income), and while class is still greatly determined by race in the United States, the Republican Party can no longer be said to be a racist party. The description may well fit some individual Republicans, however. Certain senators and ex-Senators who associate with the Council of Conservative Citizens (the revamped but thinly-disguised White Citizens' Councils), or who write essays for Southern journals that are nostalgic for the Confederacy, come to mind.

⁶ Although religious themes recur throughout Buckley's work and are often championed in *The National Review*, one of the most subtly insidious examples is to be found in a book that is much more about religion than politics, his *Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith* (Harvest Books, 1998). In a chapter that investigates the idea of sin as a builder of a social "ethos," and makes distinctions between transgressions of the legal, social, and divine orders, Buckley writes that societies descend into tyranny in the absence of a sense of divine law. He protests the secularizing trend in public schools and other public institutions.

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privileges to which he – the heir to an oil fortune – and those with whom he identifies have grown accustomed. It is interesting, and surprising, that in public debate so little has been made of the convenient confluence of the personal and ideological interests of men like Buckley. He and his legions of admirers want government to get out of the way, so that the rich and powerful can better dictate terms to those whose lives and aspirations they can bully by economic means. This is a shabby conception of liberty.

Buckley and the traditional right were joined in the late 1960s and early 1970s by another group of “neoconservatives” led by former liberal Norman Podhoretz, who, as editor of the journal *Commentary*, would go on to develop and promote some of the most extreme right-wing ideas behind the Reagan administration, as well as the art, learned from the Communists, of creating innocuous-seeming front organizations to push radical ideas.

The resurgent conservative movement focused ever more closely on the media after the publication of libertarian right-winger Edith Efron’s 1971 book *The News Twisters*. Using a dubious methodology, described in the book, Efron compiled statistics that purported to show left-wing bias in the news and concluded that the network news under the prevailing “fairness doctrine” was biased against conservative opinion that she considered mainstream (Efron acknowledged that it was also biased against radical left-wing opinion far out of the mainstream.) She argued that merely expanding the range of opinion would be inadequate, and that the only real solution was the complete privatization and deregulation of television news, which would allow the American public to get the news it wanted by a “dollar vote.”

Note that Efron’s proposed solution assigns no value to any sincere search for an objective truth, only for the most popular preferences about subjective truth; note also

More fundamentally, he believes he has observed the incapacity of liberal (in the classical sense) society to inspire with merely philosophical tenets, and that it is therefore at a disadvantage in contending with the evils of “redemptive” secular faiths like Marxism. He concludes the chapter thus: “The rediscovery of sin as defined in the Bible would cause us to look up and note the infinite horizons that beckon us toward better conduct, better lives, nobler visions.” (p. 235.) As religious dogma, there is nothing wrong with this. As a corrective for secular society, as Buckley uses it here, there is a great deal wrong with it. This is typical of the manner in which religion informs Buckley’s work. For those who do not share his enthusiasm for the social virtues of religion, it is profoundly disturbing.

By the way, Christopher Hitchens has noticed something about societies that rely on repressively redemptive faiths, secular or otherwise, that is quite beyond the scope of Buckley’s limited philosophical talents and beyond the interest of his veiled authoritarianism. Rather than being a consequence of taking God out of social affairs, as Buckley would have it, Hitchens observes that the authoritarian taint often inheres fundamentally in religious attitudes. “Ostensibly irreligious despotisms based on faith and praise invariably take the form of cult worship... this observation does not just mean what many take it to mean – that fanaticism or tyranny can take an atheist form. It means, rather, that fanaticism and tyranny have a strong if not ineluctable tendency to take a theistic form.” (“The Future of an Illusion.” In Christopher Hitchens, *Love, Poverty and War*, p. 336. [Nation Books, 2004]). Hitchens goes on to give examples of how some of the most repressive societies in the world (Mao’s China, Stalin’s USSR, North Korea, fascist Japan and Germany, etc.) drew on, rather than rejected, religious tradition in constructing their mental and physical prisons.

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that these preferences are not formed in the absence of exposure to media, but also, at least partially, in response to it. This dynamic means that a news presentation system without a commitment or obligation to objective truth has explicit license to shape a subjective one, and in the absence of oversight, it hands a distinct advantage in public debate to the private broadcasters with the deepest pockets. Rupert Murdoch has been quite straightforward about his political agenda. Does anyone doubt that his money has shaped, rather than merely followed, public opinion? Private, unregulated television news did not exist when *The News Twisters* was published. When it was introduced, the success of Murdoch's Fox News – where the staff receive daily memos on how to slant news coverage to the right,⁷ but which nevertheless wins Efron's popular "dollar vote" – should be read as a cautionary tale by anyone who questions both Efron's proposal and her motives.

The effectiveness for the American right of Efron's market-based solution has been well vindicated. With the deregulation of media monopolies under the Telecommunications Act of 1996 – something that right-wing lobbyists and large media outlets had long sought, and which immediately led to a significant consolidation of media ownership – and the repeal of the federal "fairness doctrine" in 1987, there is little recourse against the dominance of the views favored by producers, not consumers, who have dollars. And these producers tend to promote conservative views. Hardly surprising, since much of their revenue depends on getting advertising from corporations which, in their own interests, favor deregulation and the extension of private control of public services.

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The attack on the independence of the media has been multifaceted, and some of it has been quite indirect. In 1978, Irving Kristol in his book *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, urged large corporations to donate to scholars and institutions that would do sociological research in support of the private sector, and publicize their findings. William E. Simon, from 1977 until his death in 2000 the President of the John M. Olin Foundation, said the same thing in his book *Time for Truth*. If academia was not providing facts to the liking of the political right, new ones could be bought. This strategy has been highly successful. Right-wing radicals now preside at "think tanks" funded by right-wing millionaires, like the American Enterprise Institute (the original of its type, founded in the 1930s but much transformed by post-Goldwater conservative radicalism), the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institute, the Manhattan Institute and many others that are close to the Bush administration and provide it with policy suggestions and lists of ideologically sound nominees for important posts. Their boards are dominated by corporate officers and right-wing political activists. In 2003, just one think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, spent almost \$20 million to influence public policy – often by way of public opinion – and took in almost \$24.5 million. 23 percent of these revenues came from corporations, while 36 percent came from other right-wing

⁷ As disclosed in the film *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*.

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foundations that offer consistent support to AEI,⁸ like the Scaife Family Foundation, Sarah Scaife Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation and the Olin Foundation, which are funded by corporate interests. The think tanks play an important role in getting right-wing positions accepted as mainstream thought, positions that would have been considered loony by most Americans, at most times, between the New Deal and the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994.

The institutes supported by the right engage very forcefully in public debate. They nurture ideology-driven scholarship and publish it in non-peer-reviewed journals, then place their “experts” as commentators on mainstream news programs and as contributors to the Op-Ed pages of major newspapers. A variation on this theme is the pet ideological news outlet; a good example is the *Weekly Standard*, created by Rupert Murdoch in 1996. This publication has half the circulation of the left wing magazine *The Nation*, but serves the larger purpose of legitimizing the radical views of its right-wing contributors and giving them a platform from which to address the policy makers and the more mainstream media. It is taken seriously in Washington.

Cocooned in comfortable institutional fellowships subsidized by the philanthropists of the right, these think tank “scholars” – Michael Novak (whose enthusiastic support for the most totalitarian tendencies in the Catholic church does not inhibit him from writing frequently on how those totalitarian tendencies promote spiritual and political freedom), Dinesh D’Souza, Robert Bork, James K. Glassman, William Bennett and Newt Gingrich, to name only a few of the biggest names in the fellowship world⁹ – are able, ironically, to write and make a very good living free of the realities of the market. The right-wing foundations often buy in bulk the books that their writers produce, giving them away or selling them below cost to conservative book clubs, thereby both expanding their readership and propelling them up the bestseller lists – again, free of market realities.

Through the efforts of elite billionaires like Scaife (heir to a banking and oil fortune), the Olin family (armaments and chemicals), the Buckley family (oil), the Coors family (brewing), the Koch family – (oil), the Bradley family – (automobile parts), the Smith Richardson family (Vicks Vapo-Rub), Harry B. Earhart (oil), Henry Salvatori (oil) Philip M. McKenna (machine tools), and the foundations that the above individuals and families have endowed, the right has been greatly successful in shifting the terms of debate. These foundations have collectively awarded more than \$1 billion in grants to projects advancing right-wing ideas since 1985.¹⁰ Conservative foundations funded right-wing

⁸ AEI’s financials from www.aei.org. This link was active as of August 2005.

⁹ See Eric Alterman, “The Right Books And Big Ideas.” *The Nation*, November 22, 1999. Michael Novak, James K. Glassman, and Newt Gingrich are fellows at the American Enterprise Institute; Dinesh D’Souza at the Hoover Institute; Robert Bork has been a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution, and the Hudson Institute; William Bennett is a fellow at the Heritage Foundation. Details on the funding sources for these institutions can be found in the annual *Foundation Grants Index* and in the Media Transparency Grants Database at www.mediatransparency.org. The names Scaife, Olin, Coors, Bradley et al recur frequently. This link was active as of August 2005.

¹⁰ Source: Media Transparency Grants Database.

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publications *The National Interest*, *The Public Interest*, *The New Criterion*, and *the American Spectator* to the tune of almost \$3 million between 1990 and 1993. Competing ideas are badly outgunned in the money arena; by comparison, *The Nation*, *In These Times*, *The Progressive* and *Mother Jones* collectively received slightly less than \$270,000 in this period.¹¹

The connections between money and ideology are little known to the public, and the funders, for obvious reasons, prefer it that way. In 1981, when questioned by reporter Karen Rothmeyer about his largesse to the right, Scaife famously replied, “You fucking communist cunt. Get out of here.”¹² So much for the chivalry of conservative values.

Although Scaife deeply values his privacy, Rothmeyer’s question was quite legitimate. Scaife, among other things, would later promulgate rumors that Bill Clinton and his administration were involved in murder and drug dealing, and one of his media investments almost led to a coup. Scaife was a major funder of the right-wing magazine *The American Spectator* while it was engaged in what it called its “Arkansas Project,” the attempt to dig up personal and political dirt on Bill and Hillary Clinton in Arkansas. This investigation first brought Paula Jones to the nation’s attention, with results that we now know all too well.

The “research” of the foundations’ “experts” is hooked up with the cultural and technological means of dissemination, especially now that the right has vast squads of organized, fanatical bloggers ready to do its bidding.¹³ Political radio, fueled by the phenomenal commercial success of Rush Limbaugh and his many imitators – Michael Reagan, Sean Hannity, Neal Boortz, Laura Ingraham, G. Gordon Liddy, Oliver North, Michael Savage, Limbaugh’s brother David, and many, many more – is a vast wilderness of right-wing rants. A network of right-wing websites, such as the Scaife-supported *newsmax.com*, *townhall.com*, and “news” digests – many of them also funded by the right-wing foundations – feed right-wing rumors to right-wing talk-radio and television stations, whence – anxious lest they be scooped or, even worse, accused of a liberal bias – the “respectable” media often pick them up, after minimal fact-checking.

On the cable networks, hard-right hosts and guests greatly outnumber even tepid liberals in both roles, and, as David Brock has pointed out, when there is a “liberal” side to the debate it is usually a professional journalist with a considered and balanced, factual approach who is paired with a political ideologue supplied by one of the right-wing foundations. Well-funded media “watchdogs” of the right, such as L. Brent Bozell III’s

¹¹ See Sally Covington, “Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations” (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy)

¹² See Karen Rothmeyer, “Citizen Scaife.” In *Speak Out Against The New Right*, edited by Herbert F Vetter (Beacon Press).

¹³ It is interesting that, as part of the Bush White House push for the confirmation of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court, Republican Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman met with a group of influential, supposedly independent right-wing bloggers to make the case.

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Media Research Center, Accuracy in Media, and the less openly-partisan but still conservative-aligned Center for Media and Public Affairs have so intimidated the network broadcasters that the same patterns prevail there. It is almost tiresome to note that the Scaife, Olin and Bradley foundations are major underwriters of these right-wing monitors. Counterposed to these organizations on the left, there is only Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting – which, compared to the Media Research Center, is hardly noticed by the mainstream media. FAIR simply has far less ability and desire to intimidate than the MRC, and is therefore less effective.

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The real conundrum is that liberalism, by definition, requires a hearing for both sides of the political argument. *The New York Times'* Op-Ed page runs two regular right-wing columnists (David Brooks and John Tierney), two middle-of-the-road liberals who often praise right-wing ideas (Thomas Friedman and Nicholas Kristof), one unpredictable stylist who has written scathingly of both George W. Bush and Bill Clinton (Maureen Dowd), one political liberal who is an ambivalent economic liberal, and who takes a generally sunny view of economic globalization led by business (Paul Krugman), and two thoroughgoing liberals (Bob Herbert and Frank Rich). While the Washington Post Op-Ed page is dominated by commentators of no consistent partisan allegiance, it does run more partisan liberals than partisan conservatives. The liberals, however, tend to be policy pragmatists (David Broder, Richard Cohen, E. J. Dionne, Michael Kinsley, William Raspberry) while the two hard-right conservatives, George F. Will and Charles Krauthammer, are made of much sterner, more ideological stuff. Will is an acolyte of Milton Friedman who believes that a state-run Social Security system corrupts the character of individuals. He is also a fussy cultural reactionary who has scornfully denounced the harmless fashion of wearing a baseball cap backwards.¹⁴ Krauthammer has written that the US should never allow the United Nations any real power because that institution limits American national sovereignty – and *also* urged the US never to rely on the United Nations because it has no real power. He has written that the US treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay is “remarkably humane and tolerant.”¹⁵ He

¹⁴ George F. Will, “Holden Caulfield – American Whiner” in *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2001. Actually Will got it wrong: Holden wore a hunting cap, not a baseball cap. Will could not resist the opportunity for snobbery, however.

¹⁵ Charles Krauthammer, “Gitmo Grovel: Enough Already.” *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2005. In this column, Krauthammer also makes the specious argument that “Koran abuse” as a tool of interrogation is a trifling thing compared to the attacks of September 11. Of course it is; but – even leaving aside the obvious concern about how public knowledge of this practice helps terrorists win hearts and minds around the world – should American interrogators be limited in their techniques only by what is less bad than September 11? That leaves a great many things open, and this is consistent with Krauthammer’s views. In focusing on “Koran abuse,” he lets the Guantanamo jailers escape responsibility for much more serious crimes.

For a very different view of what goes on at Guantanamo, see Jane Mayer, “The Experiment.” *The New Yorker*, July 11, 2005. The deputy judge advocate general of the Air Force, Maj. Gen. Jack Rives; the Navy’s chief lawyer Rear Admiral Michael Lohr; the senior Marine lawyer Brigadier General Kevin Sandkuhler; and the Army’s top-ranking lawyer Major General Thomas Romig have all expressed grave

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seems to believe that any criticism of Israel can only be anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, or merely a means of attacking George W. Bush. The *Post* also used to publish bitter conservative zealot Michael Kelly before he was killed while covering the Iraq war in 2003. Is it really a “liberal” paper, as the right endlessly insists?

William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*, is the son of Irving Kristol, the former Chief of Staff to Vice President Dan Quayle, and a major force in right-wing politics. Kristol is one of the authors of the world-domination blueprint *Rebuilding America's Defenses*,¹⁶ undertaken by the Project for the New American Century, much of which has

doubts as to the legality of the some of the interrogation practices in use at Guantanamo (Neil A. Lewis, “Military's Opposition to Harsh Interrogation Is Outlined.” *The New York Times*, July 28, 2005). The FBI at one point warned its agents not to participate in Guantanamo interrogations that could leave them open to criminal liability under international law.

The standards in effect at Guantanamo, for at least some of the time that prisoners have been held there, and perhaps informally if not by direct order, apparently reflect the legal conclusions of a memo that John Yoo, then an attorney in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, prepared in August 2002 for Alberto Gonzales, under the signature of his supervisor, Jay Bybee. Gonzales was then Counsel to the President, the chief White House legal advisor. This memo is an astonishing document. It is clearly designed to define torture in such a way as to make the word inapplicable to almost any act of brutality, and thereby to render brutality legal. Among other things, Yoo argues that for an act to be considered torture, there must be a specific intent on the part of the accused to inflict pain; “...even if the defendant knows that severe pain will result from his actions, if causing such harm is not his objective, he lacks the requisite specific intent even though the defendant did not act in good faith.” p. 4. This opens up an enormous field of action for creative lawyers. Yoo defines physical torture this way: “The victim must experience intense pain or suffering, of the kind that is equivalent to the pain that would be associated with serious physical injury so severe that death, organ failure, or permanent damage resulting in a loss of significant body function will likely result.” p. 13. (Memo from Jay S. Bybee to Alberto Gonzales, August 1, 2002. A reproduction of the original memo can be found at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/documents/dojinterrogationmemo20020801.pdf>; this link was active as of August 2005). Note that Yoo's view of what constitutes torture is by no means identical with that of the Geneva conventions (or the United States constitution). Apparently Krauthammer had not read this memo or heard of its consequences when he pronounced the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo to be “remarkably humane and tolerant,” as cited above. There is an interesting discussion of this memo and its importance in Mark Danner's book *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York Review of Books). Dana Priest of the *Washington Post* has recently reported on a clandestine system of CIA prisons all over the world, in which suspected terrorists are held without charge and without anyone outside the system having knowledge of their identities, status or even existence. This is a system designed to defeat transparency and accountability, and thus might as well have been designed to encourage human rights abuses. It is fundamentally anti-democratic, a betrayal of everything the United States is supposed to stand for, and it corrupts the United States government at home. See Dana Priest, “CIA Holds Terror Suspects in Secret Prisons,” November 2, 2005. No comment yet from Mr. Krauthammer.

¹⁶ This statement of neo-conservative principles on defense was written in 2000 as a sort of first draft for a possibly incoming Republican administration. Kristol was chairman of the project, and the 26 other credited participants included such luminaries of the future Bush administration as I. Lewis Libby, Dick Cheney's Chief of Staff; Paul Wolfowitz, the former Deputy Secretary of Defense, now President of the World Bank; and Stephen Cambone, Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, who was responsible for overseeing Donald Rumsfeld's Special Access Programs, which in practice often meant the use of torture to extract information from individuals held by US forces. For details on Rumsfeld's torture policies and Cambone's role in supporting them, see Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command* (HarperCollins, 2004). The

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been adopted into the Bush administration's military doctrine. Kristol has mastered the art of saying the most extreme things in the most reasonable tones, and, perhaps for this reason, he is a frequent guest on National Public Radio, which is considered by the right to be a bastion of liberalism. Grover Norquist is also regularly heard on NPR. Norquist is president of the innocuously-named but actually hard-right organization Americans for Tax Reform, and he also coordinates the agenda of the most right-wing Washington interest groups that come together to discuss tactics in his Wednesday Group; this is where the gun zealots, the anti-tax zealots, anti-union and Creationist and home-schooling zealots get together to exchange ideas and help each other out.¹⁷ Norquist once famously remarked, "I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub."¹⁸ NPR host Mara Liasson has gushingly referred to him, on air, as a friend.¹⁹ Norquist has also been a guest on Al Franken's liberal *Air America* radio. Franken was extremely polite, even deferential. To find a left-wing equivalent of Kristol or Norquist, you'd have to look to someone like the sinister far-left ideologue Noam Chomsky, whose appearances in the mainstream media are rare indeed. Yet Kristol and Norquist are frequently welcomed to express their views to the "liberal" media.

The New Republic has published pieces by right-wing writers like Lawrence F. Kaplan, a former editor at Irving Kristol's *National Interest*. *The New Yorker* has run commentary by William F. Buckley, most recently an adoring essay on Westbrook Pegler, a prolific journalist most active in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Pegler was a nasty anti-Semite, racist, McCarthyite collaborator, and enemy of organized labor who in many ways pre-figured the populist demagoguery of Rush Limbaugh. He ended up writing for the John Birch Society. In his *New Yorker* piece, Buckley wrote, without any apparent consciousness of contradiction, that Pegler "was by nature on the side of the workingman" and also that he was outraged by the closed Union shop.²⁰ Despite the fact that *The New Yorker* was willing to publish Buckley's reactionary silliness, his *National Review* editors and much of its readership no doubt consider the magazine to be the

Project for the New American Century report, in a speculative futuristic section dealing with space wars, cyber dominance, and undersea battles, veers into some very odd territory indeed: "And advanced forms of biological warfare that can 'target' specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool." (*Rebuilding America's Defenses*, p. 60. Project for the New American Century, 2000). What does one make of that?

¹⁷ Norquist presents himself as a libertarian concerned with individual freedoms, but he is far from being a consistent advocate of individual liberty. While he has adamantly defended gun ownership, home schooling and minimal taxation, he is just as adamantly opposed to gay marriage, an idea which would honor individual rights without any verifiable negative social effects.

¹⁸ Grover Norquist, interviewed by Mara Liasson on the Bob Edwards show. National Public Radio, May 25, 2001. Norquist later denied having made this statement (for example, on the PBS television show *Now*, interviewed by Bill Moyers. January 10, 2003). You can hear him saying it at <http://www.thenationaldebate.com/audio/GroverNorquistBath tubQuote.mp3>. This link was active as of August 2005.

¹⁹ National Public Radio, "Talk of the Nation." December 20, 2002.

²⁰ William F. Buckley Jr., "Rabble Rouser: Once, Everyone Read Westbrook Pegler." *The New Yorker*, March 1, 2004.

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apotheosis of liberalism.

By contrast, conservative media has room only for conservative ideas. Yes, the conservative press has lately published Christopher Hitchens, whose ideas on social policy would probably not be to the right's taste; but he has gained favor as a supporter of the Iraq war, and his pieces that appear in right-wing outlets are usually on that subject. Alexander Cockburn was once the house leftist of *The Wall Street Journal*, but that was quite exceptional, and liberals can detect something sinister and dishonest in the *Journal* opening its pages to him: Cockburn has defended Castro and the Soviet Union in print, and in the 1980s he supported – or, at best, did not oppose – the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In presenting him as the voice of the left, *The Wall Street Journal* can be strongly suspected of embracing Cockburn as a way of suggesting that leftists in general are grim extremists, while claiming credit for its own broad-mindedness.

Compared to the space that the supposedly liberal *New York Times* gives to conservatives, the number of column inches that the *Wall Street Journal* is willing to give to non-conservative points of view is minuscule, while liberals are a rare breed indeed in the pages of *The Washington Times*. Two of supposedly liberal New York's conservative daily newspapers, the *Post* and the *Sun*, routinely insert right-wing political commentary into their news stories. Imagine their editorial pages. Back in 1998 the *Post* was even known to add its own partisan, unlabeled commentary into letters submitted to the editor, a practice which was defended by then-editorial page editor John Podhoretz, the son of Norman. Podhoretz and the *Post* later had to disavow this dishonest and deceptive practice, but only because Scott Pellegrino, a letter writer whose work had been "enhanced," secretly tape-recorded a phone conversation in which Podhoretz responded to his complaint by telling him, "My friend, you don't know what you're talking about . . . I'm an editor and I've been an editor for twenty years and editing includes rewriting and additions where necessary . . . There's not going to be a correction." But Podhoretz was mistaken: It turned out that there were limits to the arrogance even of the *Post*. After Pellegrino played his tape for other New York editors, there was a correction.²¹

Podhoretz doesn't seem to be thought an embarrassment by the management at the *Post*, which now employs him as a political columnist. This says a great deal about the *Post's* standards.

There have even been explicit attempts by conservatives to make media a secret mouthpiece of government, something that should outrage thoughtful conservatives. The Bush administration is already a master of legitimate self-promotion; it spends almost twice as much on contracts with public relations firms each year than the Clinton

²¹ The Pellegrino/Podhoretz incident is recounted in *Columbia Journalism Review*, May-June 1998. On February 14, 1998 the *Post* published an apology; on February 19 it ran Pellegrino's original letter without unauthorized enhancements.

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administration did in each year of Clinton's second term.²² Beyond this, we now know that the Bush administration frequently planted news "stories" on television, spots that looked like legitimate, independently-generated news but were actually delivered by actors giving the government's gloss on events – a disturbing development that was declared to be illegal "covert propaganda" by the Government Accountability Office.²³ In addition to generating fake news reports, the Bush administration made secret payments to journalists to promote administration views, another form of subversion of the media as an institution. Several high-profile incidents have been instructive of the way the Bush administration uses the right-wing media as an ally. Conservative commentator Armstrong Williams got \$240,000 from the Department of Education to praise Bush's "No Child Left Behind" act. Gay-bashing conservative columnist Maggie Gallagher got more than \$40,000 from the Department of Health and Human Services for "research" on family issues. Mike McManus, a syndicated columnist who also operates a group called Marriage Savers, received \$4000 from the Bush administration to train "marriage mentors" while promoting Bush social policies in print.²⁴ None of these journalists revealed their funding until they were found out; Gallagher said of the matter, "Frankly, it never occurred to me to disclose it."²⁵ Bear in mind that when we talk about journalists taking money from the government, we only know about the journalists who got caught.²⁶

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There is a paranoid streak in militant conservatism, and conservatives have never shaken off the idea that the definition of "liberal bias" is a lack of active support for conservative policies. Perhaps this is why Bernard Goldberg has become such a hero to the American right, even though his bestseller, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How The Media Distorts*

²² \$62,500,000 per year under Bush as against \$32,000,000 per year in Clinton's second term. Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, as quoted in the Harper's Index, *Harper's Magazine*, May 2005.

²³ In commenting on "news" stories produced by the Department of Health and Human Services in support of the No Child Left Behind act, the GAO noted, "At no point in the news story did HHS identify itself as the source of the story. We concluded that these prepackaged news stories violated the publicity or propaganda prohibition because they constituted covert propaganda... The obvious, "critical element" of covert propaganda is concealment of the agency's role in preparing the material from the target audience... to avoid a violation of the publicity or propaganda prohibition, an agency must inform the viewing public that the government is the source of the information disseminated." United States Government Accountability Office, Document B-304228: A report in the form of a letter to Senators Edward Kennedy and Frank Lautenberg. September 30, 2005.

²⁴ CBS News, "Third Columnist on Bush Payroll." January 28, 2005.

²⁵ Howard Kurtz, "Writer backing Bush plan had gotten federal contract," *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2005.

²⁶ This description of the genesis and extent of the right's control of the American media is, necessarily, shallow and cursory. Readers who desire more detail on this very important subject can look – among many other sources – to several hugely important and necessary books: Eric Alterman's *What Liberal Media?* (Basic Books), Joe Conason's *Big Lies* (Thomas Dunne Books), David Brock's *The Republican Noise Machine* (Crown Books) and Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber's *Banana Republicans: How The Right Wing Is Turning America Into A One-Party State* (Jeremy P. Tarcher).

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The News, makes little sense.

Goldberg's book springs from one undeniable episode of liberal bias at the network he used to work for, CBS, in 1996. This was a broadcast during which correspondent Eric Engberg, in a news piece (not an editorial) openly mocked the plan for a flat tax proposed by Steve Forbes, a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. In response, Goldberg wrote an Op-Ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* claiming widespread liberal bias in the media, and believes that as a result of this article he was shunned and pressured to leave his job. The book takes off from there. Its main theme, however, is not so much bias in the news as Goldberg's own self-pity and sense of martyrdom, present on almost every page – you'd think he were Alfred Dreyfus.

From his book, it seems that CBS indeed treated Goldberg very shabbily, although one may be skeptical: while Goldberg throughout the book gives the impression that CBS was itching to fire him at any time after his *Wall Street Journal* piece, by his own admission the network simply did not renew his contract when it ran out, and allowed him to stay on until he'd earned his pension, more than *four years* after his article ran. From Goldberg's hysterical tone throughout the book, one senses that his problems with his employers may have had to do with things other than his righteous crusade against bias in the media.

The rest of his observations are just odd. When he's not moaning about how all his colleagues turned against him, Goldberg is claiming that certain stories that were perhaps incorrect, such as reports on an impending heterosexual AIDS crisis in America, or stories that came from third parties, such as NAACP complaints to the networks that there were not enough blacks on popular TV shows, are somehow deep evidence of liberal bias. In the first case it's hard to see the bias, in the second it's hard to figure out the connection; in regard to the complaint about the low numbers of blacks on television, Goldberg goes on to make the astonishing point that the networks are primarily concerned with making money. And he hardly addresses the cable networks, although he does admit that talk radio is overwhelmingly right-wing. If, short of error-ridden lowbrow polemics like those of Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh, this is the best that the right can do in claiming some widespread liberal bias, the theory is built on a quaking bog. Put Goldberg's anecdotal book side by side with David Brock's fact-packed *The Republican Noise Machine* and see which one is more convincing.

The right's confusion of a lack of right-wing ideology with liberal bias is perhaps why Kenneth Tomlinson, the Bush-appointed Chairman of the Public Broadcasting Corporation, commissioned a secret statistical report on public programs from a consultant with little media experience, Fred Mann. Mann's methodology was bizarre,²⁷ but it seems that, chillingly, he scored all criticism of George W. Bush and his policies as

²⁷ See Max Blumenthal, "M Is For Moronic." *The Nation*, July 8, 2005 (online only, <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20050718&s=blumenthal>. This link was active as of August 2005.)

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liberal bias. It seems also to be the reason why Tomlinson has worked hard to bring explicitly conservative points of view to public broadcasting, such as “The [Wall Street] Journal Editorial Report,” a platform for the editorial views of a conservative newspaper that, as one node of a wealthy mainstream commercial enterprise, certainly does not need to benefit from socialistic public media sponsorship to get its views out.

In their more candid moments, even those associated with the right-wing media acknowledge the double standards that the right has imposed on the debate about bias. Pat Buchanan has said, “I’ve gotten balanced coverage, and broad coverage – all we could have asked. For heaven’s sake, we kid about the ‘liberal media’, but every Republican on earth does that.”²⁸ William Kristol, the far-right editor of the *Weekly Standard*, said back in 1995: “I admit it. The liberal media was never that powerful, and the whole thing was often used as an excuse by the conservatives for conservative failures.”²⁹ Rich Bond, former chairman of the Republican party, has said: “There is some strategy to it [bashing the ‘liberal’ media]...If you watch any great coach, what they try to do is ‘work the refs’. Maybe the ref will cut you a little slack on the next one.”³⁰ Matt Labash, a writer for the *Weekly Standard*, explains how it works. Responding to a question about why right-wing media has become so popular, he replied, “Because they feed the rage... We come with a strong point of view and people like point of view journalism. While all these hand-wringing Freedom Forum types talk about objectivity, the conservative media likes to rap the liberal media on the knuckles for not being objective. We’ve created this cottage industry in which it pays to be un-objective. It pays to be subjective as much as possible. It’s a great way to have your cake and eat it too. Criticize other people for not being objective. Be as subjective as you want. It’s a great little racket. I’m glad we found it actually.”³¹

Joe Conason notes: “[Conservative] exclusion is one of the most widely discussed topics in the media – with them doing most of the talking... Yet the conservatives still demand pity as media outcasts. This paradox raises an obvious question. If liberals actually dominate the media, why do they spend so much time and effort publicizing their ruthless suppression of their adversaries?”³²

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The right-wing bias in for-profit media in the United States is particularly tragic because there are no effective public media, certainly not as compared with the other major media center of the English-speaking world. The UK has a fiercely partisan private media sector, but it also boasts a public media sector, the British Broadcasting Corporation, which is funded by annual public licensing fees on television and radio sets, and overseen

²⁸ Pat Buchanan in the *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1996.

²⁹ William Kristol in the *New Yorker*, May 22, 1995.

³⁰ Rich Bond in the *Washington Post*, August 20, 1992.

³¹ Matt Labash, interviewed on journalismjobs.com, May 2003.

³² Joe Conason, *Big Lies*, p. 35.

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by a non-partisan Board of Governors in the public interest – a mechanism that results in one of the most impartial and respected news organizations in the world, where all sides are heard. In contrast, the American environment – in which a tiny, underfunded and only partially publicly funded National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting Service³³ are constantly under attack from conservatives and intimidated by them – in practice imposes a near-blackout on any medium that could be effective in getting out any point of view that contradicts that of the right.

People, movements and institutions that want to achieve and maintain power have been aware of, and acted on, the need to capture the public imagination through the control of information for as long as there have been complex societies. For a democratic society, however, what has happened in modern American media is unprecedented: an organized effort to control the terms of debate is overseen by a relatively small number of wealthy people. It makes sense that those who have plutocratic philosophical leanings would have a lot of money to distribute in the defense of plutocracy; it is not surprising that they would wish the media to endorse the policies that have been good to them personally: less regulation, lower taxes, more privatization.

What is surprising is that, by and large, they have gotten away with it, even though plutocratic philosophies do not work so well for non-plutocrats. This is a major problem in a society in which speech is free, but the ability to make oneself heard is expensive. If the trend to the political right in America, and lately to the radical right, is seen as some sort of organic, populist, independent movement, that perception is to a great extent a measure of the success that people like Scaife have had in promoting their own interests. Which are not necessarily identical with the interests of an open, broadly egalitarian, democratic society.

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In such an environment of right-wing dominance of the news and right-wing triumphs in social and economic policy, there is a hunger for alternative points of view. But most independent media, with their small distributional networks and their lack of resources, aren't capable of meeting that hunger in a sustained and effective manner. This is a big part of Michael Moore's popularity, which is classically market-based. The supply of left-wing ideas in media has been choked off by the strategy of the right. But there's a still a market, and Moore is the guy who can get the product out the door.

He has been able to break out of the "alternative" news ghetto, to get around right-wing

³³ The use of the word "public" in the names of these organizations is somewhat misleading. Both declare themselves private corporations on their websites. The Public Broadcasting Service gets about 35 percent of its revenue from public sources, including both state (18.3 percent) and federal (16.4 percent) grants. National Public Radio gets 1–2 percent of its \$100 million annual budget from federal grants and has to fight for every penny of this against conservative lawmakers who would love to cut it off entirely, just on principle.

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dominance of the major media, because his work makes money and corporations like Disney and Miramax and Fox and Columbia Tri-Star want to make money. That's a major aspect of Moore's success, as he points out in an interview in the film *The Corporation*. "I'm driving my truck through this incredible flaw in capitalism – the greed flaw, the thing that says that the rich man will sell you the rope to hang himself with if he thinks he can make a buck off it. Well I'm the rope – I hope. I'm part of the rope." Moore may be overestimating his own political impact here, but he certainly occupies a market niche that would otherwise be a vacuum only partially filled by obsessive bloggers, radical left low-budget radio stations, Chomsky's grim manifestoes, and local protest sheets, and he's proven that he can show a return on investment. Since he's the only one doing both of these things, he has an enormous audience.

The fact of the right's domination of the media and the desperate need for someone who could get around it, along with Michael Moore's media skills, meant that Moore appeared as a savior in certain quarters.