

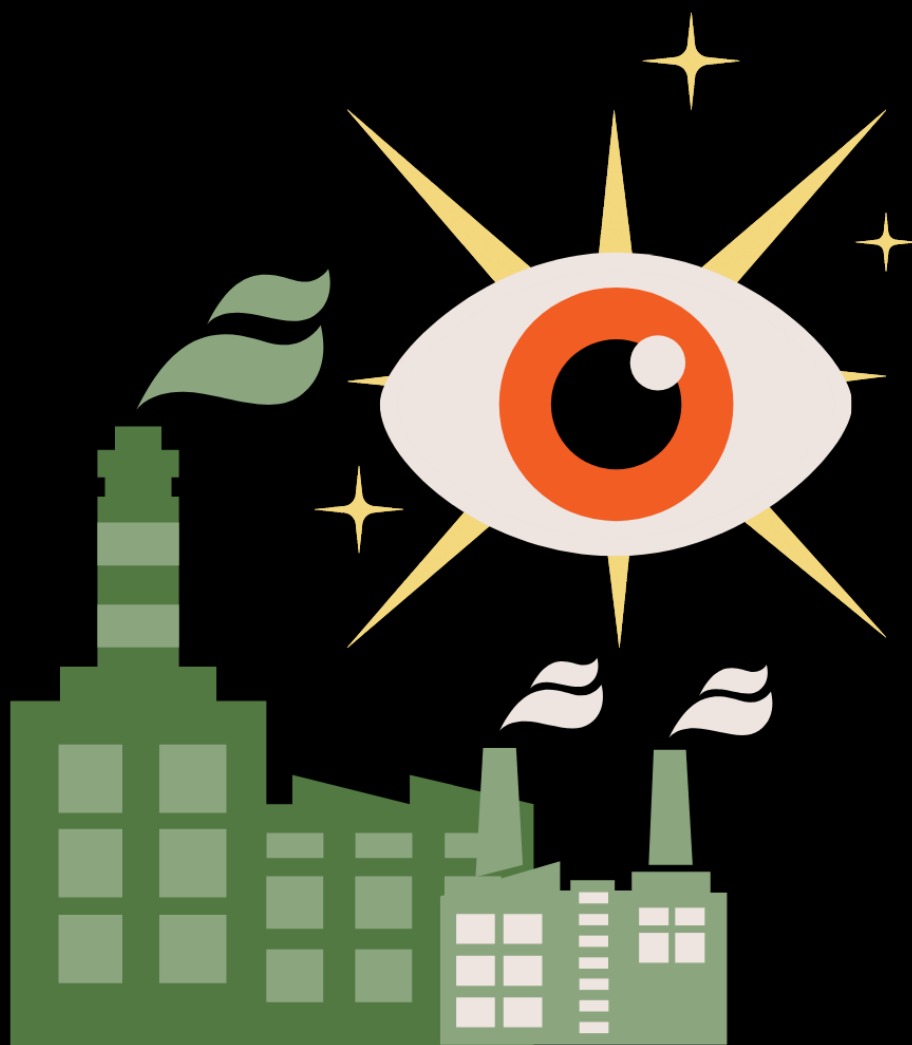


A ST. MARTIN'S PRESS VINTAGE

inventing reality

THE POLITICS OF MASS MEDIA

MICHAEL PARENTI



0-312-02013-9

INVENTING REALITY

the politics of mass media

BY

michael parenti

To the memory of Philip Meranto

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements..... | i |
| I. From Cronkite's Complaint to Orwell's Oversight..... | 1 |
| - Whom to Believe?..... | 3 |
| - Cronkite and Other Critics..... | 5 |
| - Class, Race, and Gender..... | 10 |
| - Monopoly Politics..... | 20 |
| - Do the Media Manage Our Minds?..... | 23 |
| - Beyond Orwell's 1984..... | 27 |
| II. "Freedom of the Press Belongs to the Man Who Owns One"..... | 29 |
| - A Favored Few..... | 29 |
| - Interlocking Control..... | 32 |
| - Many Voices, One Chorus..... | 33 |
| III. Who Controls the News?..... | 37 |
| - Calling the Tune: Owners..... | 37 |
| - Calling the Tune: Advertisers..... | 40 |
| - On the Line: Editors..... | 43 |
| - Self-Censorship: Reporters..... | 47 |
| - The Ruling Culture..... | 48 |
| - Suppressing the News..... | 52 |
| IV. Objectivity and Government Manipulation..... | 59 |
| - The Myth of Objectivity..... | 59 |
| - Not Enough Time, Space, and Money?..... | 64 |
| - Maintaining Appearances..... | 67 |
| - Is it All Economics?..... | 69 |
| - Government Manipulation..... | 71 |
| V. The Big Sell..... | 81 |
| - The Consumer Ideology..... | 83 |
| - Selling the System..... | 85 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| - Public Service for Private Interests..... | 90 |
| - Even Sports and Weather..... | 92 |
| VI. Giving Labor the Business..... | 97 |
| - Business Over Labor..... | 97 |
| - Nice Bosses, Crazy Strikers..... | 102 |
| - The Invisible Worker..... | 107 |
| VII. “Liberal” Media, Conservative Bias..... | 110 |
| - Creating a “Conservative Mood”..... | 111 |
| - Populist Electorate, Conservative Outcome..... | 117 |
| - Pundits to the Right..... | 119 |
| - How to Discredit Protestors..... | 121 |
| VIII. The Media Fight the Red Menace..... | 129 |
| - Enter the Red Menace..... | 129 |
| - The Cold War..... | 135 |
| - The Creation of Joe McCarthy..... | 138 |
| - Rational Hysteria..... | 141 |
| - Twists and Turns..... | 144 |
| - Celebrating the Collapse of Communism..... | 150 |
| IX. Doing the Third World..... | 158 |
| - The Vietnam Apology..... | 159 |
| - Murder in Chile..... | 164 |
| - Stomping on Grenada..... | 170 |
| X. For the New World Order..... | 176 |
| - The “Totalitarian” Sandinistas..... | 176 |
| - A Devil in Panama..... | 182 |
| - Celebrating the Massacre of Iraq..... | 187 |
| XI. Propaganda Themes..... | 197 |
| - American Virtue and “Anti-Americanism”..... | 197 |
| - The Nonexistence of Imperialism..... | 200 |
| - “Moderate Authoritarian” Regimes..... | 202 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| - Evil, Power-Hungry Leftists..... | 206 |
| - Economic “Failures”..... | 212 |
| - Democracy is in the Eyes of the Beholder..... | 214 |
| - “Inferior” Peoples and Their Hopeless Ways..... | 215 |
| XII. Methods of Misrepresentation..... | 219 |
| - Selectivity and Deliberate Omission..... | 219 |
| - Lies and Face-Value Transmission..... | 222 |
| - False Balancing..... | 227 |
| - Framing and Labeling..... | 230 |
| - The Greying of Reality..... | 232 |
| - Auxiliary Embellishments..... | 235 |
| - Placement..... | 238 |
| XIII. Culture, Control, and Resistance..... | 241 |
| - Capitalism and Culture..... | 241 |
| - The Limits of Orthodoxy..... | 244 |
| - Credibility and the “Liberal Bias”..... | 249 |
| - Between Conspiracy and Culture..... | 257 |
| - The Conflict Within..... | 261 |
| Appendix..... | 264 |
| Notes..... | 269 |

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Peggy Noton, Gwen Glesmann, Sally Soriano, and Laura Cooley for the generous assistance they rendered at crucial times. My thanks to the St. Martin's Press staff, especially my editor Don Reisman, Frances Jones, and Suzanne Holt for their efficient and thoughtful service in guiding the manuscript safely through hazardous editorial and production straits—and improving its quality along the way.

For their critical suggestions I wish to thank Earl S. Grow, The University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, and Edward C. Uliassi, Northeastern Illinois University.

Encouraging and helpful comments from interested readers, too numerous to mention, regarding the first edition of this book gave me much of the resolve to write this updated and, I think, improved version. For this they have my gratitude.

INVENTING REALITY

I. From Conkrite's Complaint to Orwell's Oversight

For many people an issue does not exist until it appears in the news media. Indeed, what we even define as an issue or event, what we see and hear, and what we do not see and hear are greatly determined by those who control the communications world. Be it peace protestors, uprisings in Latin America, crime, poverty, or defense spending, few of us know of things except as they are depicted in the news. Even when we don't believe what the media say, we are still hearing or reading their viewpoints rather than some other. They are still getting the agenda, defining what it is we must believe or disbelieve, accept or reject. The media exert a persistent influence in defining the scope of respectable political discourse.

Be this as it may, growing numbers of people are becoming increasingly aware that the media are neither objective nor consistently accurate in their portrayal of things. There seems to be a growing understanding that we need to defend ourselves by challenging the misinformation we are fed. In this book I will try to demonstrate how the news media distort important aspects of social and political life and why. The press's misrepresentations are not usually accidental, not merely the result of the complexity of actual events and the honest confusions of poorly prepared reporters. While those kinds of problems

MICHAEL PARENTI

exist, another kind of distortion predominates, one not due to chance or to the idiosyncratic qualities of news production or newspeople. The major distortions are repeatable and systemic—the product not only of deliberate manipulation but of the ideological and economic conditions under which the media operate.

One book cannot cover all that might be said about the media. I will concentrate on national and international politico-economic class issues, with some attention given to the racist and sexist biases in the media (dealt with in this chapter). I do not deal with the entertainment media and the many hidden ideological and political biases found therein. That subject is treated in my recent book *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment*.¹ In the pages ahead we will explore the way the press distorts and suppresses the news about major domestic and foreign events, the hidden and not-so-hidden ideological values, the influence of ownership, and the opportunities for dissent.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive canvassing of the news complete with statistical breakdowns and content analyses, I trace media performance along several basic themes, providing representative samples of how the press treats or mistreats a subject. A more systematic undertaking would have had the virtue of thoroughness and maybe increased precision of a sort, but it would have made for a very huge and dull volume. In any case, numerous systematic studies are cited and summarized in the chapters that follow.

This book concentrates on the more influential news media, specifically the three major networks: the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), along with the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (and their respective news services). These two newspapers, the *Post* and the *Times*, not only feed information to the public but to other news media as well. Occasional attention is also given herein to two newsweeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and lesser publications and broadcast media. Taken together these various outlets compose what I alternately describe as the “major media,” the “mainstream media,” the “corporate-owned press,”

INVENTING REALITY

the “US press,” the “national media,” or just the “press” and the “news media.” Throughout this book I use the terms *news media* and *press* synonymously to mean the printed and broadcast news organizations. It so happens that *press* is singular and *media* plural, but I mean the same by both. The above-mentioned news organizations represent the higher quality establishment press, being more informative and less distorted than most of the other (more conservative) media. If this book has a bias in selection, then, it is in the direction of understatement.

WHOM TO BELIEVE?

If the media so preempts the communication universe, then how can we evaluate them? And who is to say whether our criticisms are to be trusted? In attempting to expose the distortions and biases of the press, do we not unavoidably introduce biases of our own? And if objectivity is unattainable, are we not then left in the grip of a subjectivism in which one person’s impressions are about as reliable (or unreliable) as another’s? To be sure, there is always the danger that a dissenting viewpoint of the kind presented in this book will introduce distortions of its own. The reader should watch for these. But this new “danger” is probably not as great as the one posed by the press itself, because readers approach the dissenting viewpoint after having been conditioned throughout their lives to the sentiments and images of the dominant society. Far more insidious and less open to conscious challenge are the notions that so fit into the dominant political culture’s field of established images that they appear not as biased manipulations but as “the nature of things.”

When exposed to a view that challenges the prevailing message, the reader is not then simply burdened with additional distortions. A dissident view provides us with an occasion to test the prevailing beliefs, open ourselves to information that the mainstream media and the dominant belief system have

MICHAEL PARENTI

ignored or suppressed. Through this clash of viewpoints we have a better chance of moving toward a closer approximation of the truth.

In addition, we have the test of experience itself. Common sense and everyday life oblige us to make judgments and act as if some images and information are closer to the truth than others. Misrepresentations can be eliminated by a process of feedback, as when subsequent events fail to fulfill the original images.

There is also the internal evidence found in the press itself. We can detect inconsistencies among reports in the mainstream press. We can note how information that supports the official view is given top play while developments that seem not to fit are relegated to the back pages. Also, like any liar the press is filled with contradictions. Seldom holding itself accountable for what it says, it can blithely produce information and opinions that conflict with previously held ones, without a word of explanation for the shift. We can also learn to question what the press tells us by noting the absence of supporting evidence, the failure to amplify and explain. We can ask: Why are the assertions that appear again and again in the news not measured against observable actualities? We can thereby become more aware of how the news media are inviting us to believe something without establishing any reason for the belief.

Much of the evidence herein has been gathered from extensive and detailed studies produced by academic scholars and independent investigators. Also helpful has been the information provided in such dissenting publications as the *Nation*, the (New York) *Guardian*, *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, *People's Weekly World*, *Z Magazine*, and the *Progressive*. Publications that are specifically designed to monitor the media, such as *Lies of Our Times* (published by the Institute for Media Analysis), *Extra!* (published by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), and *Propaganda Review*, have been especially helpful. In addition, there are the publications put out by public interest groups too numerous to mention, dealing with everything from environmentalism and tax policy to militarism and foreign policy.

INVENTING REALITY

Some readers will complain of this book's "one-sidedness." But if it is true that "we need to hear all sides and not just one," then all the more reason why the criticisms and information usually suppressed or downplayed by the American press deserve the attention accorded them in the pages to follow. In any case, it can be observed that people who never complain about the one-sidedness of their mainstream political education are the first to complain of the one-sidedness of any challenge to it. Far from seeking a diversity of views, they defend themselves from the first exposure to such diversity, preferring to leave their conventional political opinions unchallenged.

A former member of the Federal Communications Commission, Nicholas Johnson, once urged people to "talk back" to their television sets. We can talk back to all the media a lot better and demand a lot more only when we know how we are being manipulated and why we are being lied to. This book is an attempt at understanding how and why the media are the way they are so that we can better defend ourselves not only by talking back in the privacy of our living rooms but by organizing and struggling to become the active agents of our own lives and the creators of our own reality.

CRONKITE AND OTHER CRITICS

We do not have a free and independent press in the United States but one that is tied by purchase and persuasion to wealthy owners and advertisers and subjected to the influences of state power. Of course, not everyone sees it that way. Many people who hear about "a controlled press" think only of something that exists in other lands. If anything, the more conservative among them advocate greater restrictions on the US media, in imitation of the censorship they say they are fighting when they say they are fighting communism. Others who complain about the US news media's shortcomings believe "our" press, for all its faults, is a free and independent one, certainly freer than in most other countries.

MICHAEL PARENTI

In this book I choose to investigate the US news media not by comparing them to the media of other countries, but by measuring them against their own assertions about being independent, objective, neutral, informative, balanced, and truthful. I will argue and try to demonstrate that in regard to the most crucial questions of political and economic life, the media do not, and cannot, live up to their claims; and I will try to explain why they fail to do so.

The structures of control within the US media are different from the institutionalized formal censorship we might expect of a government-controlled press; they are less visible and more subtle, not monolithic yet hierarchical, transmitted to the many by those who work for the few, essentially undemocratic and narrow in perspective, tied to the rich and powerful but not totally immune to the pressures of an agitated public, propagandistic yet sometimes providing hard information that is intentionally or unintentionally revealing.

The US news media operate under an established ideology that claims they have no established ideology, no racial, gender, or class bias. Supposedly committed to no persuasion, they just report things as they see them. Now and then we hear murmurs to the contrary. For instance, for nearly two decades, every evening in the week, the dean of America's newscasters, Walter Cronkite, would end his CBS television news show with the statement: "And that's the way it is." On the eve of his retirement in 1980, Cronkite admitted that isn't the way it is. "My lips have been kind of buttoned for almost twenty years... CBS News doesn't really believe in commentary," he charged.²

It was a remarkable admission. The man who had been given honorary degrees by leading universities and who had been voted in one opinion poll the nation's most trusted public figure was saying that he had spent almost two decades under the censorship of network bosses. To be sure, it was a comfortable sort of repression. Cronkite's last ten-year contract with CBS went for \$20 million, a sum that has been known to ease the pain of buttoned lips. But finally Walter Cronkite had his moment of truth. Yet he only complained,

INVENTING REALITY

and never explained: Why was he so restricted by those who exercised such power over him?

That we think the American press is a free and independent institution may only be a measure of our successful habituation to a subtler, more familiar form of suppression. The worst forms of tyranny—or certainly the most successful ones—are not those we rail against but those that so insinuate themselves into the imagery of our consciousness and the fabric of our lives as not to be perceived as tyranny.

This is not to say the press has escaped all criticism; indeed, more frequently than ever, the media are under attack from various quarters. Most widely publicized by the press itself are the right-wing attacks on the news industry for its supposedly liberal biases and negative treatment of American life, its failure to support true American values and even its “un-Americanism,” its alleged softness on communism and eagerness to give publicity to protesters, its failure to show business’s side of things, and its occasional stories about wasteful defense contracts, corporate crime, and the crimes of conservative leaders (for example, Watergate and the Iran-contra affair). Conservatives would prefer that the news media avoid any mention of the large profits that big business makes (especially embarrassing during hard times). They would like never to see reports about unemployment or the struggles of minorities, women, and the poor, or about those who protest against US military interventions, arms spending, nuclear power, and corporate mistreatment of the environment.³

In fact, critical information and commentary in the mainstream media treat but the tip of the iceberg. But even this is more than conservatives care to endure. They would prefer a press dedicated to an exclusively unblemished picture of American business and American life, complete with upbeat stories about the nation’s military prowess, its benign world leadership, and the ever-expanding blessings of the free market at home and abroad.

Attacks from the right help the media maintain an appearance of neutrality and objectivity. The charge made by leftist critics that the media are

MICHAEL PARENTI

complicit with the dominant powers seems to be refuted when these same powerful interests attack the media for being a liberal tool. The truth is that while the press may not be totally uncritical or adulatory toward big business and the executive power of government, it is not an autonomous adversary, independent of the corporate class. On the contrary, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is owned and largely controlled by that class.

Not all the criticism is from conservatives. Centrists and liberals, including some journalists, have criticized the press for failing to do its job of informing the American public about the crucial issues. Criticism from those on the political center focuses less on content than on the lack of it. They complain that the news is superficial and trivial, that it focuses on personalities rather than issues, on surface happenings rather than substantive matters, that it is often more interested in entertaining than informing us.

I agree with such observations and in the pages ahead will offer supporting examples. But the kind of criticism remains more of a complaint than an analysis. When the centrist and liberal critics get around to trying to explain why stories are so poorly reported they are likely to blame the journalists. They tell how stories are mishandled because reporters are not well informed, too dependent on officialdom, or given to indulging their “personal predilections and prejudices.”⁴

These kinds of criticisms are often true, but they place too much blame on the weakest, lowliest link in the news manufacturing chain: the reporter. The critics say nothing about the editors who cut and rewrite the reporters’ copy and who control their jobs. They say nothing about the people who hire, fire, pay, and promote the editors and who exercise ultimate control over them. The centrist-liberal critique fails to note that while the journalist’s product may be gravely wanting in certain qualities, including objectivity and balance, it remains acceptable to his or her superiors. It is the kind of copy they deem suitable for their readers. And as will be seen, the reporter who produces more penetrating stories—especially ones that reveal something about the

INVENTING REALITY

exploitative, undemocratic nature of corporate America and US foreign policy—will run into difficulties with superiors. By fingering the journalist as the main or only culprit, liberal critics are treating reporters as free agents when in fact they are not. The “working press” works for someone other than itself.

Sometimes media critics will fault not the people involved in manufacturing the news but the structure of the media. By its very nature, we are told, television emphasizes the visual over the ideational. Action events and national leaders have visual appeal; issues and policy analysis do not. Hence there is bound to be more surface than substance in the news. The problem also is said to exist—to a lesser extent—with the print media, which have limited space and time to frame vastly complex events on a daily basis. So, it is said, the media latch on to simple images and explanations in order to reduce their subject matter to manageable components.

There is no denying that stereotyping and reductionism are the common tools of shallow thinking, but why must such shallowness be treated as inevitable? That the media so frequently resort to slick surface treatment does not mean such treatment is the only way the media can function. Rather than being a criticism, this “blaming the nature of the media” is a disguised defense. It gets everyone off the hook and treats television, or whatever medium, as a disembodied technological force all its own. However, it is not television as such that chooses to cling to surface events but the people who run it. With the right script and right intentions, visual media can offer engrossingly informative and penetrating presentations on vital subjects, as demonstrated by the many fine independently produced documentaries the major networks deign not to carry.

In contrast to the above views, I argue that the news media do not fail to do their job, rather they perform their function all too well. Their objective is not to produce an alert, critical, and informed citizenry but the kind of people who will accept an opinion universe dominated by corporate and governmental

MICHAEL PARENTI

elites, almost all of whom share the same ideological perspective about political and economic reality. True, these elites do not always appreciate how well they are served by a press that would be less effective if it were exclusively a propaganda arm of business and government, but this does not mean the press is free and independent.

The basic distortions in the media are not innocent errors, for they are not random; rather they move in the same overall direction again and again, favoring management over labor, corporatism over anti-corporatism, the affluent over the poor, private enterprise over socialism, Whites over Blacks, males over females, officialdom over protesters, conventional politics over dissidence, anticommunism and arms-race militarism over disarmament, national chauvinism over internationalism, US dominance of the Third World over revolutionary or populist nationalist change. The press does many things and serves many functions, but its major role, its irreducible responsibility, is to continually recreate a view of reality supportive of existing social and economic class power. That is what I will try to demonstrate in this book.

These basic biases are rarely subjected to careful scrutiny in the corporate-owned media. When the press does give attention to media critics, they are almost always of the conservative variety. Progressive criticisms are habitually ignored or—when aired on rare occasions—they are greeted with amused incredulity by conservative and centrist commentators. This itself demonstrates something about the media's conservative slant.⁵ Its willingness to give a respectful hearing and serious response to right-wing attacks along with its tendency to ignore leftist criticism testifies to its ideological bias and reflects the distribution of class power within the media's own structure.

CLASS, RACE, AND GENDER

One indication of how the press serves the privileged and the powerful is found in how it treats the underprivileged and the powerless. The news media

INVENTING REALITY

are largely an affluent White male domain. Blacks, Latinos, Asians, women, and the poor are accorded brief mention on special occasions. The poor are most likely to receive coverage during Thanksgiving and Christmastime when some indigents are administered turkey dinners, the message being that there is comfort, food, and shelter even for the more unfortunate among us. When more serious coverage of poverty in America is forthcoming (for instance the ABC evening news reports of June 18—19, 1991), the media still have nothing to say about why some 35 million people live below the poverty level in what is professedly the richest country in the world. The poor are with us, we are told, but there is no exploration of the link between poverty and the increasing concentration of wealth, between poverty and regressive taxes, high rents, low wages, high profits, inflated prices, and underemployment.

The class dimensions of poverty are judged to be simply not a fit subject for the mainstream news media. One's social status is seen principally as a matter of individual achievement. Class as a designation of occupation, income, and life-style wins occasional recognition with such references as "middle class," "low income," "professional class," "white collar," and "blue collar." But class, as an exploitative relationship between owners and employees, as a determinant of wealth and power, is a subject the news media rarely if ever touch upon.

The news media treat slums as more or less the natural habitat of the people who live in them, rather than the creation of real estate speculators, fast-buck developers, urban "removalists," unenforced housing codes, tax-evading investors, and rent-gouging landlords. The press may sometimes link disorders among the urban poor to the conditions of inner-city life, but no linkage is made between such obviously bad conditions and the economic injustices of the system that produced them.

While the press reports occasional abuses in the economic system, it treats corporate capitalism as providential rather than exploitative. The contradictions of capitalism, for instance, between the need to keep wages

MICHAEL PARENTI

down in order to maximize profits and the need to keep wages up in order to maintain demand, are seldom if ever dwelt upon in the media. The waste, duplication, stagnation, unemployment, inflation, and anarchy of production that come with an unplanned economy, and the failure of a market economy to respond to social need rather than private greed, are seldom linked to anything in the nature of capitalism. Recessions are treated as natural, albeit unfortunate, events, somewhat akin to earthquakes or droughts, caused by something innocent called “hard times.” Inflation and pollution are supposedly caused by everyone, since we all spend and consume. One television reporter put it this way: “Inflation is the culprit and in inflation everyone is guilty.”⁶

Class biases operate in how crimes are reported and in what is even defined as a crime. Press coverage focuses on crime in the streets, downplaying such corporate crimes as monopolistic restraints of trade, illegal uses of public funds by private interests, occupational safety violations, unsafe consumer goods, and environmental poisonings—which are, or should be, crimes, and which can cost the public dearly in money and lives.⁷ Every year more than 14,000 workers in the United States are killed on the job; another 100,000 die prematurely, and 400,000 become seriously ill from work-related diseases. Many, if not most, of these deaths and injuries occur because greater consideration is given by management to profits and production than to occupational safety and environmental standards. Yet these crimes are rarely defined and reported as crimes by the news media.

How the press defines and reports on crime is largely determined by the class and racial background of the victim and victimizer.

Affluent victims are more likely to receive press attention than poor ones, leaving the false impression that most victims of crime are from upper- and middle-class backgrounds. And low-income lawbreakers, especially Blacks, Latinos, and other minorities, are more likely to be depicted as criminals than the corporate leaders whose crimes may be even more serious and of wider scope and repercussion than the street criminal's.⁸

INVENTING REALITY

The news media have not much to say about the struggles of African-Americans, Latinos, and other ethnic groups for jobs, decent housing, safe neighborhoods, viable political organizations, and the like. Likewise, the struggles of people of color to gain recognition in art, literature, entertainment, music, sports, religion, labor, and education have earned relatively scant notice in the White media.⁹

The African-American candidate who attracts millions of votes in presidential primaries while taking a progressive stance on issues is likely to win unsympathetic press treatment, as did Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988. Jackson was designated the “Black candidate,” one with limited appeal to White voters, even though he did well in primaries in predominantly White states like Vermont and Oregon. Despite his constant attention to the issues, he was said to be on a self-serving ego trip. Although his financial status was much more modest than that of most other presidential candidates (and all television anchor persons), the press raised questions about his “large” salary. And because he argued that US interventions abroad serve neither the interests of the people of those regions nor those of the American people, he was labeled a “Third World radical.”

The mayor of Gary, Indiana, Richard Hatcher, commented on the hostile and distorted coverage accorded him by the press in his city. “I was the first Black mayor of this city and they’ve never quite forgiven me for that.”¹⁰ After he had been reelected for a fifth term with 90 percent of the vote, the *Post-Tribune* still saw fit to remark that there was “no consensus” among the voters in support of Hatcher. And when a University of Chicago study rated Gary first among sixty-two cities in regard to fiscal policy, the local media never even reported it.¹¹

African-Americans are generously overrepresented in the media when there is bad news to report. Thus, polling statistics in *USA Today* show that only 15 percent of US drug users are African-American, but data from the Black Entertainment Network indicate that 50 percent of network news stories on

MICHAEL PARENTI

drugs focus on African- Americans.¹²

As media commentators, African-Americans remain drastically underrepresented. Mayor Hatcher noted: “About the only time you really see Blacks giving their opinions, or given any serious space, is when it relates to minorities or civil rights. That seems to be the only time the media feel we are competent enough to express opinions.”¹³ Even in that area, Blacks who express ideas on race that run counter to the predominant ideological mode are likely to be subjected to attack. Reputable African-American scholars and educators have tried to move away from a Eurocentric approach to history and set the record straight with university curricula that treat the often neglected African and African-American experience. But these efforts have been vehemently denounced by the White media as “bad history” and “ethnic cheerleading.”¹⁴

In contrast, conservative African-American writers and academics who serve as cheerleaders for the status quo are accorded generous exposure as they denounce affirmative action and other federal programs designed to help ethnic minorities, and as they praise the established power structure and downplay the effects of racism in the United States.¹⁵ Thus the major media give frequent and eager attention to Black conservatives like Thomas Sowell and Shelby Steele, along with less frequent exposure to establishment liberals like Juan Williams and Roger Wilkins—who seldom if ever shake the ideological boat. But almost never do we find major media exposure given to African-American left critics such as Angela Davis, Charlene Mitchell, and Ron Daniels. Blacks can appear on national television, but they must be the right kind of Blacks.

African-Americans and other people of color are drastically underrepresented as employees in the communication industry. As of 1990, all minority groups taken together composed only 7.8 percent of newsroom employees. More than half of the 1,700 daily newspapers in the United States have no people of color working on their journalistic staffs.¹⁶ Of employed African-American journalists, many work for Black-owned publications and radio stations.

INVENTING REALITY

Women are another drastically underrepresented employee group in the communication industry. They hold only 6 percent of the top jobs and 25 percent of the middle-level management positions in news organizations. Female correspondents increased from about 10 percent to 15.8 percent between 1975 and 1989. But of the fifty correspondents seen most frequently on the three network evening newscasts in 1989 only six were women.¹⁷ One study found that only 10.3 percent of the guests on “Nightline,” the ABC late-night news show, were female, and of the twenty most frequent guests, none was a woman.¹⁸

Women account for only about 11 percent of persons in print and broadcast news stories taken together, usually appearing as celebrities and the wives of important political leaders.¹⁹ Women also commonly make the headlines as victims of male violence, especially homicide. But they seldom appear as the victims of public policy. Thus abortion is covered less from the perspective of the women who are victimized by the outlawing of safe and legal services and more as a political issue concerning official decision-makers. Only when discussing a communist country like Romania has the press given attention to the awful effects abortion bans have had on women and unwanted children.²⁰

Women of accomplishment are very likely to make the news if they are unusual “firsts”: the first woman astronaut, the first woman on the Supreme Court, the first female vice presidential candidate for a major party. However, the more general battle for economic, social, and sexual equality and for material betterment and health-care that women have been waging is slighted. Women made up 65 percent of the minimum-wage work force; but as with the Black struggle, the class dimensions of the women’s struggle is not a fit subject for the mainstream media. The press regularly ignores issues of desperate concern to working-class women and women of color.²¹

MICHAEL PARENTI

IMAGE POLITICS AND CONSERVATIVE BIAS

While posing as an objective chronicler of the events of the day, the press generally functions more as a public relations conduit for top government leaders, especially that most exalted leader of all, the president, “who is viewed as the ultimate protector of order.”²² A systematic examination of twenty-five years of presidential news in the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine, and ten years of CBS newscasts, reveals a “consistent pattern of favorable coverage of the President,” with sympathetic stories outnumbering critical ones by two to one.²³

Conservative presidents are especially well served. Note how the press called Ronald Reagan “the Teflon president,” thereby attributing to him some mystical capacity to remain untarnished by the fray—when in fact the press itself was acting as his Teflon Shield by treating him almost reverentially and being unwilling to direct any criticism at him for the policies and scandals of his administration.²⁴ Even during the height of the Iran-contra scandal, Reagan was hailed by the media as a leader who commanded wide popularity and affection—though national polls showed more than half the public disapproved of the way he handled his job.²⁵

Frequently the president’s statements are publicized by the press with no opposing facts. Thus when Reagan claimed that his administration had advanced the interests of minorities and females more than previous ones, the press dutifully reported his assertions without pointing out that he actually had threatened to veto the Voting Rights Act (and only signed it because it passed both houses by veto-proof majorities), and that he had cut back on minority and female appointments and civil rights enforcement in his administration.

In 1991, when Senator Pat Moynihan proposed that Social Security taxes be cut since the fund regularly accumulated huge surpluses that were being raided by the government to finance the general budget. President Bush was quick to appear before the cameras and denounce Moynihan’s proposal as an intolerable tampering with Social Security. While posing as a defender of the

INVENTING REALITY

fund's integrity, Bush was actually violating it. But the many viewers who relied solely on the evening news for their information would never know of this deception since the newscasts never explained that the Bush administration was using the Social Security fund to pay for missiles, FBI agents, business subsidies, and the like.

Presidential election campaigns reveal the media's conservative bias. Surveys show that daily newspapers endorse Republican presidential candidates over Democratic ones at about a six-to-one ratio.²⁶ Surveying "eighty-four systematic studies," one media critic found "a very high correlation" between editorial slant and news coverage, with political bias in the news being "overwhelmingly pro-Republican and proconservative." Despite the talk about a "liberal conspiracy" in the press, "the real question is how liberal electoral politics survives at all with the overwhelming opposition of the conservative press."²⁷

In early 1991 the media were criticized for "mistreating" Vice President Dan Quayle by raising questions about his suitability to occupy the presidency, in light of President Bush's reported illness at that time. The media were criticized not only by conservatives but by liberal Democrats such as Senator Patrick Leahy and House Speaker Tom Foley, who have spent much of their careers trying to demonstrate their respectability and fair-mindedness to conservatives. Overlooked was the fact that media commentators had said almost nothing in three years about Quayle's politics, his link to the Iran-contra scandal through his legislative assistant Rob Owen, and his ultra-rightist stance on numerous issues.

Likewise, in the 1988 vice presidential campaign the press raised—but failed to pursue—troubling questions about Quayle's background: How did he graduate from college without meeting the requirements that other graduates had to meet? Why was he given a second general examination in order to graduate after failing the first, and what was the nature of the second? How did he get into law school when his grades were well below the levels of other

MICHAEL PARENTI

applicants? Why did he continue to refuse to make public his academic record—which would have answered some of these questions?

The press measure liberal candidates by a more exacting standard. Thus, while Quayle never really had to answer any troublesome questions, a liberal Democrat, Senator Joseph Biden, was obliged to drop out of the race for the presidential nomination in 1988 because he falsely claimed to have finished near the top of his law-school graduating class and because he had used without attribution some quotes from a British politician's speech in a talk of his own. And liberal Democrat Gary Hart was forced to disqualify himself because it was discovered he had engaged in sexual liaisons, an activity that hardly made him unique in Washington, D.C. In contrast, allegations about the adulterous doings of GOP presidential candidate George Bush received almost no press coverage in the 1988 campaign.

When Dan Rather tried to question Bush on CBS evening news about his role in the Iran-contra scandal, Bush just refused to answer and instead picked a fight. For this evasive but belligerent performance Bush was hailed by his own public relations people as a hero for having “stood up to the media.” In the 1984 vice presidential campaign, serious questions were raised about Bush's income taxes—but never pursued by the press. In contrast, questions regarding the taxes of John Zaccaro, the husband of Bush's liberal opponent Geraldine Ferraro, received prolonged and intensive coverage, or what one reporter called “ferocious” treatment: “It was a hit squad.”²⁸

The conservative biases of the supposedly liberal media have a feedback effect on political life. As Galbraith noted, political conservatism benefits from:

... the deep desire of politicians, Democrats in particular, for respectability -their need to show that they are individuals of sound confidence-inspiring judgment. And what is the test of respectability? It is, broadly, whether speech and action are consistent with the comfort and well-being of the people of property and position. A radical is

INVENTING REALITY

anyone who causes discomfort or otherwise offends such interests. Thus, in our politics, we test even liberals by their conservatism.²⁹

The media create conservative effects by slighting the issues and focusing on candidate image. Even when attention is given to an issue, it is usually to conjecture on how the candidate used it to help his or her image and advance his or her electoral chances. Once considered an adjunct to political discussion, image now seems to be the whole point of the discussion. It is not the issues we are asked to judge but the nuances of the presentation.

A study conducted by the media specialist Michael Robinson found no liberal bias in campaign coverage but rather a “hollowness” and lack of content. The campaign was treated more as a horse race than a clash of programs and policies.³⁰ Who will run? Who will be nominated? Who’s ahead? Who will win? These preoccupations are supplemented with generous offerings of surface events and personality trivia.

Studies of recent campaigns found that newspapers devoted most of their presidential coverage to the personal attributes of candidates. Television gave even more emphasis to personality than the print media. In one campaign, by a ratio of more than four to one, both print and broadcast media stressed personality and campaign events over issue discussion.³¹ The media, like the major political parties themselves, treat campaigns not as an opportunity to debate issues, but as a competition for office. The focus is on the race itself with little thought about what—if anything—makes the race a meaningful exercise in democratic governance.

By focusing on “human interest” trivia, on contest rather than content, the press makes it difficult for the public to give intelligent expression to political life and to mobilize around issues. Thus the media have—intentionally or not—a conservative effect on public discourse. Given short shrift are the concerns of millions of people regarding nuclear arms, Pentagon spending, tax reform, war in Central America, unemployment, and poverty. The democratic

MICHAEL PARENTI

input, the great public debate about the state of the Union and its national policies, the heightening of political consciousness and information levels—all the things democratic electoral campaigns are supposed to foster—are crowded off the stage by image politics.

Not only during election campaigns but just about on every other occasion the news media prefer surface to substance, emphasizing the eye-catching visuals, the “special angle” report, and the reassuring stories, while slighting the more important but politically more troublesome themes. There is so much concentration on surface events that we often have trouble grasping the content of things, so much focus on action and personality that we fail to see the purposive goal of the action. For instance, early in his administration President Reagan dismantled major portions of forty years of domestic social legislation, initiated enormous tax cuts for rich individuals and corporations, dramatically escalated an already huge military spending program, and launched a series of cold-war confrontations against the Soviet Union— all policies of great import. However, the theme that predominated in most of the stories about those crucial actions was whether Reagan was “winning” or “losing” in his contests with Congress, the bureaucracy, labor, and foreign governments. Thus momentous political issues were reduced to catchy but trivial questions about Reagan’s political “score card,” his efficacy as a leader, and his personal popularity.³²

MONOPOLY POLITICS

Such as it is, media electoral coverage is lavishly bestowed on the two major parties, while minor parties are totally ignored or allotted but a few minutes, if that, over the entire campaign. Thus the media help perpetuate the procapitalist, two-party monopoly.

In recent contests, presidential candidates of the Peace and Freedom Party, Communist Party, Citizen’s Party, Socialist Workers Party, Workers

INVENTING REALITY

World Party, and others did all the things presidential candidates are supposed to do. They met voters on street corners, spoke on college campuses and at voter forums, issued position papers and press releases, traveled around the country, and probably spoke directly to more people than did the major candidates. But on election day, most voters had never heard of them.³³ Deprived of mass media coverage, a third party cannot reach the voting masses.

Simon Gerson, who managed the 1980 Communist Party campaign for Gus Hall and Angela Davis, complained of “the consistent spiking of news about them.”³⁴ Other third-party candidates testify to a similar experience.³⁵ As a nationally known ecologist, author Barry Commoner was a frequent guest on national television shows—until the day he was nominated as the presidential candidate for the Citizen’s Party and became virtually a nonperson.³⁶

While the local media are sometimes accessible to third-party candidates—especially radio talk shows—it is only when they happen to be visiting an area. Unlike the Democrats and Republicans who remain a constant focus for local as well as national media, third-party candidates receive no recurring coverage.³⁷ When they leave town, they leave the local media’s vision. Being momentary rather than constant, the exposure they receive is of limited impact.

Despite being shut out by the mainstream media, third-party candidates manage to garnish a considerable number of votes, taken together a total of one to two million in each presidential election. But the people who vote for them are rendered as invisible as the candidates themselves. During election-night coverage their votes go unreported. As Peter Camejo, the 1976 presidential candidate of the Socialist Workers Party, commented: “Before the election, Democrats and Republicans and the media waged a campaign to convince the American people that a vote for a third party would not count. To convince them further, they simply didn’t count the votes for most third-party candidates on election night.”³⁸

By giving elaborate national coverage only to Republicans and

MICHAEL PARENTI

Democrats, news organizations are letting us know that these are the only ones worth considering. Candidates who are not taken seriously by the media swiftly discover that they are not taken seriously by many voters. Even when they make face-to-face contact with voters, they still lack legitimacy as candidates for national office, being more a curiosity than a serious choice. People may like what third-party candidates say, because often they are the only ones saying anything, but they usually won't vote for someone who doesn't have a chance. Since third-party candidates are not in the news, they are considered to be not really in the race.

The argument made against giving national coverage to minor-party candidates is just that—they are minor; they do not represent the main concerns of the electorate; they are unknowns. But as Aaron Orange of the Socialist Labor Party stated before a Senate subcommittee: “How can a candidate attract the following ... that would convince the broadcasters that he is a ‘significant’ candidate? Isn't it a fact that in our present society one can become a ‘significant’ candidate only as a result of repeated exposure on the airwaves?”³⁹

Whether a candidate is a prominent or an unknown personage is less important in determining media treatment than his or her politics. John Anderson was an obscure member of Congress who did miserably in the 1980 Republican presidential primaries; yet, given his mainstream politics and safe credentials, he was treated like a major candidate by the media when he later ran as an independent. This was in part because he raised no serious politico-economic challenges to the major candidates but ran on an “I-can-do-it-better” platform, thereby making himself safe for big contributors and national media. Dozens of relatively obscure Democratic and Republican contenders, such as Pat Buchanan, Reuben Askew, Patsy Mink, John Ashbrook, Sam Yorty, and Paul McCloskey “were brought ... to the public's attention by the media. Few had any chance of winning their party's nomination and none did,” yet they were treated as real candidates.⁴⁰ In contrast, persons like Barry Commoner, Angela Davis, Gus Hall, and Benjamin Spock (the People's Party presidential candidate of

INVENTING REALITY

1972) were nationally known figures. Before Dr. Spock began his campaign, millions of Americans were already familiar with his name, having read his books on baby care, and many knew of him as a dedicated peace activist. Yet because of media blackout, only a tiny fraction of the public ever knew of his candidacy and his views, despite almost a year of Spock's active campaigning.⁴¹

The press's bias against candidates—especially progressive ones—who lack the imprimatur of the two major parties was demonstrated when it ignored the most dramatic race in the 1990 congressional elections. Running for Congress in Vermont as an independent with openly socialist leanings, Bernard Sanders won a landslide victory against a Republican incumbent. (Since Vermont has only one member in the US House of Representatives, Sanders's election was a statewide victory.) Despite its dramatic aspects, the national media gave the campaign little notice before election day (in contrast to the rather uncritical saturation coverage accorded Klan-Nazi leader David Duke whenever he has campaigned for state or national office. Casting a belated glance at Sanders's accomplishment in its post-election wrap-up, the *New York Times* tried to explain away his victory by noting that he “toned down his Marxist slogans” and ran an anti-incumbent campaign. The *Times* rarely describes Republican or Democratic campaign positions as “slogans”; they are more respectfully termed “stands” or “positions.”⁴² Actually, Sanders did not make incumbency the issue and did not “tone down” anything. He conducted a strongly progressive campaign calling for higher taxes for the rich, national health insurance, a stronger environmental policy, a curbing of the power of multinational corporations, and an end to military interventions abroad.

DO THE MEDIA MANAGE OUR MINDS?

The news may be manipulated by the media, but does that mean we are manipulated by the news? If it turns out that the press exercises only an inconsequential influence, then we are dealing with a tempest in a teapot and

MICHAEL PARENTI

are being unduly alarmist about “mind management.”

Early studies of the media’s impact on voting choices found that people seemed surprisingly immune to media manipulation. Campaign propaganda usually reinforced the public’s preferences rather than altered them. People exposed themselves to media appeals in a selective way, giving more attention and credence to messages that bolstered their own views. Their opinion and information intake was influenced by forces other than the media, things like family, school, peer groups, work place, and community. The individual did not stand without a buffer against media impact. The press, it was concluded, had only a “minimal effect.”⁴³

At first glance these findings are reassuring. People seem fairly self-directed in their responses to the media and do not allow themselves to be mindlessly led. Democracy is safe. But troublesome questions remain. If through “selective exposure” we utilize the media mainly to reinforce our established predispositions, where do the predispositions themselves come from? In part, they come from the media. Furthermore, even the various other socializing agencies such as family and school are not immune to the climate of opinion created by the media. Thus at least some of our internalized political predilections derive from the dominant political culture that the press has a hand in shaping—and from earlier direct media exposure.

Because of previous media exposure, we are likely to resist opinions that depart too far from the conventional mainstream view.

In such situations, our “self-directed selectivity” is designed to avoid information that contradicts the dominant viewpoint. If much of our information and opinion intake is filtered through our previously established mental predispositions, these predispositions are often not part of our conscious discernment but of our unexamined conditioning. Thus, rather than being rational guardians against propaganda, our mind-sets, having been shaped by prolonged exposure to that very same propaganda, may be active accomplices.

INVENTING REALITY

Furthermore, there are many things about which we may not have a predetermined opinion. Lacking any competing information, we often unwarily embrace what we read or hear. In those instances, the media are not merely reinforcing previously held opinions, they are implanting new ones, although these implants themselves seldom fall upon tabula rasa brains and usually do not conflict too drastically with established biases.

While people may not always be happy with what is in the news, they tend to believe what they hear or read. Surveys indicate that the media enjoy a widespread credibility among the public. One Gallup poll found that, far from being critically skeptical of news sources, respondents gave the major print and broadcast media high marks of 80 to 87 percent for believability.⁴⁴

Recent evidence suggests that, contrary to the earlier “minimal effect” theory, the news media are able to direct our attention to certain issues and shape our opinions about them. One study found that persons exposed to a steady stream of news about defense or pollution came to believe that these topics were more important problems than previously thought.⁴⁵ Other studies discovered that fluctuations in public concern for problems like civil rights, the Vietnam War, crime, and inflation over recent decades reflected variations in the attention paid to them by the major media.⁴⁶

As with issues, so with candidates. We noted earlier that the inability to win press coverage consigns third-party candidates to the dim periphery of American politics. The power to ignore political viewpoints beyond the standard two-party fare is more than minimal, it is monumental. Media exposure frequently may be the single most crucial mobilizer of votes, even if not the only one.

One study found that the more people watched television news during the Gulf crisis of 1990-91, the more likely they were to support the US war effort—but the less they knew about the underlying issues. In other words, network news bolstered support for President Bush’s policy of war but was not a factor in informing people. The heavy viewers were poorly informed about

MICHAEL PARENTI

things that were part of the public record, but had been given little or no airing. The great majority of the viewers did not know that Kuwait had been slant drilling into Iraqi oil reserves. Less than a third knew that Israel and Syria also occupied territory in the Middle East. Only 13 percent knew that the US had misleadingly told Saddam Hussein in July 1990 that it was neutral regarding Iraq's dispute with Kuwait. But these viewers were well informed about the few facts that the news gave them. Thus 81 percent knew that "Patriot" missiles were used to shoot down Iraqi "Scuds." And most of them believed that Iraq had gassed the Kurds. Thus they were not completely uninformed, only selectively and poorly informed.⁴⁷

The press can effectively direct our perceptions when we have little information to the contrary and when the message seems congruent with earlier notions about events— notions that themselves may be partly media created. In this way the new information is a reinforcement of earlier perceptions. For example, while most Americans had never heard of Saddam Hussein before July 1990, they were prepared to fear and hate him on the basis of what government spokespeople and media pundits told them. But this image of Hussein was also persuasive to them because it was congruous with a longstanding climate of opinion older than the cold war, one filled with images of a world populated by evil, alien adversaries who threaten the United States and need to be vanquished.

Reportage about seemingly distinct and diverse events have a hidden continuity and a cumulative impact on the public. To see this reportage as one of "minimal effect" because it merely reinforces existing views and does not change them is to overlook the fact that it was never intended to change them but was designed to reinforce the dominant ideology. The "minimal effect" is the intended effect.

Even if the press does not mold our every opinion, it does mold opinion visibility; it can frame the perceptual limits around which our opinions take shape. Here may lie the most important effect of the news media: they set the

INVENTING REALITY

issue agenda for the rest of us, choosing what to emphasize and what to ignore or suppress, in effect, organizing much of our political world for us. The media may not always be able to tell us what to think, but they are strikingly successful in telling us what to think about.⁴⁸

Along with other social, cultural, and educational agencies, the media teach us tunnel vision, conditioning us to perceive the problems of society as isolated particulars, thereby stunting our critical vision. Larger casualties are reduced to immediately distinct events, while the linkages of wealth, power, and policy go unreported or are buried under a congestion of surface impressions and personalities. There is nothing too essential and revealing that cannot be ignored by the American press and nothing too trivial and superficial that cannot be accorded protracted play.

In sum, the media set the limits on public discourse. They may not always mold opinion but they do not always have to. It is enough that they create opinion visibility, giving legitimacy to certain views and illegitimacy to others. The media do the same to substantive issues that they do to candidates, raising some from oblivion and conferring legitimacy upon them, while consigning others to limbo. This power to determine the issue agenda, the information flow, and the parameters of political debate so that it extends from ultra-right to no further than moderate center, is if not total, still totally awesome.

BEYOND ORWELL'S 1984

The news media operate with far more finesse than did the lacerating instruments of repression portrayed in George Orwell's 1984. The picture Orwell draws of a Spartan barracks society with a centrally controlled electronic surveillance system barking exercise commands at a hapless, demoralized Winston Smith in his home, leaves no doubt in Winston's mind and ours that he is being oppressed. Something quite different goes on with our news media.

MICHAEL PARENTI

The sinister commandant who tortures Winston lets us know he is an oppressor. The vision of the future is of a boot pressing down on a human face, he tells his victim. The ideological control exercised in the United States today is far more insidious. Power is always more secure when cooptive, covert, and manipulative than when nakedly brutish. The support elicited through the control of minds is more durable than the support extracted at the point of a bayonet. The essentially undemocratic nature of the mainstream media, like the other business-dominated institutions of society, must be hidden behind a neutralistic, voluntaristic, pluralistic facade. For manipulation to be most effective, evidence of its presence should be nonexistent. ... It is essential, therefore, that people who are manipulated believe in the neutrality of their key social institutions," writes Herbert Schiller.⁴⁹

If Big Brother comes to America, he will not be a fearsome, foreboding figure with a heart-chilling, omnipresent glare as in 1984. He will come with a smile on his face, a quip on his lips, a wave to the crowd, and a press that (a) dutifully reports the suppressive measures he is taking to save the nation from internal chaos and foreign threat; and (b) gingerly questions whether he will be able to succeed.

II. “Freedom of the Press Belongs to the Man Who Owns One”

Freedom of the press, A. J. Liebling once said, is for those who own the presses. With rare exception, the nation’s “free and independent” newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, and television and radio stations are owned by giant corporations. The media are not merely close to corporate America, they are an integral part of it. As such they manifest all the same symptoms: increasing concentration of ownership, big salaries for top executives, political conservatism, union busting, and a constant push for profits.

A FAVORED FEW

The pattern of media ownership shows a high degree of concentration. Eight corporations control the three major television networks (CBS, NBC, ABC), some 40 subsidiary television stations, over 200 cable TV systems, over 60 radio stations, 59 magazines including *Time* and *Newsweek*, chains of newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*, 41 book publishers, and various other media enterprises.

The three major networks garner over 80 percent of all television

MICHAEL PARENTI

advertising intended for a national audience. Of all the existing TV and radio stations, 80 percent are network affiliates. Six corporations earn most of the revenues in the publishing world. Four major studios control most of the box office gross on Hollywood films. Eight studios account for about 90 percent of US feature film video rentals. Five conglomerates own 95 percent of the music industry.¹

During the 1980s, the media industry was one of the business world's most active sectors when it came to multimillion-dollar mergers and acquisitions.² In that decade, the number of corporations dominating all media shrank from forty-six to twenty-three. In 1981 there were twenty dominant firms in the magazine industry; by 1990 a few corporations, Time Warner, News Corporation, Times Mirror, and Hearst, controlled the lion's share of magazine circulation. Giant newspaper chains like Gannett, Knight-Ridder, and Newhouse are gobbling up independent dailies at the rate of fifty or sixty a year and earn about 75 percent of all newspaper revenues in the country. Less than 4 percent of US cities now have competing daily newspapers under separate ownership.³

Through mergers, packaged news services, union busting, wage freezes, and staff cutting, the large media conglomerates have attained a rate of return on their investments that is double the industrial average.⁴ Consider the Hearst Corporation, whose empire includes scores of newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, syndication productions (including King Features and Cowles Syndicate), and interests in cable stations and cable networks, real estate, printing, cattle ranching, and other businesses. In 1987 Hearst showed debt-free assets of \$3.44 billion. Of the \$215 million in profits made that year, \$40 million were distributed to a relatively small group of William Randolph Hearst's living descendants and the rest went for capital spending and acquisitions.⁵

The Hearst empire is easily matched by Times Mirror with its 20

INVENTING REALITY

newspapers and magazines, 50 cable TV systems, television stations and publishing houses, and \$3.5 billion in revenues and \$298 million in profits in 1989.⁶ Then there is Gannett Company with 84 daily newspapers, 16 radio stations, 10 television stations, and \$3.3 billion in revenues with net profits of \$364 million in 1989.⁷

The Rupert Murdoch empire (News Corporation Ltd.) owns over 150 newspapers and magazines, 8 book publishing houses, including HarperCollins, a television network (Fox Broadcasting Company), satellite cable systems, and a major movie studio (20th Century Fox).

Murdoch has substantial media holdings on three continents, including 67 percent of the newspaper circulation in Australia. During the 1991 recession, however, Murdoch's expansionism threatened to undo him. Having borrowed some \$8 billion to finance his acquisitions, he was having trouble meeting his debt payments. Usually he could come up with money by profitably selling off a few properties. But during a recession that offered few buyers and almost no lenders, Murdoch found himself in financial trouble.⁸

The buyout of Warner Communications by Time Inc. created Time Warner, the largest of all media conglomerates, with assets estimated somewhere between \$25 billion and \$30 billion in the magazine, book publishing, and movie industries. It also created an \$11 billion debt and a financial crisis for Time Warner during the 1991 recession that was not unlike the one faced by Murdoch.⁹

While conservatives from Spiro Agnew to George Bush have denounced the press for its supposedly "liberal bias," they have never sought stricter regulations on ownership, advertising rates, and profits. Presidents like Nixon and Reagan imposed serious restrictions on freedom of information yet supported corporate takeovers and profiteering in the media industry. In 1985 the Federal Communications Commission even set up new rules allowing greater concentration of ownership in television and radio.

The end result of all this concentration is that market-dominant media

MICHAEL PARENTI

corporations make a higher percentage of profit on every dollar than do smaller competitors. It is not that they have superior quality, just superior reach and more economic muscle.¹⁰ Needless to say, the social and political implications of big profits and giant media mergers are subjects not critically treated by the news commentators who work for these conglomerates.

INTERLOCKING CONTROL

Newspapers and television networks are run like other corporations in the United States, by boards of directors composed mostly of persons drawn from the moneyed stratum of society. Three-quarters of the major stockholders of ABC, CBS, and NBC are banks such as Chase Manhattan, Morgan Guaranty Trust, Bankers Trust, Citibank, and Bank of America.¹¹ Representatives of the more powerful New York banks sit on the boards of the major networks and greatly influence network fiduciary functions.

Besides banks, the big media organizations hold interlocking directorates with giant companies that have major investments in airlines, coal and oil, insurance, telephone communications, agribusiness, automotives, defense contracts, rocket engineering, nuclear power, and nuclear weaponry. Ford Motor Company—already exercising a considerable influence on American society with its own multibillion-dollar business—has had directors on the corporate boards of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*.¹² General Electric, one of the nation's largest and most influential industrial giants, owns NBC.

The board of directors that rules CBS contains board members from ITT, IBM, Philip Morris, Dow Corning, J. P. Morgan, Rand, Carnegie Corporation, AT&T, Chase Manhattan, Citibank, Alcoa, Bulova, and Metropolitan Life.¹³ Seated on the board of directors of the company that owns the *Washington Post* are representatives from IBM, Johnson & Johnson, Bank of New York, Bankers Trust, Heinz, General Electric, and Coca-Cola.¹⁴ Overall, the directors of media

INVENTING REALITY

corporations “are linked with powerful business organizations, not with public interest groups; with management, not labor; with well-established think tanks and charities, not their grassroots counterparts.”¹⁵ With few exceptions, they lean politically to the right, being supporters of conservative viewpoints. They are drawn from a narrow, high-income segment of the population.¹⁶

MANY VOICES ONE CHORUS

Hailed for its pluralism and diversity, the news media actually are highly centralized outlets that proffer remarkably homogenized fare. News services for dailies throughout the nation are provided by the *AP*, *UPI*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times-Washington Post* wire services, and one or two foreign ones such as *Reuters*. The underlying political viewpoints of these conduits are pretty much the same, “marked by a prefabricated standardization of news which is constricting and frightening.”¹⁷

A growing portion of press offerings is given over to fluff and puffery rather than “hard” news, to trivialized features and gossip items, crime, scandal, sports, “women’s features,” advertisements, crossword puzzles, comic strips and horoscopes. Be it broadcast or print, the news is usually scant, superficial, and oriented toward “events and personalities in the limelight,” a few “headline stories” along with a number of conservative or simply banal commentaries and editorials.¹⁸

Whichever newspaper one reads or TV news show one views, in whatever part of the United States, one is struck by the indistinguishable and immediately familiar quality of the news and views presented and of the people presenting them. One confronts a precooked, standardized news industry that is in sharp contrast to the “pluralistic diversity” of opinion said to prevail in the United States. Most of the news items and even many editorials are “canned,” derived from syndicated sources. Worse still, many are thinly disguised press releases distributed by private or governmental sources and published almost

MICHAEL PARENTI

verbatim. For instance, *PR Newswire*, a wire service specializing in business press releases, distributes 150 stories daily to the major TV networks and other broadcast outlets, and to some 600 newsrooms across the nation, including the major dailies and wire services.¹⁹

To think that information and viewpoints circulate in “a free market of ideas” is to conjure up a misleading metaphor. A “market” suggests a place of plentitude, with the consumer moving from stall to stall as at any bazaar, sampling and picking from an array of wares. But the existing media market of ideas is more like the larger economic market of which it is a part: oligopolistic and accessible mostly to those who possess vast amounts of capital, or who hold views that are pleasing to the possessors of capital.

To be sure, in this controlled market there is a vast array of publications—for motorcycle owners, dog owners, and homeowners, for brides and singles, for fishing, hunting, and dating, for camping and gardening, for weight watching and weight lifting, for karate and judo, for sailing, swimming, and jogging, for auto mechanics, auto racing, horse racing, and horse raising, for music fans, movie fans, television fans, soap opera devotees, and computer buffs, for just about every conceivable diversion and taste. Relatively few of these have anything to do with meaningful political and social affairs. Most are devoted to recreation and consumerism. The diversity of publications, both serious and trivial, should not be mistaken for a plurality of ideas and ideologies, nor a wealth of political information.

If the news media offer a good deal of trivialized fluff, isn't that what the public wants? Don't people prefer to be diverted and entertained rather than informed and burdened with serious matters? Publishers and network producers say so. But one reason they do not offer more serious news is that it costs more than the canned features. News is produced by staff reporters who demand salaries and benefits and who often try to unionize. Sometimes they attempt to write about things that are troublesome to large financial interests and big advertisers. In contrast, “soft” features attract advertisers and offend no

INVENTING REALITY

one. They can be bought inexpensively from a syndicate, and they demand no salaries, benefits, or unions.²⁰

One of the first things a big chain does when it takes over an independent newspaper is cut down on its staff in order to lower costs and maximize profits. The result is less news and less quality.

And if the paper enjoys the monopolistic advantage of being the only daily in town, it can raise its advertising rates and make still more money. Although the chains control 75 percent of the nation's daily circulation, they employ only 25 percent of the correspondents. In other words, they make more money but offer less news.²¹

Is this what the public wants? Less news and more high-priced advertising, the costs of which are eventually passed on to them? If anything, circulation tends to stagnate or even decline slightly when an independent becomes just another link in a newspaper chain. In city after city, "the papers that chose to emphasize the primacy of news over the primacy of advertising revenues developed the strongest reader loyalty," and had the best survival rate. Papers that failed had less serious and poorer quality news, and less coverage of all kinds than did their successful counterparts.²²

The same is true of magazines. In the 1960s national magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* actually gained circulation when they became more socially conscious and dealt with important issues. Yet they died at the height of their popularity because of the competing appeal of television as an advertising conduit.²³ The fate of the national magazines was not determined by what the public wanted but by where the corporate advertisers wanted to put their money.

There is no one monolithic public but many various publics. Some people may want to be distracted with tabloid television, comic strips, and pop features, but many others are concerned about serious politicoeconomic events and issues, including world events.²⁴ They get little of what they want from the news media, and what they do get is what the dominant interests want them to

MICHAEL PARENTI

have—as we shall see in the pages ahead.

INVENTING REALITY

III. Who Controls The News?

Does ownership of the media translate into control over information? Or are journalists free to write what they want? Reporters themselves offer contradictory testimony on this question. Some say they are independent agents while others complain of control and censorship.

CALLING THE TUNE: OWNERS

The people who own the media conglomerates along with their directors and chief executive officers are drawn overwhelmingly from the ranks of the rich. Not surprisingly, nearly all of them are politicoeconomic conservatives.¹ One media critic notes that among the top officers of the three major networks “there is not a person who I would judge is a liberal.” The network bosses are “in general closer to the right of the political center than to the left.”²

Do these rich conservatives preside over their empires without a concern for the ideological slant of the news stories and political commentary produced by their media organizations? If so, it would seem odd. An article in *Forbes*, a business magazine, noted that the Hearst Corporation enjoyed “considerable clout over network programming” because it owned the largest collection of

MICHAEL PARENTI

non-network-owned ABCTV affiliates. *Forbes* recognized that with ownership comes “clout” and saw nothing unusual about that.³

Rupert Murdoch was once asked: “You’re considered to be politically conservative. To what extent do you influence the editorial posture of your newspapers?” He responded: “Considerably. The buck stops on my desk. My editors have input, but I make final decisions.” Murdoch added that he thought of himself not as a mere conservative but a “radical conservative.”⁴

Otis Chandler, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, readily admitted there existed an ideological selection process: “I’m the chief executive. I set policy and I’m not going to surround myself with people who disagree with me. In general areas of conservatism vs. liberalism, I surround myself with people who generally see the way I do.” Chandler thinks of himself and his editors as “centrists.”⁵

The top news executives are subject to the judgments of the ruling corporate directors and owners who exercise financial power over the organization and, if they so choose, final judgment over the news itself and over who is hired or fired at lower levels. When the Du Ponts owned the largest newspapers in Delaware they blatantly suppressed news reports and editorials that did not suit their ideological proclivities.⁶ When Walter Annenberg owned the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, he regularly prohibited his editors from running stories that mentioned the names of persons he disliked, including individuals normally reported in the news. He also used the paper to attack a gubernatorial candidate who advocated policies that might infringe upon his own railroad interests in Pennsylvania—without ever informing readers that he had such interests.⁷

C. Peter Jorgensen, publisher of Century Newspapers Inc., advised all editors of his three Boston-area weeklies that he did

not intend to pay for paper and ink, or staff time and effort, to print news or opinion pieces which in any way might be construed to lend support,

INVENTING REALITY

comfort, assistance, or aid to political candidates who are opposed by Republican candidates in the November election. You are specifically instructed to submit any and all political stories which mention any candidate in any race and any photographs, letters, editorials, cutlines, or any other kind of written material whatsoever relative to the election or elected officials and their record, to the publisher prior to publication... . If this is unclear in any way, resolve every question in your mind with a decision NOT to print.⁸

No state censor could have been more thorough.

Owners often make a show of not interfering, but “the suggestions of powerful superiors are, in fact, thinly veiled orders, requiring circumlocutions in which commands are phrased as requests.”⁹ Sometimes suggestions made by owners can be brushed aside by editors, but not too often. And if the owner insists, then the editor obeys. Herbert Gans writes: “Older journalists at *Time* told me that Henry Luce used to flood them with story suggestions, many of which were ignored; but those he deemed most important and urgent were not.”¹⁰

If an editor proves recalcitrant, the owner’s velvet glove comes off. In the early 1950s Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* decided his liberal editors were being too critical of the anticommunist witch-hunting escapades of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Eventually Pulitzer’s requests that his editors “lay off the McCarthy hearings” were replaced by a direct and silencing command: “I must ask that the words ‘McCarthy’ or ‘McCarthyism’ or any oblique reference to either shall not appear on the editorial page without my specific approval ...”¹¹

Les Brown’s observations about the ideological underpinnings of local TV stations holds for local radio and newspapers as well:

Many of the stations are owned by persons of hard right-wing bias who

MICHAEL PARENTI

are pillars of the local power structure and who believe their public service obligations to be met by promoting love for the flag. They would have networks concentrate on spreading patriotism and ... would keep the air waves free from the voices of dissent.¹²

CALLING THE TUNE: ADVERTISERS

Owners themselves must have a care not to offend other large financial interests, especially those of big corporate advertisers. Todd Gitlin reports:

The knowledge of who pays the bills can't be dispelled, even though it doesn't always rise to consciousness. Network executives internalize the desires of advertisers. CBS's Herman Keld ... didn't qualify his answer when I asked him whether ad agencies—and affiliates—are taken into account in programming decisions. "I would say they are always taken into account. Always taken into account..."¹³

The notion that the media are manipulated by big moneyed interests is dismissed by some as a "conspiracy theory." But there is nothing conspiratorial about it. Because they pay the bills, advertisers regard their influence over media content as something of a "right." And media executives seem to agree. As erstwhile CBS president Frank Stanton said: "Since we are advertiser-supported we must take into account the general objective and desires of advertisers as a whole."¹⁴

Consider how, during the early 1970s, the *New York Times* covered the issues of auto safety and auto pollution. *Times* publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger openly admitted that he urged his editors to favor the automotive industry's position so as not to "affect the advertising." The industry was one of the *Times's* biggest accounts at that time.¹⁵

Advertisers are not hesitant to exert pressure. Mobil Oil urged PBS to

INVENTING REALITY

suppress a film that would offend its oil partner, Saudi Arabia.¹⁶

Tobacco companies withdrew their ads from *Mother Jones* after the magazine ran articles citing cigarettes as a major cause of lung cancer and heart disease.¹⁷ A study of five major women's magazines (which frequently reported on women's health and also regularly ran cigarette ads) found that they offered not a single article, review, or commentary on any aspect of the dangers of smoking. When NBC ran a documentary on the terrible conditions endured by migrant workers, citing the abuses perpetrated by Coca-Cola Food Company, Coca-Cola sharply denounced the show, and the network was unable to find a single corporate sponsor for the program.¹⁹ NBC was less courageous when its "Today" show managed to report a boycott without once mentioning GE even though the corporation was a major target of the boycott. As already noted, GE owns NBC.²⁰

Locally owned media are also vulnerable to the pressures of advertisers and other business interests. While working for a paper in an Ohio mill town many years ago, Art Shields was cautioned by his editor to report nothing that might offend the town's merchants and brewers: "We can't live without their good will. Be especially careful when you write about the brewery. It's our best advertiser." Shields was further warned to check with the management of the big steel plant before reporting about it: "The steel mill runs this town," said the editor.²¹

A reporter for the *Willamette Week* in Portland, Oregon, was told by her editor that "business is where the power is and we have to rub their backs." She noted that "numerous articles containing mildly critical information on business" were rewritten because the editor wanted only "positive" pieces.²² A study of how absentee mine owners dominated an impoverished Appalachian valley found that the media in the area never questioned the power of the coal company nor the baneful effects that the company's policies had on the local citizenry.²³ After reviewing many county weeklies published in the United States, one writer concluded that very few "ever print anything that might cause

MICHAEL PARENTI

discomfort to anyone with any economic power.”²⁴

Advertisers will cancel ads when they feel the reporting reflects unfavorably on their own product or industry. But they just as frequently withdraw financial support because they dislike the “liberal biases” they think are creeping into the news.²⁵ Thus when the *New Haven Advocate* ran an article containing some positive things about revolutionary Grenada, a large department store responded by canceling its advertising account with the paper.²⁶ Years ago the owners of *Esquire* started Ken, “a magazine of liberal idealism” that attracted a good deal of reader interest. But big corporations unfriendly to the liberal views in its articles refused to advertise in the new publication and even threatened to withdraw their ads from *Esquire*. So the *Esquire* owners killed Ken even though it had met its circulation plans.²⁷

Business viewpoints are abundantly represented with TV shows like “Nightly Business Report,” “Wall Street Week,” and “Adam Smith’s Money World”—all of which have corporate backing. This country’s most far-reaching wire service, *Associated Press* (AP), is also its most conservative.²⁸ AP is owned by big companies like Merrill Lynch. Corporate support also explains the plethora of conservative commentators such as Robert Novak, William Buckley, and John McLaughlin on political talk shows and the absence of progressive ones. The backing of rich sponsors explains the transformation of McLaughlin “from a fringe right-wing columnist in the late 1970s to one of the most prominent faces on public affairs TV.”²⁹ In contrast, progressive commentators such as Jonathan Kwitny and Jesse Jackson—deprived of major advertisers—do not last long on public television, let alone on commercial outlets. Likewise, without big advertising support, progressive publications like the *Nation* and the *Guardian* are always facing insolvency, never able to launch the kind of massive mainstream promotional campaigns that might win the attention of larger publics.

Business interests rail against the “anti-business bias” in the news. It is a way of keeping the press in line. But actually very little of the “investigative

INVENTING REALITY

reporting” of the last two decades has targeted big business. No wonder when corporate leaders were asked to evaluate the treatment accorded them by the media, only 6 percent said it was “poor,” while 66 percent said “good” or “excellent.”³⁰

Almost all the discussion regarding freedom of the press focuses on government attempts to influence or limit the information flow. But most of the censorship occurs in the private sector, carried out by owners and advertisers who determine which facts and ideas will reach the public.

ON THE LINE: EDITORS

Actual responsibility for daily (or weekly) news production rests with the newspaper editors and radio and television program producers. Without having to answer to reporters, they can cut, rewrite, or kill any story they choose, subject only to final review by their executive superiors.³¹ The top media executives meet regularly with editors and producers in order to keep tabs on story selection. They can recommend or veto a story whenever they like, even overriding their editors. However, since they have other duties and, within their corporation, are supposed to adhere to a division of labor, most often they refrain from imposing their power on a daily basis.³² As one editor put it: “It is not what [the executive boss] will do or will veto, but what we expect that he will do or veto; that’s his influence.”³³ Daily censorship is made unnecessary by anticipatory self-censorship.

Many editors insist they are nobody’s puppet. Infused with notions of professional integrity and personal autonomy, they will vehemently deny they are objects of corporate control. Indeed, editors are accorded a certain degree of independence—if they demonstrate their ability to produce what their superiors want: copy that generally does not challenge the interests of those of wealth and power. Editors perform without daily interference from their superiors because such interference is not necessary. An editor who has to be reined in every day

MICHAEL PARENTI

by the publisher will not last long as editor. But we must not mistake this kind of conditional autonomy for actual autonomy. There is no reason to believe that compliant editors could oppose their publishers even if they wanted to.

Since many news editors and broadcast producers share the world view of their superiors, they seldom experience any ideological dissonance. They are free because they are in perfect agreement with their bosses and therefore give no cause for being called to account.

When an editor resists doing what the publisher wants, then the latter—like the boss of any business organization—is not above ramming his or her dictates down the editor’s throat. If they want to keep their jobs, editors learn to swallow. On those relatively rare occasions when it is more than they can swallow, they will resign. The publisher of some local Michigan newspapers wrote a memo provoking his editor to quit. It read in part: “It will be our policy to aggressively support, promote, and report business organizations within our circulation area and/or those business organizations who support us with their advertising.”³⁴ Sometimes editors are not given the choice of resigning and are unceremoniously fired for resisting the owner’s directives or for allowing uncomfortable information or dissident opinions to creep into their pages.³⁵

It is a rare event when a journalistic defender of capitalism stops pretending that he or she is an independent agent and explicitly admits that a class power relationship exists in the media. In 1983 and again in 1987, James Kilpatrick, a conservative columnist for the *Washington Post* and himself a former editor, wrote columns supporting the power of high school and college authorities to censor and suppress student newspapers. To give students “absolute freedom of the press is to let the animals run the zoo,” he asserted. Furthermore:

In a real, grown-up world an editor is subject to a publisher, and if the publisher says “Kill the piece,” that’s it, sweetheart, the piece is killed. The right of a free press attaches to the guy who owns one. Students do

INVENTING REALITY

not own a school paper. They have invested not one dime in its production.³⁶

Here Kilpatrick admits, indeed, proclaims that, contrary to the established mythology, freedom of the press is not a reporter's political right but is a prerogative of ownership and wealth. Owners thereby have license to exercise prior censorship over editors. Kilpatrick is right in saying that's how things work in the real world. It is just not often that mainstream commentators announce such truths about the real world. (However, if he seriously believes that those who pay should have the final say, then Kilpatrick should keep in mind that most student-run college newspapers are supported by student activities funds. It is the college administrators who "have invested not one dime but who still claim the right of censorship.)

Editors are more frequently the conduits of, rather than resisters to, the owner's censorship. Former managing editor of the *New York Times* Turner Catledge notes how he used to pass his publisher's numerous criticisms to reporters and editors as if they were his own so that his staff would not feel "the publisher was constantly looking over their shoulders. In truth, however, he was."³⁷

SELF-CENSORSHIP: REPORTERS

Like editors, reporters are granted autonomy by demonstrating that they will not use it beyond acceptable limits. They are independent agents in a conditional way, free to report what they like as long as their superiors like what they report. Journalistic competence is measured in part by one's ability to cover things from an ideologically acceptable perspective, defined as "balanced" and "objective." Like social scientists and other investigators, journalists rarely doubt their own objectivity even as they faithfully echo the established orthodoxy. Since they do not cross any forbidden lines, they are not reined in.

MICHAEL PARENTI

Thus they are likely to be unaware they are on an ideological leash. This is why some reporters insist they are free agents. Only when they stray off the beaten path is the pressure from above likely to be felt. And they almost never do.

If every reporter had to be policed continually by superiors when producing the news, the system could not maintain its democratic appearance and probably could not function very smoothly. As it turns out, editors and owners do not have to exercise ubiquitous supervision; intermittent control will do. As already mentioned, the anticipation that superiors might disapprove of this or that story is usually enough to discourage a reporter from writing it, or an editor from assigning it. Many of the limitations placed on reporting come not from direct censorship but from self-censorship, from journalists who design their stories so as to anticipate complaints from superiors. This anticipatory avoidance makes direct intervention from above a less frequent necessity and leaves the journalist with a greater feeling of autonomy than might be justified by the actual power relationship.

After an extended study of major media, one sociologist concluded that self-censorship becomes a matter of habit, "in which case journalists may not be aware they are responding to pressure."³⁸ Gans mentions one reporter who considered arguing with an editor for deleting an uncomplimentary fact about the CIA but since "too much disagreement with superiors types people as 'cranks,' she decided to save her scarce political capital for an issue about which she felt more strongly."³⁹

Many people who learn to hold their fire eventually end up never doing battle. After a while anticipatory avoidance becomes a kind of second nature. Former FCC chairperson Nicholas Johnson describes the process of self-censorship:

A reporter ... first comes up with an investigative story idea, writes it up and submits it to the editor and is told the story is not going to run. He wonders why, but the next time he is cautious enough to check with the

INVENTING REALITY

editor first. He is told by the editor that it would be better not to write that story. The third time he thinks of an investigative story idea but doesn't bother the editor with it because he knows it's silly. The fourth time he doesn't even think of the idea anymore.⁴⁰

One might add a fifth time when the reporter bristles with indignation at the suggestion that he is on an ideological leash and is not part of a free and democratic press.

Many reporters insist they owe their souls to no one. This despite the fact that they frequently wonder aloud to each other how the boss is taking things. They talk of good stories spiked or rewritten by politically motivated editors. They know of potentially combustible events that go unreported and of editors who decide to favor officialdom's version of events while ignoring abundant information to the contrary. They can recall instructions from above on how not to antagonize big advertisers and other powerful interests. They can name journalists who have been let go or banished to some obscure section of the paper. They know of political dissidents who have been invited to appear on opinion shows or write guest columns only to be suddenly disinvented when word of the event reached higher news echelons. Still most of them treat these incidents as aberrant departures from a basically democratic system of news production.

Journalists will treat their self-censorship as a matter of being "realistic" or "pragmatic" or "playing by the rules." In their ability to live in a constant, if not always conscious, state of anticipatory response while maintaining an appearance of independence, newspeople are not much different from professionals in other hierarchical organizations.

Journalists are subjected to on-the-job ideological conditioning conducted informally through hints and casual inferences that masquerade as "professional" advice. Thus, they might be admonished not to get too "emotionally involved" and not to lose their "objectivity," when they are

MICHAEL PARENTI

producing copy that is disturbing to persons of wealth and power. While deputy editor of the *Washington Post* editorial page Meg Greenfield advised a colleague on how to keep a safe distance from a particularly controversial subject as follows: “I don’t know much. I’m like you. I’ve never been a ‘cause’ person.”⁴¹ Eventually Greenfield was promoted to editorial page editor.

Veteran newspeople “have remarkably finely tuned antennae for finding out the limits” to which they can go, remarked one former reporter.⁴² Some even admit there are invisible restraints. ABC correspondent Sam Donaldson says: “There is a line when you’re questioning public officials, particularly in public, beyond which you don’t go. I can’t define that line and I have never purposely gone over it, although once in a while I come close.”⁴³

THE RULING CULTURE

When determining what to treat as news, media organizations often take their cues from one another, moving in a kind of rough unison, a phenomenon that has been called “pack journalism.” The pack may run in one direction or it may suddenly stampede in another. But it is not entirely free to roam as it chooses, for past images influence present ones, and if a media opinion already exists about what is true and important, it usually will shape subsequent reporting on the topic.

If an opinion prevails for any great length of time without benefit of critical examination or hard evidence (for instance, the view that a conservative president is concerned about the well-being of working people in America or that the US government supports democracy and human rights in the Third World), it is usually because of a durable ideological underpinning. Opinion inertia is easier to sustain if it is rolling with, rather than against, the ideological tilt of the land. By definition, opinion inertia favors the existing framework of institution, power, and persuasion and generally operates with conservative effect. Pack journalism is conformist journalism. But where does

INVENTING REALITY

the conformity come from?

Journalists are exposed to the same communities, schools, universities, graduate schools, popular culture—and media—that socialize other Americans into the dominant belief system. They react to much the same news that inundates their audiences. They seldom look to the radical press for a different viewpoint or for information unreported in the mainstream media. The establishment biases that predefine what is acceptable news and commentary are subjected to no critical examination by them. With cyclical effect, they find confirmation for the images they report in the images they have already created and internalized.

The image of the reporter propagated by Hollywood films of an earlier era is of a tough-talking, two-fisted, regular guy, more at home in a local bar than in a fancy country club, scornful of bluebloods and stuffed shirts. With a fedora shoved back on his head, he gives his typewriter a furious two-finger pounding, pausing only to gulp coffee from a cardboard container, showing himself every inch the courageous investigator, ready to “blow this town wide open” with revelations that will rock City Hall and other venal powers.

Turning from Hollywood fantasy to reality, we find that most journalists employed by major media were raised in upper-middle-class homes. Only one in five come from blue-collar or low-status white-collar families. Almost all have college degrees and a majority have attended graduate school. Despite journalism’s reputation as a low-paid profession, most newspeople have family incomes that put them in the top 10 percent bracket. Network correspondents, senior editors, and producers make considerably more, usually well into the high six-figure range, while network TV-news anchorpersons earn million-dollar salaries.⁴⁴

As in other fields, so in the world of journalism: “knowing and pleasing the right people, and coming from a prestigious background do not hurt in the competition for promotions.”⁴⁵ Syndicated columnists like Stewart and Joseph Alsop, William Buckley, and George Will often start out with personal wealth or

MICHAEL PARENTI

diplomas from elite schools or important political friends and business connections—or all of the above. The apprenticeship they serve in the lower ranks is usually a brief one, if any. Jonathan Schell’s meteoric rise from college graduate to a leading *New Yorker* writer was helped by his Harvard background, a father who was a successful Manhattan lawyer, and a family friend, William Shawn, editor of the *New Yorker*. Benjamin Bradlee’s family connections with multimillionaire Eugene Meyer helped him get a reporter’s job on the *Washington Post*, owned by Meyer. While still a young reporter, Bradlee was invited into his publisher’s social circle, not a usual practice, but Bradlee came from “aristocratic northeastern stock,” a family of bankers. He later became Washington bureau chief of *Newsweek* (owned by the Grahams) and was then picked by Katharine Graham (Eugene Meyer’s daughter and subsequent owner of the *Post*) to become the paper’s executive editor.⁴⁶

Diane Sawyer reached the elevated heights of a national television news host who makes \$1.2 million yearly partly by hard work and good looks. But it also happened that her father had political contacts in Washington which helped her get a position with Ron Ziegler, President Nixon’s press secretary. She worked loyally with Nixon on his memoirs for an extended time. Then Bill Small, senior vice president of CBS and old friend of the Sawyer family, hired her to work at CBS.⁴⁷

Most newspeople lack contact with working-class people, have a low opinion of labor unions, and know very little about people outside their own social class.⁴⁸ Martin Lee and Norman Solomon cite a number of studies showing that journalists identify themselves as either “conservative” or “middle of the road” and are slightly less inclined than the general public to see government act to reduce the gap between rich and poor.⁴⁹

Persons of almost any political persuasion can get jobs at the lower entry ranks of journalism (unless they have gamed some notoriety as radicals or have other credentials that markedly indicate political deviancy). The process of selection becomes more ideologically exacting the higher one goes up the

INVENTING REALITY

communication hierarchy. Above the ordinary reporters stand the more prominent and influential columnists and commentators who are drawn from that portion of the spectrum ranging from arch-conservative to mildly liberal.

In regard to economic and class issues, most journalists are educated into a world view that supports rather than opposes the existing corporate system. Most journalism schools offer politically conventional curricula. While repeatedly lectured to about the importance of objectivity and professionalism, a journalism student can easily go through an entire program without ever raising critical questions about how and why the capitalist economic system functions and malfunctions as it does. Corporations and foundations have endowed journalism schools with courses and programs designed to make newspeople “more understanding” of the business viewpoint. At best, most journalists have only a feeble grasp of economics.

Numerous conservative think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institute send pamphlets, “expert” reports, and other publications to newspeople across the nation, alerting them to the harmful effects of government regulations, corporate taxes, and labor unions, and making a case for a strong national security state and a militant foreign policy. Even if this flood of material does not win the hearts and minds of all journalists, it is read by many and regularly referred to in their stories and news analyses. The unrelenting inundation of business propaganda is likely to affect the consciousness of the working press—especially in the absence of an alternative view of equal currency.⁵⁰

Prestigious awards and prizes, funded by big corporations, are given every year for excellence in business reporting. For instance, the University of Missouri School of Journalism awards a prize for energy reporting that is subsidized by the National Gas Association. And the Media Awards for Economic Understanding, which in one year received 1,400 entries from journalists, is supported by Chambion International Corporation.⁵¹ The Bagehot Fellowship, “an intensive program of study at Columbia University for

MICHAEL PARENTI

journalists interested in improving their understanding of economics, business and finance,” fills its guest speaker program with such elite figures as Paul Volcker, former head of the Federal Reserve System; Donald Regan, formerly secretary of the Treasury and subsequently chief of staff to President Reagan; and financiers Felix Rohatyn and David Rockefeller.⁵² Since editors are inclined to judge and promote reporters according to the number of awards they win, there is no shortage of eager journalistic applicants. These corporate-backed awards and training programs help “to shape the kinds of stories journalists pursue and the kinds of standards that editors recognize.”⁵³

Business corporations offer other more familiar enticements, such as dinners, parties, gifts, and free trips to luxury hotels for “conferences” that boost this or that industry. Peter Dreier notes that newspeople claim they are free to write whatever they please about these junkets, but few ever produce critical reports. Most newspaper sections, such as food, auto, real estate, travel, fashion, sports, and business, offer little more than puffery and promotional copy, with stories initiated by business, written by sympathetic reporters, and rewarded with advertising revenue.⁵⁴

SUPPRESSING THE NEWS

In defense of his profession, a journalist once told me: “We simply goes out, we gets the story, and we writes it.” In fact, the process is more complex than that. Reporters carry along their past conditioning, schooling, and political socialization. Before they ever leave the office they are influenced in what they will report by (1) the assignments given them by their superiors, (2) anticipatory responses to the reactions of superiors and public officials, (3) career considerations, and (4) the general political climate and dominant ideology (sustained partly by the press itself). Then they observe events and report to their editors who, responding to the same influences listed above, run the stories often after cutting and rewriting them.

INVENTING REALITY

Despite self-censorship and the various organizational influences and controls, there is always the danger that a reporter or editor might report something that does not rest well with those at the top. On such occasions, direct interposition from owners or sometimes advertisers becomes necessary. Publishers and network bosses will rein in editors and producers who in turn will curb reporters. As the famous newscaster Edward R. Murrow observed, the top managers “make the final and crucial decisions having to do with news and public affairs.”⁵⁵

The political radical James Aronson relates how as a young reporter for the *New York Post* in the 1940s, he did not receive an assistant editorship that ought to have been his. His news editor told him: “You were not advanced, my young friend, because your political views are at variance with those held by the managers of this enterprise and therefore not acceptable to them.”⁵⁶ Thinking back to the days he worked as a reporter for the *New York Times*, when that paper was relentlessly committed to US cold war policies, Aronson recalls “a censorship so subtle that it was invisible” yet it “affected everyone on the staff. The ‘approach’ (it was never a vulgar ‘line’) was made clear in casual conversations, in editing of copy for ‘clarity,’ and in the deletion of any forthright interpretation as ‘emotionalism.’” He concluded: “The surest way to isolation was the espousal of unpopular radical views.”⁵⁷

Another former journalist relates his experiences with a *Time* magazine news bureau:

At one time or another those of us out in the field would be sent a suggestion, really a directive from the central office, maybe originating from [Henry] Luce himself, to cover a story or play up some angle. ... If I protested and said that the suggestion didn’t make sense, or was loaded, or presumed something that just was not true, they would say, “Oh, of course, sure, use your own judgment.” There was a big show of not forcing [anyone] to obey a direct order. But after I balked a few more

MICHAEL PARENTI

times, I found myself ignored and then reassigned.”⁵⁸

A former employee of *Time* remembers how Whittaker Chambers, foreign news editor of that magazine in the summer of 1944, repeatedly suppressed dispatches from *Time*'s overseas correspondents. Chambers tailored the news to make it conform to his own right-wing view of world affairs. “So many of John Hersey’s stories from Moscow were suppressed that he stopped sending news and confined his cables to accounts of Shostakovich's newest symphony and other cultural events. Reporting from China, Theodore White saw his criticisms of Chiang Kai-shek’s autocratic regime replaced with encomiums of Chiang as a defender of democratic principles.”⁵⁹ *Time*'s researchers protested the distortions but Chambers prevailed, for he was producing stories his publisher, Henry Luce, liked.

In 1949, correspondent Aslan Humbaraci resigned from the *New York Times* because his journalistic efforts in Turkey met with systematic hostility from Turkish officials and from the US embassy and US military mission in that country. Worst of all, he complained, his reporting in the *Times* itself, “when it was not completely suppressed, was cut, rewritten, buried somewhere in the back pages or distorted, if it did not happen to fit in with State Department policy.” In his letter of resignation to the *Times*, Humbaraci wrote:

The suppression of civil liberties [in Turkey], the brutal treatment of peasants by a ruthless gendarmerie, the police terror in the towns, the revolt of the peasants in remote Anatolian villages, the arrest and imprisonment and torturing of political prisoners, the persecution of intellectuals, the scandalous abuse by officials, and the official support extended to the extreme right wing have found no place in the columns of the *New York Times*. Further, I cannot remember any anti-Russian news from any sources in Turkey that has not been published in the *Times*—especially news depicting Russia as Turkey’s enemy and the

INVENTING REALITY

menace to Turkey's existence.⁶⁰

Humbaraci wrote that letter in 1949. The *Times's* reporting on Turkey has not changed significantly since then.

Malcolm Browne said he left the television industry in 1966 because he was unable to communicate the deeper aspects of the Vietnam War to the American public. When dealing with the economic and political problems relating to the war, he often found that "the producer switches you off and cuts the footage that he deems most illustrative of what you're talking about."⁶¹ One could go on with examples of news suppression, such as the following:

After working for CBS News for twenty-three years, Daniel Schorr resigned in 1979 when a controversy arose regarding his story on a classified report by the House Intelligence Committee. The report dealt with improper conduct in the FBI and CIA and was never aired by CBS.⁶²

After *Newsday* refused to investigate whether the CIA and Henry Kissinger had conspired to assassinate Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica, two of the paper's veteran reporters wrote the story and published it in *Penthouse*. *Newsday* is owned by Times Mirror, whose board of directors was chaired by Franklin Murphy, a man with links to the intelligence community and a good friend of Kissinger. After Kissinger heatedly complained about the story, pressure from above was soon felt at *Newsday*.

One of the authors of the article, Ernest Volkman, was told he could no longer cover anything having to do with national security. The other author already had been demoted to an obscure post.

Volkman's television appearances to discuss the story were mysteriously canceled. After fourteen years with *Newsday* he decided to quit.⁶³

Reporter Gregory Gordon was fired by *UPI* after seventeen years of service because he co-authored a book about *UPI* and refused to submit the manuscript to superiors for their approval.⁶⁴

UPI reporter Edward Roby discovered that US oil companies were

MICHAEL PARENTI

claiming business expenses in Saudi Arabia as tax credits (instead of as ordinary deductions), thereby evading millions of dollars in US income taxes. Roby's reward for this investigative reporting was to become the object of concerted denunciations by Mobil and Exxon. *UPI* forbade him from doing any more stories about oil and taxes.⁶⁵

Two *AP* reporters, Robert Parry and Brian Barger, uncovered involvement of CIA-supported contras in the cocaine trade and arms traffic. After their stories were repeatedly spiked or heavily cut, the two quit in disgust.⁶⁶

Prior to the 1984 electoral campaign, ABC suppressed several stories produced by its own investigative unit that were potentially harmful to conservative Republicans, including an FBI cover-up of Labor Secretary Raymond Donovan's association with organized crime and attempts by Senator Paul Laxalt to stop a probe of his campaign contributors.⁶⁷

When *New York Times* columnist Sydney Schanberg became increasingly attentive to the greed and indifference of New York's big developers, bankers, and other moneyed interests, his column was permanently canceled by publisher Sulzberger. Schanberg resigned from the paper.⁶⁸

After reporter John Hess's investigative reports on corruption in the Bronx Terminal Market were spiked by the *New York Times*, seemingly in response to pressure from powerful interests at City Hall, he resigned.⁶⁹

Reporter Bill Collins was fired by the publisher of the *WinstonSalem Journal* in North Carolina for union activity and for writing too much about labor. An associate of Collins was fired by the *High Point Enterprise* (NC) purportedly for covering labor-management disputes in such a way as to give labor's side of things as well as management's. Both journalists were blacklisted by North Carolina newspapers after that.⁷⁰

During a strike by *New York Daily News* workers, *New York Times* reporter Bruce Lambert wrote a thorough story on the Tribune Company, the conglomerate that owned the *News*. It was killed. The *Times Metropolitan* denied

INVENTING REALITY

any managerial intervention, but Lambert was suddenly dropped as the labor reporter and sent off to the real estate page.⁷¹

When Jon Alpert, an NBC stringer, returned from Iraq, during the Gulf war, with revealing footage of civilian areas devastated by US aerial attacks, NBC News president Michael Gartner not only refused to air the film but terminated Alpert's twelve-year relationship with the network.⁷²

More examples could be provided of stories suppressed and reporters silenced, and more will be given in the pages ahead. Each act of suppression has a chilling effect on other staff members. Needless to say, these instances of news repression do not themselves usually become news items in the mainstream press. Most often the reporters do not resign; they learn to accept the existing state of affairs in order to survive in their profession. The consequences of this kind of control are that "coverage is limited and certain questions never get asked," according to Len Ackland, a *Chicago Tribune* writer. Reporters think twice before delving into sensitive areas. "They worry about the editing. They worry about being removed from choice beats, or being fired."³

James O'Shea, former business editor of the *Des Moines Register*, argues that the media's pattern of business ownership and interlocking directorates is "going to affect the reporter, I don't care who he is; or it will affect his editors. You're more cautious. ... A lot of reporters and editors will tell you that it has no effect on them, but I don't believe it."⁷⁴ Chris Welles, a former journalist and director of a program on business journalism at Columbia University, commented: "I daresay anyone who has been in the business for more than a few months can cite plenty of examples of editorial compromises due to pressure, real and imagined, from publishers, owners, and advertisers."⁷⁵

Most reporters are probably not right-wingers but they do not have to be. Their owners are. Years ago, media mogul Henry Luce demonstrated what has been repeatedly demonstrated by other owners before and since: that you can turn out conservative publications—as he did with *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*—while employing liberal editors and reporters. Luce never made a fortune out

MICHAEL PARENTI

of the media business by crusading for the downtrodden and attacking the large moneyed interests, favoring the have-nots against the haves.

Those conservative critics who complain that the press is composed of liberals and pinkos have failed to explain why this same “liberal press” has consistently favored conservative candidates. Lee and Solomon point out that since 1932 every Republican presidential nominee except Barry Goldwater (who was running against a conservative Southern Democrat Lyndon Johnson) has been favored by the majority of daily newspapers, that is, favored by their rich conservative owners. Ronald Reagan was endorsed by 77 percent of the dailies in 1980 and 86 percent in 1984. George Bush received 70 percent backing in 1988.⁷⁶

There is nothing mysterious about who controls the ideological direction and political content of the news. As with any profit-making corporation, the chain of command in the media runs from the top down, with final authority in the hands of the owners or those who represent the ownership interests of the company. “News organizations are not democratic; in fact, they are described as militaristic by some journalists ... The links that bind reporter to editor to news executive to corporate executive to board members to bankers and corporate advertisers are not just work relationships but class power relationships.

We might best conclude this chapter with a comment made by an American working-class leader Fanny Wright back in 1829: “The press does not speak the voice of the nation. It does not even speak the voice of those who write for it.”

IV. Objectivity and Government Manipulation

To hear some newspeople tell it, the primary goal of professional journalism is objectivity. But what is objectivity? One's perceptions are inescapably selective. Subjective judgments and biases are introduced even before the writing begins—at the moment one defines what is to be considered a story. Total objectivity—whatever that might be—is impossible. Perceptions of events are inevitably influenced by past experience, dominant social beliefs, and the limitations of the human condition.

As used by the journalism profession, “objectivity” means reporters should not inject their own opinions or biases into their reporting. But this worthy ideal has been debased in practice to mean that reporters must discard their critical thinking and questioning. They must not press too deeply into areas that might cause discomfort to those of power, wealth, and conservative ideology. In so trying to neutralize themselves, they often succeed only in neutralizing their subject matter.

THE MYTH OF OBJECTIVITY

Along with owning the media, the corporate business class controls much of the rest of America too, including its financial, legal, educational, medical, cultural, and recreational institutions.¹ Thus corporate interests not

MICHAEL PARENTI

only structure the way the media report reality, they structure much of reality itself. The ideological character of the news, then, is partly a reflection of the journalist's "routine reliance on raw materials which are already ideological."² The financier's statement about economic prosperity, the Pentagon's advocacy of new weapons systems, the president's assertions about the need for military intervention to stop demon aggressors, the corporation's call for less government regulation—such actualities are laden with subjective political interests. But taken at face value, they are just the "events of the day." What passes for journalistic objectivity is the acceptance of a social reality shaped by the dominant forces of society—without any critical examination of that reality's hidden agendas, its class interests, and its ideological biases.

Opinions that arise from the existing arrangements of economic and political power are treated as facts, while facts that are troublesome to the prevailing powers are likely to be dismissed as opinionated. Those who censor the seemingly opinionated views see themselves as protectors of objectivity and keepers of heterodoxy when, in fact, they are the guardians of ideological conformity.

Erstwhile journalist Bernard Sanders, later to become the socialist mayor of Burlington, Vermont, and then Vermont's independent representative in the US Congress, offered this account of how orthodoxy masquerades as objectivity:

I did a documentary film about [the American Socialist] Eugene Debs. It depicted his role in the labor movement and his opposition to big business in this country. Every TV station I brought it to rejected the film on the grounds that it wasn't objective; it didn't show both sides. I gathered they wanted a plug for capitalism. Can you imagine if I had done a film celebrating the accomplishments of John D. Rockefeller or Henry Ford—those stations would never have insisted on hearing the socialist side. They would never have complained about a lack of objectivity.³

INVENTING REALITY

Relying heavily on institutional authorities for much of their information, newspeople are disinclined to be critical of established sources. A random sampling of 2,850 stories from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* found that 78 percent were based largely on statements by public officials. In *Time* and *Newsweek* 20 percent of the news column inches were given to the president alone.⁴ Studies of television coverage of foreign affairs find a general absence of views that do not coincide with the ones propagated by US foreign policy elites and the US government.⁵ Much of what is passed off as “objective news” is little more than the uncritical transmission of these precooked official opinions.

Whether or not they consciously recognize the ideological parameters within which they operate, journalists usually do not pursue the questions that rub against the ideological limits of their employers. These include: Why are wealth and power so unequally distributed between classes within nations and between developed and Third World nations? Why do corporations have so much power and citizens so little? Why is there so much underemployment, want, and economic insecurity in so many countries in which capitalism is said to be working so well? Why does the United States need a global network of military bases around the world? And why are US leaders hostile toward any nation that charts an independent course, one that might infringe upon the interests of multinational corporate investors?⁶ In their dedication to “objectivity,” journalists never come close to dealing with the realities behind such questions.

Objectivity means reporting US overseas involvements from the perspective of the multinational corporations, the Pentagon, the White House, and the State Department, and rarely questioning the legitimacy of military intervention (although allowing critical remarks about its effectiveness). Objectivity has meant saying almost nothing about the tenacious influence exercised by giant corporations over Congress and the White House. “Objectivity is believing people with power and printing their press releases.

MICHAEL PARENTI

Objectivity is not shouting ‘liar’ in a crowded country.”⁷

Objectivity means that reporters should avoid becoming politically active, and should keep their distance from their subject, while commentators, editors, and owners socialize, dine, and vacation with the political, military, and corporate leaders whose views and policies they are supposed to be objective about.⁸ During the 1980 elections, George Will was an active member of Ronald Reagan’s campaign team and helped Reagan prepare for his debates with President Carter. Without informing his audience of this, Will, the objective commentator for ABC News and columnist for *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, then praised Reagan’s masterful performance in the debates. Despite the conflict of interest and the fraud that might have been involved, Will suffered no sanctions from his employers.

Objectivity means that while reporters should avoid conflicts of interest, publishers and media corporate directors can also be directors of other powerful corporations, banks, universities, foundations, and think tanks. Objectivity means not reporting how these interlocking directorates represent a conflict of interest that might interfere with the directors’ judgments regarding news selection and selection of editors, managers, and reporters.⁹

The journalist Britt Hume urged that newspeople “shouldn’t try to be objective, they should try to be honest.” Instead of passing along the approved versions of things, they should attempt to find out if the officeholder or corporate representative or whoever is telling the truth.

“What [reporters] pass off as objectivity,” Hume concludes, “is just a mindless kind of neutrality.”¹⁰

Reflecting on the 1972 presidential campaign, former *New York Times* correspondent, David Halberstam, notes that “objectivity, which was “the basic rule of journalistic theology,” prevented the press from uncovering important deceptions:

So objectivity was prized and if objectivity in no way conformed to

INVENTING REALITY

reality, then all the worse for reality. The editors were objective and they prided themselves very much on that. It did not bother them that almost everything else they did each day was subjective. Which 12 stories they put on the front page was a subjective decision. Which stories went on the inside page. Which stories were written and did not go into the paper. Which stories were never even assigned... .

So, in truth, despite all the fine talk of objectivity, the only thing that mildly approached objectivity was the form in which the reporter wrote the news, a technical style which required the journalist to appear to be much dumber and more innocent than in fact he was. So he wrote in a bland, uncritical way which gave greater credence to the utterances of public officials, no matter how mindless these utterances... .

Thus the press voluntarily surrendered a vast amount of its real independence; it treated the words and actions of the government of the United States with a credence that those words and actions did not necessarily merit.¹¹

A point Halberstam himself overlooks: In its pursuit of “objectivity” the news media show uncritical favoritism not just toward government but toward the corporate business class, the sacred cow served by government.

If reporters play “dumber and more innocent” than they are, it is in selective ways. They may obligingly report whatever politico-economic elites pronounce, be it truth, half-truths, or lies, but they instantly resuscitate their critical faculties when dealing with dissenters or foreign leaders out of favor with the United States.

If, as I noted earlier, selectivity and subjectivity are unavoidable, does this mean we should just accept biases and distortions as inevitable? No, it means that rather than professing dedication to an unrealistic and poorly defined “objectivity,” we should strive for standards of fairness and accuracy—which are best achieved by questioning the self-serving assumptions

MICHAEL PARENTI

of policy, by unearthing revealing background material, and by giving exposure to a wide range of dissident critics along with the usual establishment commentators. In this way the press would come closer to practicing the “democratic pluralism” it so strenuously preaches.

An important question is, on what basis is news selection made? Is it directed by a desire to give fair exposure to a broad spectrum of views, even seemingly unpopular ones? Or does it routinely downplay or distort some kinds of stories and opinions while giving sympathetic coverage to others? Is the selectivity one that struggles against the limitations imposed by time, space, and official manipulation? Or is it an ideological selectivity that uses these conditions as an excuse to stay away from more unsettling information and opinion? In the chapters ahead we will see that selectivity is not random but consistently serves the powers that be.

NOT ENOUGH TIME, SPACE, AND MONEY?

All sorts of vital issues go unmentioned in the news media. To try to cover everything that is happening in the world would be impossible, it is argued, because it would be too expensive and there is not enough newsprint space and air time available. Let us examine this argument.

The major media are vast news-gathering organizations with correspondents and stringers around the globe. *AP*, for instance, has a hundred reporters in Washington, D.C., alone. Despite these imposing resources, many revealing stories are broken by small publications with only a fraction of the staff available to the big media conglomerates. The startling news that the CIA was funding cultural, academic, and student organizations was first publicized by the now defunct *Ramparts* magazine. Ralph Nader’s revelations about the unsafe nature of automobiles were ignored by the mainstream press and first began appearing in the *Nation*, a low-budget magazine on the liberal left. Journalist Seymour Hersh sent his account of the My Lai massacre of

INVENTING REALITY

Vietnamese villagers by US troops to the little-known *Dispatch News Service*—after none of the major wire services would pick it up.¹²

Stories about hunger in America, the chemical poisoning of our environment, the CIA's involvement in the drug trade, the obstructionist use of the veto by the US at the United Nations, the repeated violations of our civil liberties by government security agencies, including the FBI, the massive corruption and criminal conspiracies behind the savings and loan scandal, the ferocious wars of counterinsurgency and death-squad terrorism sponsored by the US in Central America and elsewhere, and other such revelations were uncovered by poorly financed radical publications or other small media long before they were picked up—if ever—by the major news organizations.

Regarding the broadcast media, twenty-two minutes of televised evening news (with eight minutes for commercials and station breaks) simply do not allow enough time for anything more than “snapshot-and-headline services,” it is said. Yet, despite such limitations, network news finds plenty of time for frivolous subjects intended to entertain rather than inform. If the evening news were expanded to one hour, this would not guarantee more depth coverage. If anything, the repetitious and evasive surface quality of television news would become more evident, and an hour more unsatisfying—as demonstrated by the local TV news shows that now offer hour-long programs. Time is not an ironclad determinant of content. In five minutes one could make devastating in-depth revelations and connections on any number of issues, but how often would a network news team attempt to do so?

News media supposedly have a penchant for stories that are simple and sensational and thereby easily grasped by a large audience. But there are many simple and quite sensational stories that remain untouched. For instance, in October 1982 the media gave sensational coverage to several deaths caused when someone slipped poison into Tylenol capsules that were later sold in stores. Yet these same media ignored the far greater number of deaths (ninety-seven abroad and twenty-seven in the United States) caused when Eli

MICHAEL PARENTI

Lilly and Company marketed an “anti-arthritis pill” called Oraflex. The Food and Drug Administration allowed Oraflex to go on sale in April 1981 despite an FDA investigator’s earlier report indicating that Lilly was withholding data on the dangerous side effects of the drug. Here was a sensational story of mass murder and skulduggery, of possible corporate malfeasance and government collusion, yet the press did not bother with it. Why the difference in handling the two stories? The Tylenol killings seemed to have been the work of a deranged individual; the corporate manufacturer (and advertisers) could not be blamed—unlike the Lilly case. Therefore, the Tylenol story was not only sensational but safe, free of any criticism of the marketing ethics of drug advertisers and of big business in general.¹³

As noted in Chapter 1, some critics say the problem of superficial coverage rests with the journalists themselves. A president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Newbold Noyes, once remarked that reporters are “lazy and superficial,” habitually treating official events and reports as news “while the real situation behind these surface things go unnoted.”¹⁴ But is it really just a matter of laziness and inertia? Behind the superficiality of the news there stands a whole configuration of power and interest that makes the lazy, conventional way of presenting things also the politically safer, less troublesome way. Noyes seems to hint at this when he adds: “I think the worst of our lazy and superficial performance today is that we of the press are allowing ourselves to be manipulated by various interests.” But again, it is not the laziness that is allowing the manipulation; it is the manipulative control that encourages and rewards the lazy, superficial (“objective”) approach.

Correspondents who report on Third World revolutionary insurgencies by ensconcing themselves in a luxury hotel, waiting for handouts from the US embassy, or from the military junta that is trying to destroy the insurgency, may be guilty of laziness; but they are also producing copy their editors and publishers find acceptable. When one of them does otherwise, he or she may run into difficulties. When Herbert Matthews reported the Cuban revolution

INVENTING REALITY

directly from the field, offering detailed accounts of the popular support the guerrillas enjoyed and the early accomplishments of the revolutionary government, he was removed from the story by the *New York Times*. Matthews had unique access to the Cuban leadership. As he himself mourns: “Here was one of the rare phenomena of modern history—a social revolution of the most drastic kind on which I, and I alone, could report from the inside, as it went along. It was a golden opportunity for the *New York Times*. But I was muzzled!”¹⁵

Matthews was silenced on the Cuban issue because his reports were not sufficiently in step with the anti-Castro, anticommunist tidal wave that was flooding the media. Far from being lazy, he showed himself to be the go-getter par excellence, and for that he got into difficulties with his employers. If reporters hold back and allow themselves to be manipulated by vested interests, it is because they have learned that such behavior has its rewards, and a more challenging kind of journalism has its punishments.

Almost two decades later a *Washington Post* reporter, Alma Guillermoprieto, and another *New York Times* reporter, Ray Bonner, learned the same lesson. When they began producing stories for their respective newspapers about how the US-supported military in El Salvador massacred unarmed peasants, they were both pulled out of that country. Guillermoprieto was eventually let go and Bonner resigned, noting that his experience had a chilling effect on “many other reporters” who told him “I don’t want the same thing to happen to me. I’m going to be careful.”¹⁶

MAINTAINING APPEARANCES

How is it that the idea of a free and independent press persists in the face of strong hierarchical corporate controls—even among many members of the working press who should know better? We can answer that question by summarizing some previous points.

First, there is ideological congruity between many members of the

MICHAEL PARENTI

working press and media owners. When reporters and editors look at the world in much the same way as their bosses, censorship becomes an intermittent rather than constant affair, something whose existence can be more easily denied.

Second, within the existing ideological consensus there does exist a limited range of views on what to do about domestic and foreign policy issues—which do not challenge the fundamental arrangements of power and wealth yet give an appearance of diversity.

Third, there is much anticipatory self-censorship practiced by reporters, editors, and producers even while not admitted or consciously perceived by the practitioners themselves.

Fourth, the rewards and punishments designed to induce conformity also socialize people into the existing system. With one's career at stake, it is not too hard for the newsperson to start seeing things the same way superiors do. Sanctions not only force conformity, in time they change people's political perceptions so that the conformity becomes voluntary, so to speak.

Fifth, the more obvious and undeniable instances of coercion, bias, and censorship are seen as aberrations. Bauman notes that *New York Times* journalists who were critical of the newspaper's handling of a particular story insisted that it was an isolated problem.¹⁷

Sixth, reporters and editors who say they are guided by professional integrity and journalistic standards of autonomy and objectivity have rarely, if ever, defined what they mean by these terms. "Professional integrity" remains largely unexplained and somewhat contradictory. For instance, an editor's claim to having final say on what his paper prints would seem to contradict a reporter's claim to independence in what he writes. Likewise, newspeople can cloak themselves in the mantle of objectivity only by ignoring the differences of perspective that make objectivity a highly debatable concept. In order to maintain a sense of self-respect and independence, many newspeople deny the realities of class power under which they manufacture the news. They deny the

INVENTING REALITY

fact that, in the final analysis, the news is not what reporters report but what editors, producers, and owners decide to print or broadcast.

For reasons of their own, media corporate executives and owners sometimes maintain that their editors and reporters enjoy independence. After censoring and then removing a liberal editor, H. B. Du Pont denied that his newspapers served his personal political biases; he reaffirmed that they “operated independently with the objective of being a constructive influence.”¹⁸ Thus do owners lend a democratic facade to an undemocratic relation in order to better secure and legitimate the power they wield. Furthermore, they may actually believe that autonomy and objectivity are the operational rules. They have no reason to overrule compliant editors who are thereby seen as “independent.” And they find it easy to believe that the dominant view—which is their view—is the objective one. Indeed, owners are even less immune to the self-serving myths of objectivity and autonomy than editors and reporters.

In order to operate effectively, the news media must have credibility; they must win a certain amount of trust from the public. To win that credibility they must give the appearance of objectivity as befitting a “free and independent press.” Were owners to announce that their media were the instruments of their own political biases and their class power, they would reveal themselves as they are, and they would weaken the press’s credibility and its class control functions. They must take care not to exercise too blatant a control over the news. Needless to say, the frequent acts of news suppression they do perform are themselves rarely if ever reported as news.

IS IT ALL ECONOMICS?

More than a century ago Karl Marx observed that those who control the material means of production also control the mental means of production. So in every epoch the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. Indeed, it seems so today. Viewpoints supported by money have no trouble gaining mass

MICHAEL PARENTI

exposure and sympathetic media treatment, while those offensive to moneyed interests languish either for want of the costly sums needed to reach a vast public or because of the prohibitions exercised by media owners and management. In a word, the mass media are a class-dominated media—bound by the parameters of ownership in a capitalist society.

The media play a twofold role. While seen as something apart from business, they actually are a big business. But like the “nonprofit” churches, universities, law schools, professional associations, arts and political parties, the media also are an institution geared for ideological control. Their role is to reproduce the conditions of social and class dominance, to carry out the monopoly management of image and information, but in such a way as to engineer an appearance of class neutrality and an appearance of independence from the corporate class that owns them.

Some persons would deny that oligopolistic ownership fosters uniformity of ideas. They argue that even if the media do show a concentration of ownership, this does not explain everything about their content, for mass communication is influenced by an array of social, cultural, and psychological forces. For instance, the professional values of journalists ensure a good deal of independence in the media. To focus exclusively on the economic factor is to lapse into a simplistic materialist reductionism. Economic power is not everything, the argument goes.

No one says economic power is everything, but it is quite a lot. And having taken note of the other factors, need we then hastily dismiss the material (and ideological) class interests that result from corporate ownership and control, as do more orthodox writers who prefer to blame the media’s “shortcomings” on inept reporters, an ignorant public, and cultural biases? Social experience is no less economic because it is also cultural and psychological. Life does not come in neatly divided and mutually exclusive subject areas as do academic departments. The “cultural” is not something to be counterposed as distinct from, and competitive with, the economic. How could

INVENTING REALITY

there not be a linkage between cultural and economic interests? How could there be a viable society in which the two were chronically apart and opposed to each other?

Most things are simultaneously cultural and economic. An automobile, a television advertisement, a board of trustees, a cosmetic kit, and a tool kit are all cultural and economic. The technology, commodities, services, institutions, and systems of ownership and command have both a cultural and economic dimension, and for that matter a psychological one as well. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine any of the dimensions existing in a context devoid of the others. This does not mean they operate with perfect coordination, but it is time we stopped thinking about them as being mutually exclusive and conceptually competitive.

Economic power does not automatically translate into cultural hegemony, but it makes such hegemony much more likely. Those who own the media must make conscious efforts in selecting the right managers and editors, and setting down proper guidelines and permissible boundaries—so that they might exercise maximum control with a minimum of direct and naked intervention.

GOVERNMENT MANIPULATION

Along with owners and advertisers, government leaders exercise a substantial influence over what becomes news. Shifts in official policy are routinely reflected in media coverage and editorial opinion. How is such a confluence achieved between a supposedly democratic government and a pluralistic press that is neither owned nor officially censored by the state?

First of all, common class interests often make for common political perspectives. On fundamental issues, media owners are eager allies rather than independent critics of the nation's political leaders, sharing the same view about the desirability of the existing corporate economic system at home and

MICHAEL PARENTI

abroad and the pernicious nature of those who struggle to get out from under it.

Aside from this coincidence of ideological perspectives, newspeople generally are attracted to power, finding it more gratifying and rewarding to stand with than against it. Those who wield words often hope that they might exercise a determining influence over those who wield power. A former member of the *Washington Post* editorial staff writes, “Washington journalists are just like other people. Many of us are suckers for people who have fame and power.”¹⁹

Aware that newspeople are ready to be seduced, rulers are not above enticing publishers, editors, and journalists with invitations into the charmed circles of power. In addition to cozy off-the-record receptions with top officials, there are gala events at the White House featuring not only the usual array of business bigwigs, diplomats, congressional leaders, and sports and entertainment celebrities but also a selection of journalists, editors, and publishers. The White House state dinner for the grand duke of Luxembourg, for instance, had a guest list that included ABC “Nightline” host Ted Koppel and his wife; NBC “Today” show host Bryant Gumbel and his wife; Gene Roberts, senior vice president and executive editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*; Nicholas Timmesch, resident journalist at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank; and Mortimer Zuckerman, publisher of *U.S. News & World Report*.²⁰

Top journalists are “often socializing with people they’re supposed to be scrutinizing.”²¹ At one social event, CBS’s Lesley Stahl greeted the Republican Party national chairperson Frank Fahrenkopf with a kiss. And ABC’s Kathleen Sullivan walked arm-in-arm with Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.²² ABC’s Barbara Walters spent off-duty time with Henry Kissinger when he was in the Nixon administration.

If individuals moved easily between journalistic and government employment in a communist country, this would confirm our impression of a totalitarian system that lacks an independent press. What then are we to

INVENTING REALITY

conclude when finding the same “revolving door” mobility in our own country? Jack Rosenthal, a *New York Times* editor, was a former high-ranking official in the State Department. Leslie Gelb left his job as national security correspondent for the *Times* to become a bureau director in the State Department, only to reappear some years later as a *Times* editor. His replacement as *Times* national security correspondent, Richard Burt, joined the Reagan administration as a nuclear strategist. NBC News correspondent Bernard Kalb was a State Department public relations person during the Reagan administration. Another Reagan administration spokesperson, John Hughes, later became an editorial columnist for the *Christian Science Monitor*. Retired US Army general Bernard Trainor became a reporter covering military affairs for the *Times*. NBC’s John Chancellor served as a government propagandist, heading up the Voice of America for a stretch of time. Pat Buchanan has moved back and forth from journalism to government several times, alternately serving in the Nixon and Reagan administrations and as a syndicated columnist and TV host for CNN’s “Crossfire” and “Capital Gang.” Similarly, Edward R. Murrow, Sid Davis, Carl Rowan, Pierre Salinger, Bill Moyers, William Safire, Diane Sawyer, Russell Wiggins, David Gergen, Joanna Bistany, Richard Perle, and Peggy Noonan worked both as journalists and as staff members of the White House or State Department or Pentagon or some related government agency.²³ With rare exceptions like Moyers, these revolving-door people share the ideological perspective of the national security state in whose employ they feel comfortable.

The revolving door exists even at the highest reaches of government and media. Former top officials like Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, Defense Secretary Harold Brown, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Attorney General William French Smith, and CIA Director William Casey have held executive or board positions in the corporate structures of major media like the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, GE/NBC, and CBS.²⁴

MICHAEL PARENTI

In addition to the interlocking personnel, the government exercises an influence over news organizations through its control over the product they market: information (and misinformation). A daily assembly line of proposals, tips, press releases, documents, and interviews rolls out of the White House and various federal departments. In a matter of hours, sometimes minutes, the major media are telling the public what the government wants them to hear. The Pentagon alone spends millions of dollars yearly disseminating information that fits its view of the world. It employs a public relations staff of over three thousand people, many of whom can supply news nuggets to cooperative reporters—or nothing at all to uncooperative ones.

Every morning the White House senior staff meet to decide, as one participant put it, “What do we want the press to cover today and how?” Within minutes after the decisions are made, the “line of the day” is sent out via computer to all senior administration officials and to thousands of government public relations people and press secretaries, covering agencies that deal with both domestic and foreign affairs. As a follow-up, officials call each network fifteen minutes before the evening news telecast to check on what will appear.²⁵ As Reagan’s former chief of staff Michael Deaver once remarked about the self-serving stories he repeatedly planted in the press: “We fed it to them and they ate it.”²⁶

The president obtains prime-time exposure to address the nation almost anytime he desires and exercises a daily built-in control over journalists. “You’re locked into this little press room,” lamented *Washington Post* reporter Austin Scott, “with only a telephone connecting you to the rest of the White House, and they have the option of taking your calls or not. All you get is staged events—press conferences, briefings, photo opportunities.”²⁷ Reporters who refuse to go along may find themselves left with nothing to report. As ABC correspondent Sam Donaldson put it, “[White House officials] serve up what they want, and also deny us the opportunity to do anything else. So our options are, do nothing or do it their way.”²⁸

INVENTING REALITY

Top administrators, including the president himself, will telephone news executives to convey strongly worded “suggestions” and complain about particular stories and reporters. Dan Rather of CBS revealed that Reagan administration officials frequently went over his head to top CBS executives to complain about his reporting. The White House was especially displeased with CBS coverage of the unemployment situation and criticisms of the barring of reporters from the Grenada invasion. (CBS did not criticize the invasion itself.) Rather complained, “They are trying to change the coverage.” As to whether such pressure has an effect, he concluded, “I don’t care how good you are, how tough you are; in some way, on some days it is bound to work on your subconscious.”²⁹

Sometimes media heads try to act as buffers between state and journalist, but more often they seem quite ready to comply. “It is not uncommon for stories to be discreetly killed or softened” at White House request, reports one media critic.³⁰ After meeting with the three network chiefs, in his capacity as White House aide, Charles Colson concluded, “The networks badly want to have these kinds of discussions... They told me anytime we had a complaint about slanted coverage for me to call them directly. [CBS Board Chairman William] Paley... went out of his way to say how much he supports the president, and how popular the president is.”³¹

News agencies regularly show restraint when criticizing the president—especially a conservative president who is looked upon so favorably by media owners. When working in the *AP*’s Washington, D.C., bureau, reporter Owen Ullmann detected a disinclination on the part of management to report anything that might appear too critical of those in power, particularly the president. In this way *AP* avoided complaints from media bigwigs who might think the agency was being too critical of the White House.³²

Government leaders have ways of retaliating against unfavorable treatment. Officials can deny interviews, withhold access to information, give scoops to favored reporters and misleading information to disfavored ones, and

MICHAEL PARENTI

award prestigious government positions to especially cooperative newspeople. After publishing an article in *Newsday* (a large-circulation Long Island, New York, daily) critical of the shady dealings of President Nixon's close associate Bebe Rebozo, reporter Martin Schramm was denied access to White House communication director Ron Ziegler, and *Newsday* was excluded from the press corps that accompanied Nixon on his historic trip to China.³³ When the *Washington Post* went after Nixon in the Watergate scandal, the White House prepared to retaliate by "taking an obstructionist position toward the Washington Post Company's television licenses when they came up for renewal around the country."³⁴

When dealing with the media, rulers are not above utilizing the police powers of the state. The FBI has harassed newsmen who persist in writing troublesome stories.³⁵ The Justice Department won a Supreme Court decision requiring reporters to disclose their sources to grand juries, in an attempt to reduce the press to an investigative arm of the courts and prosecution.³⁶ Dozens of reporters have since been jailed or threatened with prison terms on the basis of that decision. On repeated occasions the government has subpoenaed documents, tapes, and other materials used by news organizations. Such interference imposes a "chilling effect" on the press, encouraging self-censorship. Thus CBS offered to cooperate more closely on news stories about the White House in return for government assistance in quashing a congressional contempt citation against the network for its mildly critical documentary about the Pentagon.³⁷

Government repression was quite blatant when directed against the New Left "underground" newspapers that sprang up across the nation during the late sixties. These publications were harassed and attacked by police, FBI, CIA, and rightist vigilantes. News offices were broken into, ransacked, and even bombed; files and typewriters were stolen; telephones were tapped; and staffs were infiltrated by undercover agents or arrested on trumped-up drug or obscenity charges, causing suspension of publication and prohibitive legal costs.

INVENTING REALITY

Underground newspaper street vendors were repeatedly threatened and arrested by police in a number of cities and mail distribution was sometimes interrupted. After visits from the FBI, printers were persuaded to discontinue their services; newsstands were persuaded not to handle underground papers; landlords suddenly doubled the office rent, forcing publications to move; and the Internal Revenue Service sought lists of backers and contributors of radical publications for possible tax violations.³⁸

The government's campaign against the left extends into the main unwillingness of their own organizations to give regular mass media access to left dissenters in the United States. When asked when he would allow antisocialist views in the Cuban press, Fidel Castro replied: when the capitalists allow anticapitalist views and information in the US press. Access to the mass media in the United States, he asserted, is a "freedom [that] exists only for those who agree with the capitalist system."⁴⁰ The FCC rulings against "communist viewpoints" lend truth to Castro's contention.

Government intelligence agencies supposedly dedicated to national security are just as often involved in propagandizing the American public. The FBI has planted stories in "friendly news media" designed to discredit the New Left and other democratic protestors.⁴¹ Syndicated columnist Jack Anderson routinely cooperated with the FBI when working on various stories. While writing for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Patrick Buchanan ran material that came directly from the FBI. After Buchanan left, the newspaper did not change its ways. Two days before Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, the *Globe-Democrat* ran an editorial supplied by the FBI calling King "one of the most menacing men in America."⁴²

The Pentagon sends out hundreds of stories and canned editorials each week that are picked up by newspapers and broadcast stations across the country and presented to the public as trustworthy products of independent journalism.⁴³ According to officials at the United States Information Service (USIS), the government has teams of propagandists in Washington who crank

MICHAEL PARENTI

out stories that are wired daily to USIS's 206 offices in 127 countries.⁴⁴ Many of these news plants appear in the foreign press then return as “blowback,” that is, they are picked up by US correspondents abroad and transmitted to an unsuspecting American public.

One of the most active news-manipulating agencies is the CIA, which turns journalists into agents and CIA agents into “journalists” in order to disseminate stories that support the interventionist policies of the national security state. One ex-CIA agent, Ralph McGehee, argued in a book he wrote that “the American people are the primary target audience of [CIA] lies.”⁴⁵ Some 400 to 600 journalists have been in the pay of the CIA, and the actual number is probably larger. Some are paid for their undercover services, some are not. Some play an active role as agents in overseas events—then report on these same events as “objective” journalists.⁴⁶

CIA operatives have planted stories of Soviet nuclear tests that never took place and fabricated “diaries” and “confessions” of defectors from socialist countries. In the early 1950s a news story claiming that China was sending troops to Vietnam to help insurgents fight against the French proved to be a CIA fabrication.⁴⁷ The agency induced the *New York Times* to remove a reporter, Sidney Gruson, from a story about the CIA-inspired overthrow of a democratic government in Guatemala because he was getting too close to uncovering the US plot.⁴⁸ Stories about Cuban soldiers killing babies and raping women in Angola, concocted by the CIA, were planted abroad, then picked up by AP and UPI stringers for “blowback” runs in the US.⁴⁹

Many of the press's paid agents have been media executives and editors.⁵⁰ A reporter “may receive an assignment from an editor, who is on the CIA payroll, and never suspect for whom he is working.”⁵¹ At least twenty-five news organizations have served the CIA, including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, CBS, ABC, NBC, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Associated Press*, *United Press International*, the Hearst newspapers, the Scripps-Howard newspapers, *US News & World Report*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Among the prominent news

INVENTING REALITY

executives who knowingly have cooperated with the CIA are William Paley, chairman of the board of CBS; Henry Luce, late owner of Time Inc.; Arthur Hays Sulzberger, late publisher of the *New York Times*; Robert Myers, publisher of the *New Republic*; James Copley, owner of the Copley News Service; Barry Bingham, Sr., publisher of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and Norman E. Isaacs, its executive editor; Richard Salant, president of CBS News; and on the *Washington Post* alone, the following executives or senior editors: John S. Hayes, Alfred Friendly, Benjamin Bradlee, Chalmers Roberts, James Wiggins, and Philip Geyelin.⁵²

The CIA runs the biggest news service in the world with a budget larger than those of all the major wire services put together. In 1975 a Senate intelligence committee found that the CIA owned outright “more than 200 wire services, newspapers, magazines, and book publishing complexes” and subsidized many more. A *New York Times* investigation revealed another fifty media outlets run by the CIA in the United States and abroad, and at least twelve publishing houses, which marketed over 1,200 books secretly commissioned by the CIA, including some 250 in English. As the Times explained it, these figures were far from the whole story.⁵³ The CIA subsidized books on China, the Soviet Union, and Third World struggles, which were then reviewed by CIA agents in various US media, including the *New York Times*.⁵⁴

Supposedly such practices ceased after the CIA’s penetration of cultural and news organizations were exposed in the 1970s. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that the CIA continues to recruit from various professions, including journalism, that it subsidizes journalists’ trips abroad, that it still maintains hundreds of news conduits that feed disinformation to people at home and around the world, and that it funnels to ultra-right groups information that these groups then run in their newsletters and give to politically sympathetic newspapers.⁵⁵

The CIA in combination with the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, and other intelligence agencies compose what is known as the

MICHAEL PARENTI

national security state. Its influence over the media cannot be measured solely in its ability to plant favorable stories. In the name of “national security” the national security state enjoys a powerful ideological hegemony over major media organizations. Nothing seriously critical is reported regarding the covert actions and interventions abroad perpetrated by various agencies of the national security state. There is no debate on the fundamentals of US foreign policy and US global interventionism. There is neither extended discussion nor even passing recognition of the possibility that the United States supports imperialistic interests throughout the Third World to the severe detriment of the common people in many countries, and for the enrichment of that social class to which our top corporate, governmental, and military leaders belong.⁵⁶

The press will sometimes run a critical report about a business firm that illegally dumps toxic wastes. It will carry a story exposing corruption in an inner-city aid program. It might even criticize poor management within the Pentagon’s weapons procurement system. What the press is not likely to do is inform us of the economic class interests that underlie the US global military machine. It will not tell us about US involvement in the repressive counterinsurgency policies employed to make the world safe for profitable investment by multinational corporations.

In sum, those who see the news as being the outcome of objective reportage by professionally trained, independent journalists are missing much of the picture. What passes for the “news” is a product of many forces, involving the dominant political culture and powerful economic and government institutions—all dedicated to maintaining an ideological monopoly, controlling the flow of information and opinion in ways that best advance their interests. That so many journalists fail to see this is evidence of how thoroughly they themselves are part of the news-manufacturing process.

V. The Big Sell

Much of our media experience is neither news nor entertainment. Some 60 to 80 percent of newspaper space and about 22 percent of television time (even more on radio) is devoted to advertising. The average viewer who watches four hours of television daily, sees at least 100 to 120 commercials a day, or 36,400 to 43,680 a year. Even if we have learned to turn away from the television set when commercials come on and pass over the eye-catching ads in our newspapers and magazines, we cannot hope to remain untouched by the persistent, ubiquitous bombardment.

The media's content, the news and entertainment, the features and "specials," is the lure to get us exposed to the advertisements. ("Journalists," said one press representative, "are just people who write on the back of advertisements."¹) The end is the advertising, the process of inducing people to spend as much money as possible on consumer products and services. Entertainment and news are merely instrumental to the goal of the advertiser. They are there to win audiences for the advertisers, to keep people tuned in and turned on. The objective is commercial gain, the sale of mass-produced goods to a mass market.

MICHAEL PARENTI

The age of mass consumption came to the United States most visibly in the 1920s, interrupted by the Great Depression and World War II, then exploding upon us with accumulated vigor in the postwar era. With it came the advertising industry, called into being by the economic imperative of having to market vast quantities of consumer goods and services. Among the new products were those that enabled advertising itself to happen: the penny-press newspaper, the low-priced slick magazine, the radio, and finally the television set—all in their turn were to become both mass-consumption items and prime conduits for mass-consumption advertising.

Mass advertising has changed the shape of the media themselves, helping to concentrate ownership. The advertiser seeks the largest audience for the cheapest price, favoring media outlets with the broadest reach. With its greater profits and revenues, the giant news organization can spend more on salespeople and mass circulation promotion while charging proportionately less. Once smaller competitors are eliminated in a particular locale, the triumphant newspaper (usually chain-owned) then enjoys a monopoly market. This allows it to jack up its advertising rates and reap still greater profits. Mass advertising also helps to eliminate small businesses that cannot afford the mass circulation rates paid by big business. Thus in the media industry and business in general, mass advertising tends to kill competition rather than create it.²

With mass advertising, the daily newspaper has grown to a bulky size. Advertising on broadcast media consumes an increasingly big chunk of viewing time. The cost of all this advertising is paid twice over by the public: first it is passed on to the consumer in the cost of goods and services; then it is deducted by the advertiser as a business expense, thereby shifting an additional portion of the tax burden onto ordinary taxpayers.

Mass advertising has influenced the very content of the news media. As noted in Chapter 3, media owners are keenly attentive to the preferences of advertisers. Editors select stories not only with an eye to reader interest but for their appeal to advertisers. The real estate, fashion, food, and travel sections of

INVENTING REALITY

any newspaper are often little more than promotional sheets for the real estate, fashion, food, and travel industries—who are among a newspaper’s major advertisers.

Publications and television shows will try to upgrade their readership and viewing audience, that is, appeal to higher income groups that buy more goods and services and attract more advertisers. Delivering a different kind of reader or viewer sometimes necessitates a change in editorial policy.³ In any case, the determining factor is not reader subscriptions or viewers but the corporate advertisers who pay big bucks.

THE CONSUMER IDEOLOGY

The obvious purpose of ads and commercials is to sell goods and services, but advertisers do more than that. Over and above any particular product, they sell an entire way of life, a way of experiencing social reality that is compatible with the needs of a mass-production, mass-consumption, capitalist society. Today the family and local community are no longer the primary units for production, recreation, and self-definition. Role models and emotional attachments are increasingly sought from those whose specialty is to produce and manipulate images and from the images themselves.

People have always had to consume in order to live, and in every class society, consumption styles have been a measure of one’s status. But modern consumerism is a relatively recent development in which masses of people seek to accumulate things other than what they need and often other than what they can truly enjoy. Consumption is no longer just a means to life but a meaning for life. This is the essence of the consumer ideology. As propagated through mass advertising, the ideology standardizes tastes and legitimizes both the products of the system and the system itself, representing the commodity-ridden life as “the good life” and “the American Way.” The consumer ideology, or consumerism, builds a mass psychology of “moreness” that knows no limit;

MICHAEL PARENTI

hence the increase in material abundance ironically also can bring a heightened sense of scarcity and a sense of unfulfilled acquisition.

The consumer ideology not only fabricates false needs, it panders in a false way to real ones. The desire for companionship, love, approval, and pleasure, the need to escape from drudgery and boredom, the search for security for oneself and one's family, such things are vital human concerns. The consumer ideology does something more pernicious than just activate our urge for conspicuous consumption; like so much else in the media and like other forms of false consciousness, consumerism plays on real human needs in deceptive and ultimately unfulfilling ways.

One of the goals of advertising is to turn the consumer's critical perception away from the product—and away from the system that produces it—and toward herself or himself.⁴ Many commercials characterize people as loudmouthed imbeciles whose problems are solved when they encounter the right medication, cosmetic, cleanser, or gadget. In this way industry confines the social imagination and cultural experience of millions, teaching people to define their needs and life styles according to the dictates of the commodity market.

The reader of advertising copy and the viewer of commercials discover that they are not doing right for baby's needs or hubby's or wifey's desires; that they are failing in their careers because of poor appearance or bad breath; that they are not treating their complexion, hair, or nails properly; that they suffer unnecessary cold misery and headache pains; that they don't know how to make the tastiest coffee, pie, pudding, or chicken dinner; nor, if left to their own devices, would they be able to clean their floors, sinks, and toilets correctly or tend to their lawns, gardens, and automobiles. In order to live well and live properly, consumers need corporate producers to guide them.

The corporate system knows what formulas to feed your infants, what foods to feed your family, what medication to feed your cold, what gas to feed your engine, and how best to please your spouse, your boss, or your peers. Just

INVENTING REALITY

as the mass market replaced family and community as provider of goods and services, so now corporations replace parents, grandparents, midwives, neighbors, craftspeople, and oneself in knowing what is best. Big business enhances its legitimacy and social hegemony by portraying itself as society's Grand Provider.⁵

The world of mass advertising teaches us that want and frustration are caused by our own deficiencies. The goods are within easy reach, before our very eyes in dazzling abundance, available not only to the rich but to millions of ordinary citizens. Those who cannot afford to partake of this cornucopia have only themselves to blame goes the implicit message. The failure is yours, not the system's. The advertisement of consumer wares, then, is also an advertisement for a whole capitalist system, a demonstration that the system can deliver both the goods and the good life to everyone save laggards and incompetents.

SELLING THE SYSTEM

Along with products, the corporations sell themselves. By the 1970s, for the first time since the Great Depression, the legitimacy of big business was called into question by large sectors of the public. Enduring inflation, unemployment, and a decline in real wages, the American people became increasingly skeptical about the blessings of the corporate economy. In response, corporations intensified their efforts at the kind of "advocacy advertising," designed to sell the entire capitalist system rather than just one of its products. The spending on "nonproduct-related" advertisements more than doubled, from \$230 million to over \$474 million, showing a far greater growth rate than advertising expenditures as a whole.⁶ Today, one-third of all corporate advertising is directed at influencing the public on political and ideological issues as opposed to pushing consumer goods. (That portion is tax deductible as a "business expense," like all other advertising costs.) Led by the oil, chemical, and steel companies, big business fills the airwaves and print media with

MICHAEL PARENTI

celebrations of the “free market” and warnings of the baneful effects of government regulation.

Mobil Oil, probably the forerunner in this area, ran ad campaigns, with an annual budget of \$5 million, to inform readers that Mobil “gave employment” to thousands of persons, contributed to charities, and brought prosperity to local communities. More significantly, as some of the Mobil ads note, business firms all across America do their part to create prosperity for all. One Mobil “Observations” column in the *Washington Post* put it this way:

Business, generally, is a good neighbor, and most communities recognize this fact.

From time to time, out of political motivations or for reasons of radical chic, individuals may try to chill the business climate. On such occasions we try to set the record straight. ...

So when it comes to the business climate, we’re glad that most people recognize there’s little need to tinker with the American system.⁷

A prime-time television commercial, shown repeatedly in 1981, offered footage of a skier going down a mountain slope, as a deep, male, off-screen voice said:

Freedom. We Americans have the freedom to choose. The freedom to take risks [skier leaps over a precipitous embankment}. The freedom to succeed [skier makes a skillful maneuver] and the freedom to fail [skier takes a mild spill into the powdery snow}. When government comes into our lives, things change. When people look to government for protection, they get protection but they lose some of their precious freedom [skier at the end of the trail, head bowed, moving along slowly, dragging his poles behind him].

Just something to think about from the people at Getty.

INVENTING REALITY

Business as a providential social force was the theme of a full page ad by Conoco Inc. in the *Christian Science Monitor*. It read:

WHAT WILL CAPITAL BE DOING ON LABOR DAY? Working.

Building new plants. Starting new businesses. Funding innovation and growth. Developing more energy to fuel the economy.

Part of the capital that creates jobs comes from the earnings of American industry... .

Throughout the economy, stronger earnings can provide the capital to create more and better jobs. So as we celebrate Labor Day, let's not forget capital.

It works, too.⁸

American readers are not likely to be treated to an alternative view. No newspaper would run an advertisement pointing out that capital cannot build an industry, plant, or commodity without labor, and that when labor takes off, nothing is produced. Capital is the surplus value created by labor. "Putting one's money to work" means mixing it with labor to create more capital. Purely on its own, without labor, capital is incapable of building a woodshed, let alone "new plants." But the message we get is that capital creates, rather than is created.

Business is also depicted as society's Grand Protector. Defense companies spend millions in weeklies like *Time* and *Newsweek* and in the major newspapers to advertise their accomplishments in weaponry and to assure the reader that America's defenses are growing stronger thanks to the military hardware produced by this or that contractor.⁹

The murderous war waged by President Bush against a vastly weaker Iraq in 1991 was proudly hailed by defense corporations as an accomplishment of modern weaponry. In the afterglow of easy victory, Grumman ran a commercial on television (May 1991) that crowed: "A superior defense technology will reduce the risk to American military personnel... And we have

MICHAEL PARENTI

that technology.” Other military contractors ran ads thanking Bush for his supposedly superb leadership and the troops for their courage and devotion.¹⁰ The nuclear industry got in on the Gulf war by repeatedly running a TV commercial in the winter and early spring of 1991 with an off-screen voice that said:

We rely on over 40 percent of our oil from overseas sources [quick shots of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Muammar Qadafi, Middle East crowds demonstrating angrily, a raised arm waving an AK-47]. Which do you prefer? Nuclear energy or relying on unstable sources. [an up-close shot of Saddam Hussein], Nuclear Energy: You can count on it.

Throughout the cold war, the defense contractors ran ads that contradictorily conveyed both alarmist and reassuring messages, in effect, saying: (1) The Soviet military has achieved superiority and is ever more fearsome and threatening; and (2) the United States has the best defense system in the world thanks to the devoted and patriotic efforts of corporate defense contractors.

Cold war or no cold war, what the defense firms sell to the public is an ideology of American globalism, the need to continue spending hundreds of billions of dollars on weaponry in order to maintain a global military machine. The arms merchants invoke the menacing images of demonized foreign adversaries, then promise security through strength, assuring us that we can live safely as long as we don't skimp on military spending.

In regard to their own doings, defense contractors present benign facades: “Where science gets down to business,” says Rockwell, whose business is making the plutonium triggers for atomic warheads. “We bring good things to life,” says General Electric, who made such good things as the neutron generators that activate thermonuclear devices. “We'll show you a better way,” says Honeywell, whose electronic components show nuclear missiles a better way to targets.¹¹ “A leading manufacturer of fine products for America and the

INVENTING REALITY

Free World” is how General Dynamics, a weapons producer, describes itself.

Another area targeted by corporate propaganda is environmentalism. Industry has responded to the surge in ecological consciousness by spending millions of dollars in a campaign designed to convince the public that business has been caring for the environment. At the same time, the big corporations spent next to nothing on actual conservation and pollution controls. Were one to judge strictly from the ads, however, business does everything it can to protect the environment from industrial effusion and chemical toxins. An ad by Chemical Manufacturer’s Association shows an attractive woman being hugged by a smiling little girl. The woman is saying: “My job is managing chemical industry wastes. What I do helps make the environment safer today—and for generations to come.”¹² Of the many similar ads that have appeared regularly on television and in various newspapers and news magazines, none alters the truth that private industry has a long and dreadful record of poisoning the environment with toxic waste.

While big business spends lavishly to get its propaganda before large audiences, public interest groups, labor unions, and dissident organizations seldom gain access to mass media advertising, mostly for lack of the huge sums needed to buy television time and print space. As of 1991 a full-page “cause and appeal” ad in the weekday *Washington Post* cost \$41,065 for one day, and in the *New York Times*, \$47,124—and both papers charge substantially more for Sunday.

On the infrequent occasions when dissident groups muster enough money to buy broadcasting time or newspaper space, they still may be denied access to the media. Liberal-minded commentators have been refused radio shows even when they had sponsors who would pay. Scientists, politicians, celebrities, and political activists who have opposed the arms buildup, the threat of nuclear war, or US-supported military repression in Central America have been denied time spots and news space for their ads by the major networks and their affiliates and by major publications. A *New York Times* executive turned down one peace ad because he judged it not in the “best interests of the

MICHAEL PARENTI

country.”¹³ Broadcasters and publishers can run any political commercial they want, no matter how emotionally raw and derogatory. And they can refuse to run any political message for any reason, or no reason at all, regardless of how factually accurate or important it might be.

PUBLIC SERVICE FOR PRIVATE INTERESTS

Not all air time is given to commercial gain. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires broadcasters to set time aside for “public service announcements.” The obligation is a vague one; the FCC has never denied any station its license for failing to live up to it, despite complaints from community and public interest groups. About 3 percent of air time, worth more than a billion dollars annually, is given to public service announcements. This free time, like the millions of dollars worth of free space donated by newspapers and magazines, is monopolized by the Advertising Council, a nonprofit corporation funded and directed by corporations, bankers, and network officials. Its board of directors reads like a who’s who of big business, with representatives from such major advertisers as Procter & Gamble, General Motors, General Mills, General Electric, and General Foods. A subcommittee of the Advertising Council, the Industries Advisory Committee (at one count composed of twenty-eight bankers and fifty-four major corporate executives), sets the ideological tone for all advertising campaigns. No public interest groups are represented on the Council’s board.¹⁴

The Advertising Council is the second largest advertiser in the world (behind Procter & Gamble). Since its formation in 1941, it has used more than \$10 billion worth of free “public service” advertising donated by radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. While supposedly nonpartisan and nonpolitical, the Council’s public service commercials laud the blessings of free enterprise and urge viewers to buy US Savings Bonds. The ads tell us that business is “doing its job” in hiring the handicapped, veterans, minorities, and

INVENTING REALITY

the poor—when in fact, business makes little voluntary effort on behalf of such groups. Workers are exhorted to take pride in their work and produce more for their employers, but nothing is said about employers paying more to their workers.

Council ads offer cosmetic solutions to serious social problems, thereby trivializing the nature of the problems. Unemployment? It can be reduced with “better job training.” Crime? Lock your car after parking it and secure your front door. Hazardous and costly automobile transportation? Fasten your safety belts. Ecology and conservation? Do not litter. The Council’s slogan is “People start pollution, and people can stop it.” The ads blame pollution on everyone in general—thus avoiding placing any blame on industry in particular. The Council’s “Keep America Beautiful” campaign of 1983 was coordinated by the public relations director of Union Carbide, a chemical manufacturer and a major polluter.

Throughout the Council’s diverse range of messages runs one underlying theme: Personal charity, individual effort, and neighborly good-will can solve any mess. Collectivist, class-oriented, political actions and governmental regulations are not needed in a land of self-reliant volunteers. The goal is to change individual behavior, not social conditions.

With funds from the US Department of Commerce, the Advertising Council has launched campaigns—in the words of Commerce Secretary Frederick Dente—“to improve public understanding of our American economic system.”¹⁵ Along with television and radio ads, some 13 million booklets were distributed to schools, work places, and communities and reprinted in newspapers across the nation. These publications hailed the blessings of the private enterprise system, treating it as a mainstay of freedom and the source of unprecedented prosperity and progress. The booklets did take note of a few problems, one of them being inflation—whose primary cause was government regulation. The suggested solution was to keep the lid on wages and prices and roll back regulation. Here was corporate advocacy and propaganda disguised as

MICHAEL PARENTI

education.

The Advertising Council's campaign seemed to have its intended effect on public opinion. From the 1970s to the 1980s, opinion polls showed a marked increase—from 22 to 60 percent—of those who thought there was too much government regulation.¹⁶ By the 1980 presidential campaign, “deregulation” became a widespread, ready-made theme utilized to advantage by presidential candidate Ronald Reagan.

Those who wish to make occupational safety, unemployment, monopoly profits, and environmental protection the central issues of popular debate have no way of reaching mass audiences. The public-service air time that could be utilized by environmentalists, labor, consumer advocates, and other public interest groups has been preempted by a business-dominated Advertising Council that passes off its one-sided, ideological ads as noncontroversial and nonpolitical. One liberal member of Congress complained that the Council and the networks had corrupted the original intent of public service time by turning it into free media time for favored interests. “The Ad Council is a propagandist for business and government, and with staggering control of the media, it not only makes sure its own side of the story is told, but that the other side isn't. The public has no meaningful access to the media.”¹⁷

EVEN SPORTS AND WEATHER

Not only news and advertising but even such seemingly neutral components of the media as sports and weather are part of the big sell. Elsewhere I have shown how media sports coverage is permeated with political bias.¹⁸ Suffice it to say here that whether it is network coverage of the Olympics or the hoopla that surrounds football games and professional wrestling, media sports propagate the virtues of nation-state chauvinism and militarism.

We might recall how the Gulf war of 1991 was used as an occasion to inject militaristic hype into media sporting events. The televised NFL

INVENTING REALITY

conference championship game between the Buffalo Bills and the L.A. Raiders began with Army, Navy, Marine, and Air Force personnel in parade dress uniform, carrying flags down the field as the crowd, bedecked in yellow ribbons, chanted “USA! USA!” The 1991 Superbowl football game on ABC seemed like a feature-length promo for the war, replete with a gigantic patriotic pageant, a stadium crowd waving flags and singing patriotic songs, and a taped appearance by President and Mrs. Bush. At half-time, Peter Jennings came on with an upbeat update on the destruction of Iraq.

In the UCLA-Arizona basketball game (February 11, 1991), both teams had American flags sewn on their uniforms, as the announcer pointed out, “in support of our efforts in the Gulf”; so did just about every other basketball team in the country.

The National Football League, in a joint venture with the Department of Defense, even saw fit to sponsor a sixty-minute documentary on “Operation Desert Storm.” Steve Sabol, president of NFL Films, put it this way:

I don’t want to say that war is the same as football. But ... [the military] likes the way we have presented and mythologized pro football. The same spirit and ideology that football glorifies and inspires—discipline, devotion, commitment to a cause, unselfishness, leadership—is also the spirit necessary for a successful military endeavor... You heard references to football throughout the war. President Bush even called it his Super Bowl.¹⁹

Indeed, military personnel made the Gulf war sound more like a football game than a one-sided mass slaughter. To offer only a few of many examples: On January 17, 1991, a high-ranking officer observed on NBC: “Our team has carried out its game plan beautifully.” A few days later CBS interviewed a pilot who said: “We ran our first play; it worked great. We scored a touchdown.” When the ground war began, one infantryman exclaimed: “It’s kickoff time.” A

MICHAEL PARENTI

US general explained the war's outcome: "You had a high school team playing in the Superbowl against the New York Giants and they got their ass whipped."²⁰

While a case can be made readily enough about sports coverage, what complaints can possibly be registered against weather reports? The media's greatest method of distortion is omission. We are misled not only by what is reported, but even more by what is left unsaid. There are catastrophic things happening with the weather, specifically ozone depletion and global warming. Some 2.6 billion pounds of ozone-depleting chemicals are emitted into the air every year. Some of the biggest polluters are military-industrial contractors who are also among the biggest TV advertisers. One of them, General Electric, owns NBC. Damage to the earth's protective ozone layer causes skin cancer, cataracts, crop damage, and climatic aberrations.

In addition, auto exhaust and other fossil fuel emissions act like a blanket to create and trap heat close to the earth's surface, causing global warming. The six warmest years ever recorded were over the last decade, the warmest on record being 1990. We have discovered that the earth's capacity to absorb heat from energy consumption is limited. We face an ecological crisis whose momentous dimensions we are just beginning to grasp. One effect of global warming is drought—from California to Vermont to Russia to New Zealand. Unless reversed, drought leads to starvation, as Africa is the first to know.²¹

When the evening news tells us "what's happening with the weather," these catastrophic developments are not mentioned. "Weather" is defined in a limited way: cloudy and clear, cold and warm. The weather is reported the ways politics is reported: isolated daily particulars unconnected to the larger structural forces that help create them.

Worse still, the ill effects of global warming and ozone depletion are actually celebrated by TV weather people, who operate by an unwritten code: sunny and warm are good, rainy and cold are bad. Weathercasters in various locales get absolutely rhapsodic over the strangely mild winters we have been

INVENTING REALITY

having in recent years. They exult over the “beautiful spring fever weather” that now seems to come in January. We are told to “get out there today and catch some of these lovely rays.” Not a word about watching out for skin cancer. Not a worry about drought.

Conversely, they frown when temperatures drop and January resembles January. We are told “the outlook is not good” when rain “threatens.” Another winter with very little snow? “That’s good news,” said one announcer in Washington, D.C., good for all of us except “you skiing fans.” Forget that snow is a major source of our water supply, that it shields the topsoil from the sun, helping it to retain its moisture. Forget that the scarcity of snow is making it increasingly difficult for forests in northern climes to renew themselves.

In California, where a six-year drought threatens to devastate agribusiness, there is at least some belated awareness among weather reporters that endlessly sunny days are not good news. But even there, the reportage is misleadingly upbeat. Thus the rain that finally came to North California in early 1991 was cheerfully greeted as raising reservoir levels, with no acknowledgment of how dangerously insufficient such levels remain.

On rare occasions, the threat of environmental catastrophe is obliquely acknowledged only to be denied. Thus TV weathercasters, who usually never mention global warming, were quick to assert that the record-breaking high temperatures for May 1991 in our nation’s capital were not an indication of global warming, since other parts of the country had been cooler than usual that same month and it all averaged out.

During an ABC weather report in Washington, D.C. (August 5, 1991), an announcer asked if the increasing number of days with temperatures over 90 degrees was indicative of global warming. The weathercaster replied: “The record is too short. You’ve got to look over hundreds of years to get a perspective.”

During the Gulf war against Iraq, political bias in weather coverage showed forth unabashedly as evening reports began to feature aerial weather

MICHAEL PARENTI

maps of the Gulf region. When the skies were clear over Iraq, announcers would look pleased. When cloudy, they looked concerned; as one of them said: “It’s gonna interfere with our air strikes.”

Conservatives say that left critics deny “the autonomy of culture.” Not true. Most of us recognize that culture does not operate in perfect harmony with the dominant social and economic order. We understand that dissident cultural forces can arise and have a self-generating impact. But when it comes to the kind of mass culture manufactured by the mass media, I wanted to plead guilty to the charge: There is little autonomy to speak of. Be it entertainment, news, advertising, sports, or weather, it is all subject to various degrees of political bias.

VI. Giving Labor the Business

In capitalist society, working people are the ones who get the least of what there is to get, while often working the hardest for what they receive. Their toil is frequently dirty, mindless, hazardous, low paying, and lacking in job security and esteem. As compared to upper-income persons they are more apt to be victimized as employees, taxpayers, and consumers. And they are more apt to be slighted and misrepresented in the corporate-owned media.

BUSINESS OVER LABOR

The news media manifest a marked pro-business, anti-labor bias. During the Reagan administration, the rich received massive multibillion-dollar tax cuts, one of the greatest giveaways to wealthy individuals and corporations in US history. Yet the press gave Reagan's "tax reform" laws little critical comment, treating them pretty much as the White House wanted, as incentives that would stimulate investment and encourage productive enterprise. When those blessed with this enormous tax windfall put the money primarily into speculative investment—of the kind that led to the stock market debacle of

MICHAEL PARENTI

October 1987—the press was discreet about it. Not wishing to say anything that might embarrass the rich, media commentators seldom if ever pointed out that the tax cuts failed to create a trickle-down prosperity for all, as promised by the administration.

In 1990, the news media were equally discreet when downplaying or ignoring the proposal made by some Democrats in Congress to increase taxes for the highest income bracket. Network news shows generally gave unchallenged exposure to President Bush's claim that the Democrats wanted to raise everybody's taxes. Thus Bush came across as opposing new taxes for average Americans rather than as defending the tax privileges of the wealthy—which in fact he was doing.

On the infrequent occasions the proposed tax increase on the rich was recognized in news reports, it was likely to be labeled "class warfare."¹ The media never called it "class warfare" when the rich pummeled the poor as happened throughout the Reagan-Bush years. The term is applied (critically) only when the many try to fight back against the privileged few.

A pro-business, anti-labor bias is revealed in the very terminology the media apply to groups. For years, when the term "special interests" was used by political scientists to designate the powerful lobbyists who influenced government on behalf of the privileged few, the concept was generally ignored by the mainstream media. When Ronald Reagan became president he used "special interests" to designate labor, women, people of color, and others who compose the majority of the working population. In contrast, the corporate rich and the military represented the "national interest." Now the press quickly followed suit, applying the term "special interests" in the same way Reagan did, to millions of non-elites rather than to the privileged and powerful few.

In keeping with its protective treatment of corporate America, the press says little about the billions of dollars in giveaways that go to big business in the form of price supports, loan guarantees, grants-in-aid, research and development funds, subsidized insurance rates, export supports,

INVENTING REALITY

payments-in-kind, promotion and marketing services, land and mineral leases, and the like.²

A *Los Angeles Times* survey found that newspaper editors favored business over labor by 54 to 7 percent.³ (One would have to look hard to find the 7 percent and one might wonder about the other 39 percent of editors who admit to no partiality.) When Chrysler laid off thousands of workers in 1988 and 1989, the *New York Times* and other publications reported the story from the perspective of the company, showing more concern for Chrysler's financial strategies than for the hardships wreaked upon the unemployed workers and their families.⁴

Generally the news media provide labor with few opportunities to present its side of the story. The network evening news regularly reports the Dow Jones average and other stock market news but offers no weekly tabulations on industrial accidents, housing evictions, or environmental violations. The major newspapers and weeklies have no "labor" section to go along with their "business" section. The Gross National Product (GNP) is reported but there is no "quality-of-life index" to tell us what the GNP takes away or fails to give us. The question of why we must increase production, especially of the private market variety, is never raised. Industrial plateau is called "stagnation." When the stock market has a good day this is presumed to be something beneficial to us all. One never hears the word "capital" or "capital accumulation" to describe the core process of our economy. There is seldom a reference to corporate economic power and its political influences. The economy itself is presented by the media as something government and business attend to, while organized labor tags along at best as a very junior and often troublesome partner, at worst as a threat to the system.

In 1980 the president of the International Association of Machinists, William Winpisinger, released a survey dealing with television news. This report concluded that network coverage repeatedly slights or ignores the issues of major concern to unions and union members, specifically, inflation, energy,

MICHAEL PARENTI

foreign trade, health, unemployment, and tax reform. When these topics are touched upon it is usually from a management viewpoint.⁵ Other concerns of labor, such as occupational safety, human services, and wage and work conditions receive little coverage. Unions are most likely to be noticed when they go on strike, but the reasons behind the strike are seldom elaborated upon, the impression being that labor is simply insatiable in its demands.⁶ A special report on CBS (November 21, 1983) thus concluded: "To a lot of Americans the unions have dug their own grave by being greedy... Now things have caught up with them."

When the news media do mention unions (aside from strikes), it is to report on their links to organized crime, corrupt bosses, and the lack of internal democracy. (The media seldom raise the question of internal democracy in regard to corporations or most other institutions.) Few Americans get to hear what unions really are about. As Roberta Lynch puts it:

Media coverage of trade union activities is restricted to superficial reports of major national strikes. Yet there is in unions of every variety a wealth of experience worthy of wider public attention. Local union members who know more than epidemiologists about cancer patterns. Union stewards who blow the whistle on secret hazardous waste disposal. Women in chemical factories who know first-hand the potential for causing birth defects of many commonly used manufacturing substances. Unions that face unscrupulous and high-paid consulting firms brought in not to negotiate with them but to break them. Unions that have joined in alliances with environmentalists to help clean up the air and the water. The list could go on.⁷

The fact is that labor unions are on the whole among the most democratic institutions in American life. The local union represents one of the very few arenas in which ordinary people can come together to define their own

INVENTING REALITY

concerns, to develop new skills and understanding, and to glimpse a sense of their own potential.

The withholding of labor by workers is called a strike, but not the withholding of capital by employers. The latter is never treated as a controversial disruption of the production process. Corporations may close plants or refuse to invest because of low profit margins, or decide not to put money into maintenance and retooling, or they may milk a subsidiary for the highest possible profits and then close it down, or move to Taiwan or South Korea or some other country where labor can be even more ruthlessly exploited than at home—but such things are assumed to be management’s prerogatives and are seldom treated by the press or anyone else as contributing to conflicts between bosses and workers.

Industrial strife is never characterized in the media as an expression of class struggle, with the capitalist relentlessly accumulating as much of the wealth created by labor as possible and workers fighting back in order to protect or improve their standard of living. Little attention is given to management’s multimillion-dollar union-busting efforts and its tendency to coerce labor into giving back hard-won benefits and protections. The impression of who is giving and who is grabbing is inverted in a business-owned press that portrays management as making “offers” and labor as making “demands.” The struggles between workers and bosses are called “labor problems” and “labor disputes,” never “management disputes”—even when it is management that refuses to negotiate a contract—as is often the case.

The press fails to enlist labor’s views on national questions. One study of ABC’s “Nightline,” considered one of the best news shows on television, found that over a forty-month period covering 865 programs the guests were overwhelmingly conservative, White, male, government officials, corporate executives, and other professionals. Only 5 percent represented public interest groups. Less than 2 percent were labor leaders or representatives of ethnic minorities. On those “Nightline” programs that dealt specifically with

MICHAEL PARENTI

economic issues, business people outnumbered labor representatives seven to one.⁸ Like so many other news shows, “Nightline” gave vastly more attention to the interests of rich corporate elites who number in the hundreds than to the interests of working people who number in the millions.

NICE BOSSES, CRAZY STRIKERS

In real life, the struggle between labor and capital is constant, not occasional. Along with strikes and union organizing, worker resistance takes such forms as absenteeism, lateness, theft, deliberate inefficiency, sabotage, slow-downs. Management, in turn, will ignore safety regulations and grievances, habitually violate contract agreements, and impose speed-ups. Despite this constant strife, workers are seldom eager to strike. They do not wish to endure the hardships that come with loss of income and the possible loss of employment. Usually the strike is their weapon of last resort.

The business-owned news media, of course, say nothing about the incessant need of capital to extract as much profit from labor as possible. By ignoring the underlying causes of industrial conflict, the press finds it easy to represent strikes as irrational events, the outcome of some recalcitrant impulse on the part of workers.

Consider how the press reported the prolonged coal strike of 1977-78. Major publications blamed the collapse of contract negotiations on the United Mine Workers (UMW) union. They described management as making a wage offer that was “hefty” and “whopping.”⁹ But they said nothing about management’s intent to initiate speed-ups, substitute the union’s health care system for a more expensive private plan, and penalize any miner for encouraging or participating in strike activity.

Reporters and editors who never worked a day in the mines and rarely bothered talking to people who did treated the wildcat strikes as irresponsible, undisciplined actions. In fact, wildcat strikes are often a matter of life and

INVENTING REALITY

death, protective measures against the kind of management safety violations that cannot be overlooked for the week or two it takes for a grievance hearing. The press never reported that the mine companies rejected the UMW proposals out of hand and locked out the miners. News media kept describing the lockout as a “strike” throughout the work stoppage, leaving the impression that it was the miners who were picking a fight with the owners when the reverse was true.

Given the inflation and the threatened cutback in benefits, management’s contract offer actually represented a decrease in real wages rather than a “hefty” increase. But this point never surfaced in the news. Having ignored the issues of the strike, the press had to find some explanation for why the miners behaved so strangely by rejecting such a favorable contract. The miners, explained the *New York Times*, were “a breed apart” and “clannish.”¹⁰ *Newsweek* suggested that they were “inbred” and “hell-raising and violent, promiscuous and enduring.”¹¹ *Time* saw them as “traditionally quick to resort to violence,” and “not addicted to regular work.”¹² No such conjectures were offered regarding the mine owners, nothing about their “clannish” country clubs, and “inbred” and “promiscuous” social lives; their irregular, leisurely, and often nonexistent work hours; and the tradition of violence expressed in their reliance on goon squads, Pinkertons, gun thugs, state troopers, and national guardsmen. No reporter wrote about management’s “strange ways,” nor would any editor or publisher have allowed such a story to pass. Nor did the press ever mention that the coal companies were reaping after-tax profits that had leaped dramatically during the 1974-1978 period, while miners’ wages lagged behind.

Press coverage of the 1982 contract negotiations between the steel industry and the United Steelworkers of America manifested the same pro-business, anti-labor bias. Management demanded substantial wage cuts and a suspension of cost-of-living allowances. But the media presented the companies’ offer as reasonable and the workers’ rejection as greedy. To do so, the press had to lie. Thus, the *New York Times* blamed the steel industry’s troubles on the workers’ excessively high wages. The *Times* presented a chart

MICHAEL PARENTI

showing that steel workers earned 60 percent more than other blue-collar workers.¹³ One observer notes acidly that this was a powerful argument, “but it was false,” for the *Times* had compared the hourly wages of employees in other industries to the steelworkers’ total hourly compensation including wages and benefits.¹⁴

Coverage of major league baseball and football strikes show the same media bias. While the press makes a point of reporting the relatively high salaries of star players, it usually says nothing about the enormous profits accumulated by the team owners. Nothing is said about the hundreds of millions of dollars in TV rights the owners pocket—of which the players see not a penny. The press says nothing about the stresses and injuries sustained by players and the relatively short durations of their careers. News reports leave the public wondering why athletes who are so well paid (compared to many other jobs) would be so greedy as to go on strike and deprive fans of their diversion.

A detailed study of television news coverage of the 1985 New York hotel strike found that the media presented the workers’ wage demands as the sole cause of the strike. The drive by management for higher profits was never treated as a contributing factor. Coverage focused on the disorder caused by angry, heckling strikers on the picket line. In contrast, the interiors of the hotels were described in supportive terms as orderly and running smoothly. “New York’s best hotels are not about to be shut down,” commented one telecaster.¹⁵ The newscasters stressed the “millions of dollars in lost business” to the tourism industry, the city, taxpayers, and workers. Nothing was said about what it would cost hotel workers in benefits and real wages were they to accept management’s terms. Management was portrayed as negotiating patiently and earnestly, while labor was seen as unrelenting and “digging in.” One newscaster said union representatives “have been yelling and screaming words throughout the brief negotiations.”¹⁶ At no time did the reporters discuss the substantive issues of the strike nor did they ask either side to give details about the content

INVENTING REALITY

of the dispute.

In 1989 members of the United Mine Workers took over a coal processing plant owned by Pittston in southwest Virginia. It was the first major plant takeover since the historic Flint, Michigan, sit-down strike by autoworkers in 1937. “The event had every element of a good journalistic story: conflict, drama, colorful characters and, for television, tremendous footage,” writes Jonathan Tasini. “Yet, as far as the national media were concerned the historic action did not occur.”¹⁷

While downplaying the Pittston strike, the networks and newspapers lavished sympathetic coverage to striking coal miners in the erstwhile USSR. During a nine-day period, the Soviet miners received over thirty-seven minutes of prime-time network news. Contrasts were made between the living standards of Soviet bosses and coal miners—something media never thought of doing in regard to the Pittston owners and miners. The Soviet strikers also were portrayed glowingly as fighters for self-betterment and social justice—a kind of representation never accorded US workers.¹⁸

In July 1989, CBS’s weekly television news show “48 Hours” did devote an entire hour to the Pittston strike. Reporters interviewed company executives who said they wanted production to resume but they couldn’t get the union to cooperate. Scabs said they wanted to work and didn’t need a union to tell them what to do; they spoke at length of threats and mistreatment from strikers. State troopers were portrayed as neutral peacekeepers who were just doing their job, clearing the roads as they arrested strikers who tried to keep scabs from entering the mines.

In what seemed like a show of balanced reportage, CBS also interviewed strikers who said they were struggling for a contract and had to stick together until victory was theirs. Strikers were shown at home, at rallies, and on the picket lines. But never were they shown telling the viewers what the strike was about, what actually was at stake. Missing from the entire hour-long presentation was any reference to the substance of the issues, the content of the

MICHAEL PARENTI

conflict. Why were the miners striking? Not once did CBS mention that Pittston wanted to cut their wages and benefits by substantial amounts. Nor did CBS mention that Pittston was facing serious charges of unfair labor practices. A few such pertinent facts would have put the whole conflict in a different light. As presented by the network, the strike seemed to be a mindless contest of wills, pitting the stubborn, shrill, and rather foolish strikers against patient, soft-spoken managers who only wanted to resume production, “neutral” police who only wanted to keep the peace, and scabs who only wanted the freedom to work without union interference.

Likewise, national coverage of the 1990 Greyhound Bus strike offered little opportunity for the public to ascertain what was on the minds of striking workers. Company officials were afforded ample opportunity to comment, but union leaders and rank-and-file drivers received almost no exposure. With the aid of selective arithmetic, the real wage cuts that management sought to impose were represented as generous offers. A presentation of the union’s proposals was not to be found. Management was depicted as using “replacement workers” (scabs and strikebreakers) to “rebuild its fleet” and maintain services for the public (not to break the strike and destroy the union). Throughout the strike, the images were of a besieged, responsible management versus violent, irrational strikers, the latter showing a selfish indifference to the disruptive effects their strike was having on the economy.¹⁹

The media’s anti-labor biases should come as no surprise. Media owners themselves are among the most exploitative, anti-union employers and strikebreakers. At various times, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, the *New York Daily News*, CBS, and numerous other news organizations have been locked in bitter strikes that sometimes have ended with unions being crushed. As *Washington Post* owner Katharine Graham is reportedly fond of saying: “Unions interfere with freedom of the press.”²⁰

INVENTING REALITY

THE INVISIBLE WORKER

A major study of how the three network evening news programs covered labor found that “the lives of 100 million working people—those who make the U.S. economy and society run—are being routinely ignored, marginalized or inaccurately portrayed in the media.”²¹ Less than 1 percent of the total available telecast news time dealt with US labor unions—and the bulk of that coverage was devoted to the Eastern Airlines strike. On the rare occasions workers were interviewed, they almost never were treated as experts regarding issues that directly affected them. When not on strike, unions and workers practically vanish from the national media. The issues that concern them such as work place safety and health, declining real-wage levels, seniority, job security, underemployment, work place racism and sexism, affordable housing, and child care are routinely ignored or given paltry treatment.

In sum, labor news is sparse, superficial, and framed in a way that regularly favors management. The media treat labor-management disputes as isolated incidents having no linkage to larger economic forces. Strikes are treated as aberrant disruptions of normal life not as systemic conflicts endemic to industrial capitalism.

The press regularly presents labor as unwilling to negotiate in good faith when in fact management—in pursuit of high-profit policies—is usually the side that refuses all compromises and forces a strike. By repeatedly ignoring the substantive issues that precipitate labor struggles, the press makes workers appear as irrational and greedy to the point of being self-destructive.

The press says little about the enormous wealth accumulated by owners. The billions paid out in stock dividends and interest on bonds (not to mention the millions paid to management in the form of fat salaries, stock options, bonuses, and other perks) represent an enormously inequitable upward distribution of the productive earnings of labor, a transfer of wealth from those who work to those who live mainly off those who work.

While having little of substance to say about the causes of strikes, the

MICHAEL PARENTI

press greatly emphasizes the damage they do to the economy and the inconveniences inflicted upon the public. Little is said about the conditions of working people and their struggles in the face of the increasingly difficult economic conditions imposed on them by corporate power and government policies.

The mutual support that strikers provide for each other and the aid that unions sometimes extend to other unions are seldom noticed by the news media. During the coal strike of 1978 there was almost nothing on how farmers were bringing food to the miners. By ignoring the instances of worker solidarity and mutual assistance within and between occupations, the press denies the class dimension of the strike and underplays the support strikers have among other sectors of the public. The news media unfailingly portray the government as a neutral arbiter in the struggle between capital and labor, acting on behalf of the “national interest”—which itself is assumed to be best served by getting the workers back into production as soon as possible, regardless of the terms of settlement. The police—along with the courts, the president, and the rest of the government—are presented as neutral guardians of the peace and defenders of the public interest rather than as protectors of corporate property and bodyguards for strikebreakers.

No wonder the American public, including many progressive people, has such a negative image of organized labor. No wonder that persons who are critical of racist, sexist, and antigay attitudes still harbor anti—working-class and anti-union sentiments of the kind propagated by the media and other institutions of the business dominated culture.

A negative image of unions discourages workers from unionizing and leaves them suspicious of labor organizations. With its monopoly over mass communication, business has been able to present a largely unchallenged picture of “Big Labor” as an avaricious, narrowly self-interested, and often irrational force that does itself, the economy, and the public no good, driving up prices with its incessant demands, making gains only for itself while creating

INVENTING REALITY

costs that must be passed on to the rest of the public. Labor has no direct means of countering this negative image among the general public. If there exists for labor a free market of ideas, it is not to be found in the mass media.

VII. “Liberal” Media, Conservative Bias

There exists not only public opinion but media opinions about public opinion. What the people think is one thing; what is publicized about what they think can be something else. The media cannot mold every political feeling we have, but they can fill the air with pronouncements about what our feelings allegedly are. The press may not be able to create a conservative mood within us but it can repeatedly announce that a conservative mood exists, thereby doing much to create the impression of such a mood and encouraging conservative forces to come to the fore. The press cannot stop protests, but it can discredit and ignore them, thereby discouraging popular political actions. In short, even more than manipulating actual opinions, the media have a great deal of power in controlling opinion visibility. They create a media image of public opinion that often plays a more crucial role in setting the issue agenda than does actual public opinion and which has a feedback effect on actual opinion.

The institutions of this society whose job, among other things, is to socialize people into patterns of conventional belief and acceptable behavior do not operate with perfect effect. Some people will still become disaffected. Longstanding grievances can erupt at unexpected moments. Sometimes

INVENTING REALITY

extraordinary events play on the public's discontents, galvanizing a kind of protest that not even the most skillful media propagandist, the smoothest educator, or the slickest political leader can mollify.

The Vietnam War was just such an extraordinary event. While the news media are often credited with, or damned for, making the war unpopular by providing daily accounts of its carnage, in actuality, during the early years of the conflict the press reported the war largely the way the US government wanted it reported, raising no serious objections about US intervention. Despite this, by 1967 or so, the antiwar movement had become a political force to be reckoned with.

After initially downplaying the war and the protests, the media began giving attention to both. Unable either to prevent or to ignore mass protests, the opinion manufacturers set about to misrepresent, discredit, and contain them. The story of how that was done is told elsewhere and will not be repeated here.¹ Suffice it to say that during the 1960s the media commentators spent more time attacking those who protested the enormities of this world than those who perpetrated such enormities. While there were a few exceptional moments of coverage in which protestors were treated with fairness, the cumulative impact of press coverage was to create the impression that these "kids" were violent, extremist, and dangerous to society. Thus the protestors were made the issue rather than the things they were protesting. These discrediting techniques were to be repeated against other protestors in the years to follow.

CREATING A "CONSERVATIVE MOOD"

In the aftermath of the antiwar movement of the 1960s, the press was quick to announce a return to normalcy. Supposedly protests were passé and everyone had gone back to their private pursuits. By the mid-1970s the news media were going so far as to proclaim that the nation was in a "conservative mood." "The country is moving in the conservative direction ... surely," intoned

MICHAEL PARENTI

Washington Post columnist David Broder. And the *New York Times* talked about opinion “swinging to the right.”²

Press commentators pointed to students who now struggled for grades instead of for revolution. They noted the conservative victories in a number of state legislatures against the Equal Rights Amendment, against abortion, and for the death penalty, and the widespread resistance in local communities to school busing for racial balance. Ultraright leaders became familiar faces in the news. New conservative columnists and TV and radio commentators were hired to bolster the old stock. Some liberal intellectuals now declared themselves to be neo-conservatives.

With the advent of the 1980s and the landslide elections of a conservative president like Ronald Reagan, the press more vigorously than ever emphasized the conservative “drift” of the nation. Claiming to have discovered a conservative mood, the press helped create the impression that one existed. In doing so, it had to overlook a great deal about the 1970s and 1980s, including the various polls that showed a shift in a progressive direction on such issues as military spending, the arms race, environmental protection, care for the elderly, taxation, race relations, housing, jobs, and occupational safety.³

During the 1970s and 1980s there were major strikes and demonstrations by workers in various industries. Environmental, consumer, and other public interest groups continued to pit themselves against the giant companies, while peace organizations throughout the nation launched mass protests against military spending and the nuclear arms race. There were large demonstrations against the repressive regimes of South Africa, Chile, El Salvador, and a dozen other US-supported dictatorships. There were rallies and civil disobedience actions at nuclear sites and against unsafe nuclear plants. Scores of college campuses witnessed strikes, sit-ins, and arrests over such issues as university investment policies, the firing of radical professors, cuts in ethnic minority studies and women’s studies, and questions of university governance.

These protest activities either went unreported in the national media or

INVENTING REALITY

were given only passing and usually negative mention. In the face of substantial evidence to the contrary, and with a single-mindedness that—were it to occur in a country with a leftist government—would be taken as evidence of a controlled press, the media treated dissent and activism pretty much as a thing of the past.

By giving uncritical credence to the myth of a conservative mood, the press not only happened to misreport public opinion but helped frame issues in a way favorable to conservatives. By crediting conservative policies with a popular support they usually did not have, the press did its part in shifting the political agenda in a rightward direction. Public opinion is not just an expression of sentiment; it is a democratic power resource that sometimes constrains and directs policymakers who otherwise spend their time responding to the demands and enticements of moneyed interests. “By misrepresenting public opinion, by emphasizing some opinions at the expense of others, the press deprives the unorganized masses of some of their potential power. The media short-circuit the process by which public preference may otherwise be translated into government policy.”⁴

In addition, the myth of a conservative mood helps create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the media keep telling us that times are favorable for conservative politics, people begin to believe it and act accordingly. Right-wing candidates thrust themselves forward more aggressively, readily attracting volunteers and big contributors. Liberals are perceived, and maybe even perceive themselves, as out of step with the times. They shy away from “risky” issues and drift to the right. Given the media-created climate of opinion, fewer political leaders become willing or able to challenge the “conservative mood.”

Red-baiting is one time-tested technique for discrediting those who struggle for equitable social and economic relations. And one of the most adept red-baiters was Ronald Reagan, who enjoyed the high visibility advantage of occupying the White House and having his utterances dutifully transmitted to the American public by the national media. In 1982 President Reagan described

MICHAEL PARENTI

the nuclear freeze campaign that was sweeping across the country as instigated and manipulated by “foreign agents,” who “want the weakening of America.” When asked to elaborate, he backed off because “I don’t discuss intelligence matters.” A White House spokesperson later announced that “documentation” of the president’s charges could be found in two conservative publications, the *American Spectator* and *Commentary*, and in the October issue of the *Reader’s Digest*.⁵

Reagan was immediately criticized by members of Congress, peace activists, and segments of the press for resorting to McCarthyite smear tactics to discredit the peace movement. An extensive investigation by a congressional committee concluded that there was “no evidence that the Soviets direct, manage or manipulate the nuclear freeze movement.”⁶

The absence of evidence did not prevent some elements of the national media from joining in the red-baiting. On the eve of the antinuclear weapons demonstration that brought a million people to New York on June 12, 1982, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a major article attempting to link the US peace movement to the Soviet KGB. *New York Times* columnist Flora Lewis, without benefit of any evidence, concluded: “No doubt the KGB has a vast masterful network to spread disinformation among us.”⁷ In July the *Times* ran a three-part series alleging that the KGB had infiltrated the European peace movement. An anonymous “American intelligence specialist” was quoted as saying, “The question then will be how hard the KGB pushes. We know it has catalogues of shouters, marchers, street fighters, bomb throwers and killers it could turn loose.”⁸ This fantasy about agitator-killer “catalogues,” from an unidentified source, was treated by the *Times* as news that was fit to print.

Both the left and right try to extend their influence into the political mainstream. The left, by mobilizing large numbers of people, hopes to gain greater visibility, win more adherents, and create a ground swell for social change. The right usually does not have that kind of popular support for its political agenda, there being no mass of people out on the streets demanding

INVENTING REALITY

still more funds for the Pentagon, still more favorable banking laws for Chase Manhattan or wider tax loopholes for Exxon, no elderly agitating for cuts in medical care, no workers demonstrating for higher corporate profits and wage slashes. So the right attempts to channel popular grievances into noneconomic issues such as busing, school prayers, pornography, and abortion, issues that might cut into the support of progressive causes and candidates while strengthening conservative ones.

The right is not seeking changes of a kind that burden or threaten the interests of the dominant corporate class. If anything, it advocates a view of the world that wealthy media owners look upon with genuine sympathy, unlike the view offered by left protesters. The centrist media is, in a word, more receptive to the right than to the left because its owners and corporate heads share the right's basic feelings about free enterprise, capitalism, communism, labor unions, popular protest, and US global supremacy, even if not always seeing eye-to-eye with it on specific policies and certain cultural issues. In addition, the right has the money to buy media exposure and the left usually does not.

The right influences the mass media by generating rightist themes in its ultra-conservative publications and then working these into the communication mainstream. The rise of the "KGB menace" in America provides an example of how the right feeds into the center. The first time I heard of this updated version of the Red Menace was when the conservative columnist M. Stanton-Evans, whom I happened to be debating at a college campus in 1980, announced that "KGB agents had infiltrated our American institutions" and were "walking the streets of our nation's capital." The claim brought skeptical smiles to faces in the audience, so outlandish did it sound. First germinating on the far-right fringe, then repeated again and again by right-wing propagandists like Robert Moss, Arnaud de Borchgrave, Claire Sterling, and Michael Ledeen, the KGB charge began to slowly seep into the center. Through the process of repetition and dissemination it began to sound less outlandish. William Preston and Ellen Ray provide a good summary of how a determined right feeds a

MICHAEL PARENTI

receptive center:

A theme which is floated on one level—a feature item on VOA about Cuba for example—will appear within record time as a lead article in *Reader's Digest*, or a feature in a Heritage Foundation report, or a series of “exposes” by Moss and de Borchgrave or Daniel James in some reactionary tabloid like *Human Events* or the *Washington Times* or *Inquirer*. Then they will all be called to testify by Senator Denton's Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, repeating one another's allegations as “expert witnesses.” After that they are given credibility by the “respectable” Cold War publications like the *National Review*, *Commentary*, and the *New Republic*. And finally, since they have repeated the theme so many times it must be true, they are given the opportunity to write Op-Ed pieces for the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.⁹

Not only are they given the opportunity to write guest pieces, but as we have already observed in the case of the KGB bogey, regular mainstream columnists like Flora Lewis begin referring to the KGB's “vast masterful network to spread disinformation among us.”

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the right injected its message into a receptive center once again when it launched a campaign to purge academia of critical left viewpoints. For decades, left dissidents have criticized the university's complicity with the corporate-military establishment, the class and income barriers to higher education, the racism and sexism of many university practices and curricula, the flow of foundation money that goes to system-supporting rather than system-changing research, the ideological orthodoxy of mainstream social science, and the politically repressive hiring and firing practices that have purged hundreds of left academics from faculty staffs. These criticisms of academia seldom if ever saw the light of day in the national media.

INVENTING REALITY

In contrast, attacks launched by the right against the “politically correct” thought control, supposedly imposed by “multiculturalists,” feminists, radical homosexuals, and Marxists in academia, received an attentive response from the mainstream media. The rightist attack against the “new McCarthyites” was accorded cover stories in *Newsweek*, the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic*, and *New York*, and articles, interviews, and commentaries in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other newspapers.¹⁰ The received opinion is that academia is populated by left ideologues who push their “politically correct” line and tolerate no alternative views. In fact, the traditional White-male Western-capitalist perspective still dominates most academic departments and curriculums. But one would never know it from the flood of articles written by conservative White males. Under the guise of McCarthyism, the conservatives sought to impose a McCarthyite ideological conformism on the relatively few areas of diverse opinions that exist in academia. In that struggle, the media heavily favored the attackers over the attacked.

POPULIST ELECTORATE, CONSERVATIVE OUTCOME

By the 1988 election, the visible political climate created by government and media had shifted enough to the right so that Republican presidential candidate George Bush did not find it necessary to red-bait his liberal opponent Democrat Michael Dukakis. It was enough to liberal-bait him. Bush promised to be the “environment president,” the “education president,” and the “no-more-taxes president,” but said nothing of substance about any of those matters. Indeed, he refused to discuss issues during the campaign. He also misrepresented Dukakis’s position at every opportunity and generally ran one of the dirtiest campaigns in modern times—made all the more effective by the national media’s faithful and uncritical coverage. Thus in the notorious Willie Horton TV ads, Bush implied that Dukakis, then governor of Massachusetts, was soft on crime and was to blame for an overly permissive prisoner furlough

MICHAEL PARENTI

program in his state—even though the program had been installed by the previous governor, a Republican, and was no more liberal than the federal program under which Bush served as vice president. Bush blamed Dukakis for the terrible pollution in Boston harbor even though the harbor was under federal jurisdiction and was the responsibility of the Reagan-Bush administration.

For his part, Dukakis proved to be one of the more ineffectual and insipid candidates ever to run for president. His media delivery was wooden and lacking in content. He showed himself lacking any instinct for the jugular and incapable of countering Bush's misrepresentations. Rather than proudly pointing to the historic liberal achievements of his party, he defensively shrank from being called a liberal and begged that there be no "labeling." He and his Massachusetts staff repeatedly mismanaged the campaign, often succeeding in alienating Democratic organizations in other states. He ran television campaign ads that lacked clarity and punch. And he spent most of his time making banal assertions about his leadership qualities.

Beginning the campaign with an eighteen-point lead in opinion polls, Dukakis had the advantage of an electorate that seemed ready for change after eight years of Reaganism. But within a short time he managed to fall well behind Bush in the polls. Only in the last two weeks did he belatedly introduce a populist spirit by advocating more equitable domestic programs and denouncing the privileges and powers of wealthy interests. These appeals began to rouse voters, but too little too late. Bush overwhelmingly defeated Dukakis.

Overlooking the public's belated populist responses, the exceptional ineffectuality of the Democratic candidate, and the lack of enthusiasm for both candidates that brought a record-low voter turnout, the press concluded that Bush's victory signaled yet another swing toward conservatism. While the media saw only conservative moods, an opinion poll in 1991 found people agreeing by an 84 to 13 percent margin that "in recent years the rich have been getting richer, and it's been harder for middle income and working families to

INVENTING REALITY

get by.” The polls showed majorities favoring national health care, more environmental protection, more occupational safety, and strong anti-recessionary action by government.¹¹

PUNDITS TO THE RIGHT

One of the crucial factors controlling the limits of political awareness in the media is the growing number of conservative editorialists, columnists, TV commentators, and radio talk-show hosts who tell us what to think about the news. A rightist perspective dominates TV political talk shows like NBC’s “McLaughlin Group,” PBS’s “One on One” (with McLaughlin as host), CNBC’s “McLaughlin Show” (with guess who), William Buckley’s “Firing Line,” CNN’s “Evans and Novak” and “Capital Gang” (both featuring conservative newspaper columnist Robert Novak as host), ABC’s “This Week with David Brinkley,” and PBS’s “American Interests.”

The range of opinion on these shows and in the opinion columns of newspapers varies from far right to moderate centrist. In a display of false balancing, the right as represented by Robert Novak, William Buckley, John McLaughlin, George Will, and Pat Buchanan is pitted against the “left” as dubiously represented by Michael Kinsley, Sam Donaldson, and Mark Shields. The trouble is, these latter are mostly centrists with no real linkage to left causes and no left analysis, in contrast to the militant, right-wing ideologues they face. The “leftliberal” Kinsley has even written columns praising Britain’s former prime minister Margaret Thatcher and defending the South African government’s resistance to one person, one vote. Donaldson has asserted that “Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet system is a terrorist system,” and has described Daniel Ortega as “the Nicaraguan dictator.”¹² A genuinely left progressive analysis of US foreign and domestic policy is not to be found in mainstream commentary.

Often the “debate” is between two conservative positions, as when, on

MICHAEL PARENTI

CNN's "Op-Ed Commentary," conservative Morton Kondracke praised the Bush administration's foreign policy while conservative Fred Barnes attacked the White House for not being tough enough, or as on "American Interests," when a Reagan cabinet member, Weinberger, was paired with a Bush cabinet member, Mossbacher.¹³

Despite all this, conservative media-watch groups like Accuracy in Media (AIM) continue to attack the press for being too liberal: that is, for not being as completely right-wing as AIM would want. AIM's Reed Irvine has a weekly column that circulates in some hundred newspapers and a daily radio commentary that plays on seventy stations.¹⁴ Leftist and other progressives cannot hope for anything resembling that kind of exposure. Yet Irvine continues to charge that left views are heavily favored in the media.

Scores of other right-wingers dominate the talk-radio circuits, including such political Neanderthals as Rush Limbaugh who reaches 1.3 million listeners on more than 340 affiliated radio stations. Limbaugh attacks "commie-libs," "femiNazis," "liberal Democrats," "gays," and other unpatriotic traitors who might utter a good word about labor unions or gun control or a critical word about the socio-economic status quo. Then there is Bob Grant whose right-wing and anti-ethnic comments, coming out of the greater New York area on WABC radio, reach late-night audiences across most of the land east of the Mississippi.¹⁵

Right-wing organizations and media-watch groups like AIM are able to draw from affluent sources like the multimillionaire Richard Mellon Scaife (who has donated over \$100 million to conservative causes in recent years), New York investment banker Shelby Cullom Davis, Richard Nixon, Bebe Rebozo, and multimillionaire Walter Annenberg. The John Olin Foundation gives over \$5 million a year to right-wing causes.¹⁶ Big corporations like Du Pont and GE give millions more.

The conservative Christian Broadcast Network brings in an annual \$22 million from members around the country. Right-wing fundamentalist

INVENTING REALITY

broadcasting is a \$2-billion-a-year industry, controlling more than 1,000 full-time radio stations and more than 200 full-time TV stations, or about 10 percent of all radio and 14 percent of all television in the nation.¹⁷ There is also a Christian left in the United States composed of persons who advocate social reform at home, aid to the poor and homeless, and an end to US militarism and armed interventions in the Third World. But they lack the financial backing needed to give them any substantial access to media.

HOW TO DISCREDIT PROTESTORS

On those infrequent occasions the national media report popular protests, the coverage is usually scant and slighting. *The Washington Post* coverage of the May 1981 “March on the Pentagon” can serve as a case study of how the supposedly liberal press treats protests on the left.¹⁸ Buried in Section C along with local news and obituaries, the story, written by Mike Sager, seems more concerned with trivializing the protesters than with telling us anything about the content of their protests, about why they were out there in the first place:

They marched carrying banners for their causes while licking ice-cream bars and taking pictures of each other with complicated camera gear... . Yesterday’s minions carried a few placards and repeated a few chants, but some also took time to eat picnic lunches, smoke marijuana, drink beer and work on their tans.

(A “minion,” according to Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, is “a term of contempt” describing “a servile follower.”)

Two fairly large photographs accompanying the story show no one sunbathing or consuming picnic lunches, marijuana, beer, or ice cream.

And the photos reveal not “a few placards” but what must be hundreds of

MICHAEL PARENTI

placards and banners. To be sure, some of the participants may well have paused to refresh themselves—in a demonstration that continued for some seven hours under the hot sun. What might be questioned is why the *Post* writer treated these minor activities as central to the event, thereby suggesting a frivolous atmosphere that denies the protesters the seriousness of their concerns.

We read that the demonstrators varied “from long-haired hippie hold-outs with painted faces to L.L. Bean—clad outdoorsmen to health-conscious joggers who had stopped by to witness the spectacle... The demonstration took on a flea market atmosphere—something for everyone.” It was a “hodge-podge collection.” Even the headline proclaimed: “25,000 PROTESTERS MARCH FOR MIXED CAUSES.” The *Post* story assumed there was an incongruous mix of issues, when in fact the demonstration sought to link a range of domestic and foreign policies and make common cause against the government. Such linkage is easily misunderstood by a press that treats political issues as isolated, unrelated events.

The *Post* reporter accepted the unrealistic police estimate of the crowd at 25,000 (I write as a participant-observer of the event), making no mention of the 100,000 claimed by the march organizers. A counter-demonstration, counted by me at 100 to 110 people, was reported as 300 “clean-cut protesters” from “Rev. Moon’s Unification Church which is calling for US intervention in El Salvador to rid it of Russian and Cuban communist influence... .” (Here the *Post* accepted as established fact the Moonie charge that the Salvadorian revolutionaries were the puppets of Moscow and Havana. A less biased statement might have read: “to rid it of what the counter-demonstrators claim is Russian and Cuban influence.”) While the Moonies were only a tiny fraction of the people present, they and their concerns were accorded about one-fifth the story.

At this same demonstration, speakers from a wide range of political groups made statements about US policies at home and abroad, yet nothing about these speeches appeared in the *Post*'s rather lengthy article except for a

INVENTING REALITY

few mocking lines describing one speaker's plea for funds to pay the demonstration costs. Readers might easily have come away thinking they had exercised good sense in choosing not to participate in what must have been a rather inane, circus-like affair.

The following are the methods used by the press to discredit leftist protests:

Ignoring and Undercounting

The press makes a regular practice of undercounting the size of demonstrations; “disparagement by numbers” is what one media critic calls it.¹⁹ The press regularly ignores the estimates offered by rally organizers and fails to make an independent estimate from the number of chartered buses, trains, and auto flow or from “grid” counting. Instead, reporters treat as accurate the “official” figures provided by generally unsympathetic police, while seldom raising a question about how they arrive at their estimates. However, on those rare occasions when a police count proves too favorable, the press is capable of conjuring a lower figure. Thus when the police reported that organized labor's September 1981 protest march on Washington numbered 400,000, the *Washington Post* reported 260,000 and the *New York Times* put it at 240,000.²⁰

In 1991, hours before President Bush began his all-out air attack against Iraq, ABC did a brief report on domestic opposition to the impending war. All ABC's Ted Koppel could find was a “small group” (his words) of people in Iowa and another in Berkeley, California, engaged in candlelight vigils.²¹ ABC ignored the large and dramatic demonstrations occurring that same day in the San Francisco Bay area in which 10,000 people shut down the federal building and 2,000 shut down the Bay Bridge, the latter action resulting in hundreds of arrests.

A peace march in San Francisco on January 19, 1991, stretching from Dolores Park along the full width of Market Street all the way to Van Ness—about the length of ten or twelve football fields, easily 150,000

MICHAEL PARENTI

people—was reported by KRON-TV and CNN as 25,000.

On January 26, 1991, peace advocates launched a massive march on Washington to protest President Bush's Gulf war. Over a thousand buses filled to capacity with demonstrators from all over the Northeast, South, and Midwest rolled into the city. Tens of thousands of people came by car, Amtrak, and the Washington Metro. During the event itself, marchers tightly packed in broad uneven lines about sixty to seventy across, moving at a brisk pace, took about four hours to pass any given point. Organizers claimed 250,000. But the figure widely reported in the news was 75,000, provided by the unsympathetic Park Police. (It never would have taken four hours for 75,000 to march by.) Even worse were the early CNN reports, which noted that "organizers were hoping for 50,000 but they appear to be well short of that goal."

Large demonstrations against the US war in the Gulf took place throughout Europe and in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Pakistan, and elsewhere. These also were ignored by the US media or mentioned only in passing with no counts given of the enormous outpouring. Much smaller anticommunist demonstrations the following week in Lithuania were accorded far more elaborate exposure, including long-range camera shots to show the crowd in its most impressive perspective—something that is almost never done for protest marches in the US.

Favoritism for Rightist Demonstrators

Generally, demonstrations at home and abroad get generous coverage only if they are directed against communist governments or support US government policy. The Polish "Solidarity Day" of 1982, a series of rallies in US cities in support of the anticommunist movement in Poland, was accorded prime-time publicity that began a week before the actual event took place. (Protest demonstrations get no pre-event publicity.) The actual turnout in support of Polish Solidarity was sparse, in most cities numbering only a few hundred. Yet the rallies were treated as major events, with front-page coverage

INVENTING REALITY

in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and generous network television exposure. No mention was made of the disappointing sizes of the crowds.²²

Minimizing adjectives like “small” and “disappointing” are rarely if ever used to describe rallies that are anticommunist and supportive of US policy. Positive adjectives like “dedicated” and “massive” are hardly ever used to describe left protests, no matter how dedicated and massive they be.

Large left protests can be dismissed as “disappointing.” Thus the huge Labor Day demonstration in New York in September 1981, estimated by marchers at 200,000 and by police at 100,000, was described in the *Washington Post* as a “disappointingly small crowd of less than 100,000 union workers.”²³

Various media conduits gave a few hundred counterdemonstrators at the January 26, 1991, march in Washington only slightly less, the same, or sometimes more exposure than the vastly larger antiwar protest. NBC’s “Eye-Witness News” noted the event by doing a short special on the pro-war advocates. “As groups of [antiwar] protesters made their way across the Capitol grounds,” said the announcer (a shot of scattered clusters, not the mass of marchers), “hundreds who supported the war gathered and marched down Constitution Avenue to LaFayette Park.” The rest of the footage focused exclusively on the pro-war advocates, including generous clips of their patriotic expressions and their criticisms of the antiwar protesters. None of the latter was heard from. The impression was that the pro-war rally composed of “hundreds” was more significant and maybe even larger than the “groups” that straggled across the Capitol grounds. The hawks with their small numbers got all the exposure and all the sound bites. The doves with their hundreds of thousands could barely catch the eye of “Eyewitness News.”

In San Francisco, a KRON-TV announcer summed up the massive demonstrations against the Gulf war that were taking place across the nation as follows: “The numbers of antiwar and pro-war protesters were about equal.”

The “Desert Homecoming” victory parades in Washington and New York in June 1991, welcoming the troops home from the Gulf war, received week-long

MICHAEL PARENTI

pre-event promotional hype in the print and broadcast media and live full-day TV coverage. The turnout for the Washington parade was estimated by the sympathetic Park Police at 200,000, an exceedingly generous count judging from the great empty spaces on the mall and a sidewalk crowd along the route that was not usually more than two deep. Indeed, through most of the day, TV announcers noted that “thousands” had assembled, not “tens of thousands” and certainly not “hundreds of thousands.” Nevertheless, the 200,000 figure was soon dropped and by late afternoon “800,000” became the imaginary number heralded by the media.²⁴

The turnout for the “Desert Homecoming” victory parade in New York City a few days later was accorded the outlandish figure of 4.7 million by its promoters and the police. To achieve that number there would have to have been almost a quarter of a million people lining each of the twenty blocks of the route. Even the *New York Times* reporter noted that the count “appeared to be extravagant... But it was in keeping with the hyperbole of the day.”²⁵ So was the *Times* headline accompanying the story, which read in part: “MILLIONS ON BROADWAY ROAR A ‘WELL DONE’ TO GULF VETERANS.”

Scanting of Content

Almost never do the media give us the arguments and motives behind a protest demonstration, the reasons why so many thousands feel impelled to travel long distances to march for hours in the streets. The signs and slogans projected by the demonstrators are regularly ignored as are the speeches that deal with the grievances at hand. The event is depicted as something of a spectacle connected to little more than its own surface appearances and not as part of a democratic struggle over vital issues. Viewers might easily come away with the notion that the crowd is just a noisy bunch of malcontent or unpatriotic people, especially viewers who have been fed nothing but the official view of things.

In fact, far from being an inchoate, mindless mass, antiwar

INVENTING REALITY

demonstrations through their signs, slogans, chants, and speeches often reflect the passion and critical intelligence of informed people who care about what is happening in the world and in their own country. The media always seem to miss this story about the strength and vitality of democracy in the streets.

Content is also scanted through single-issue reductionism. The indictments made against the policies that help foster poverty, racism, sexism, economic exploitation, environmental devastation, capitalism, and imperialism are reduced to just one or two specific complaints by the press—for example, “end the war.” While the demonstrators are sometimes branded as extremists intent upon disrupting orderly society, the press reduces the truly radical content of their message to a minimal reformist demand.

This dilution of the protest message can extend to characterizations about popular leaders. Thus the national media repeatedly tell us that Martin Luther King, Jr., was an outstanding civil rights leader but they fail to mention that he was also a strong critic of the American economic system, US foreign policy, and US militarism.²⁶ King not only had a dream about racial brotherhood, he had something more dangerous than that—an analysis linking racism and poverty to class and power policies at home and abroad. So with Malcolm X, who is portrayed as a militant Black separatist but whose anti-imperialist ideas seem to have been forgotten. Not long after King and Malcolm began to link racial issues to class and economic conditions, they were assassinated.

Trivialization and Marginalization

As noted earlier in the discussion of the *Washington Post*'s account of the May 1981 “March on the Pentagon,” the press regularly directs our attention to surface appearances and ignores the substance of the protest. In doing so, it is free to ascribe irrational and frivolous motives to the demonstrators, using selective details to make light of their dress, age, language, presumed lack of seriousness, and self-indulgent activities.²⁷ The demonstrators are depicted as a

MICHAEL PARENTI

deviant and unrepresentative sample of the American people, lacking in credible life-styles and therefore credible politics. “Social problem” or “crisis” no longer describes the wrongful conditions that provoke popular response. The popular response itself is now the crisis or the problem.

Another way to marginalize a group is to portray it as violent and irrational, or linked to groups thought to be violent or in some way threatening. One TV announcer on January 18, 1991, dismissed the massive anti-war outpouring in San Francisco by saying “it has been discredited because of its violence.” The screen showed a police car burning and protesters throwing rocks at a building, then a woman who said she was very upset by the “violence.” As during the Vietnam War, so with the Gulf war, the media made no distinction between the massive violence perpetrated by US forces against an entire people and the relatively minor violence against property—except to treat the latter as a far more serious problem.

In sum, the mass media are owned by large corporate conglomerates whose financial dominance gives them the means to control news content and limit the range of acceptable media opinion, injecting a bias against organized labor, antiwar protesters, socialists, environmentalists, feminists, ethnic minorities, Third World liberation struggles, and all progressive causes. If so, why do conservatives repeatedly complain about the media’s “liberal” bias? That question is treated in Chapter 13.²⁸

VIII. The Media Fight the Red Menace

Leftist governments and movements at home and abroad, who claim to support the have-nots as against the privileged and powerful, have been treated with a fairly persistent hostility by the US capitalist state and the national media.

ENTER THE RED MENACE

American anticommunist sentiment goes back to the nineteenth century when the press, joined by the pulpit, the politicians, the police, the professors, and the plutocracy itself, alerted the public to the dangers of syndicalism, socialism, anarchism, and communism—lumping all these radical tendencies together as one great danger to the American Way of Life.¹ Any proposed departure from the capitalist social order was characterized as an end to all order and a descent into chaos, anarchy, and criminality. As early as 1880 Roscoe Conkling could hail President Ulysses Grant as an eternal foe of “communism, lawlessness and disorder.”² Opposition to the privileged institutions of power and wealth was treated as opposition to America itself.

MICHAEL PARENTI

Capitalism was called “free enterprise” and equated with true Americanism, while socialism was depicted as an alien virus infecting the American body politic.

The mildest demands for change, the palest reforms on behalf of the disadvantaged, the most modest attempts by impoverished workers to improve wages and work conditions—all moves that would cut into the profits of owners—were denounced as communist-inspired. Labor struggles were portrayed as attacks on society itself. The great Pullman strike outside Chicago in 1894—in which 60,000 workers, led by Eugene V. Debs, ceased work along the Western railway lines in an orderly mass action—was greeted with shrieking headlines like “MOBS IN CONTROL OF CHICAGO” and “CHICAGO FACES FAMINE” and was dubbed the “Debs Rebellion.”

At about that time, the *New York Tribune* “discovered” and alerted its readers to an “ANARCHIST PLOT TO BLOW UP THE CAPITAL.”³

The propaganda war against the Red Menace intensified soon after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The specter of Bolshevism sent a shudder through the wealthy classes of the Western world. In 1919, a fourteen-nation expeditionary force, including British, French, and American troops, invaded the Soviet Union in what proved to be an unsuccessful campaign to overthrow the new Bolshevik government. The anti-Soviet campaign was quickly taken up by the press. Forgetful of who had invaded whom, the *New York Times* ran story after story about imminent Bolshevik invasions of Europe, Asia, and America, with headlines like “LENIN THREATENS INDIA” and “REDS SEEK WAR WITH AMERICA.”⁴

As one historian describes it:

Anti-Bolshevik testimony was played up in the columns of the nation’s newspapers and once again the reading public was fed on highly colored tales of free love, nationalization of women, bloody massacres, and brutal atrocities. Stories were circulated that the victims of the Bolshevik

INVENTING REALITY

madmen customarily had been roasted to death in furnaces, scalded with live steam, torn to pieces on racks, or hacked to bits with axes. Newspaper editors never tired of referring to the Russian Reds as “assassins and madmen,” “human scum,” “crime-mad,” and “beasts.” Russia was a place, some said, where maniacs stalked raving through the streets, and the populace fought with dogs for carrion.⁵

During this same period, strikes swept the major industries of the United States. In the autumn of 1919 two million workers walked off their jobs, including 500,000 coal miners and 350,000 steelworkers. Immediately the press began to link worker unrest at home to the “Soviet menace” abroad with sensational headlines like “RED PERIL HERE,” “PLAN BLOODY REVOLUTION,” and “WANT WASHINGTON GOVERNMENT OVERTURNED.”⁶ A special Justice Department publicity bureau was set up to plant stories in newspapers about a Moscow-directed plot to overthrow the US government, issuing press releases with such headings as “U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE URGES AMERICANS TO GUARD AGAINST BOLSHEVIK MENACE” and “PRESS, CHURCH, SCHOOLS, LABOR UNIONS AND CIVIC BODIES CALLED UPON TO TEACH TRUE PURPOSE OF COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA.”⁷

On January 2, 1920, under the direction of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the Justice Department, assisted by state and local police, conducted raids in twenty cities, arresting thousands of leftists, including many trade union militants. The *New York Times* hailed the “Palmer raids” with this headline: “REDS PLOTTED COUNTRYWIDE STRIKE—ARRESTS EXCEED 5,000—2,635 HELD.” The *Times* also ran an editorial that heaped praise on the government’s action and promised that the raids were “only the beginning” in the war against communism.⁸ The American public was bombarded with lurid press stories of an impending Red takeover. In truth, “the nightmare was not revolution but reaction, and it was real: the job had been done. Under the

MICHAEL PARENTI

pressure of the combined forces of industry, government, and press, the major strikes had been broken, wages driven down, the open shop restored and the ranks of the unions decimated.”⁹

The government-industry-press campaign against the Red Menace continued throughout the 1920s. Socialists elected to the New York state legislature and to the US Congress were denied their seats. Legislative committees conducted witch-hunting investigations. Radicals and union organizers were harassed and arrested by state and local authorities. Immigrant leftists were summarily deported. These developments earned little criticism and much praise from the business-owned news media.

In marked contrast to the flood of horror stories about the Soviet Union was the treatment accorded fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. In the 1920s, major publications like the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Christian Science Monitor* hailed Mussolini as Italy’s savior, the man who had suddenly brought his nation from poverty and unrest to harmonious prosperity, rescuing his people from the perils of anarchy and radicalism.¹⁰ Likewise the stories that greeted Hitler’s ascension to power in 1933 were strikingly different from the shrill press treatment of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. With a few notable exceptions like the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Boston Globe*, American newspapers and radio news reports were optimistic about Hitler. In an editorial entitled “The Tamed Hitler,” the *New York Times* (January 30, 1933) told its readers to expect a “transformation” in Hitler as he begins “softening down or abandoning” “the more violent parts of his alleged program.”

There swiftly arose the give-Adolph-a-chance press claue. The *Houston Post* pleaded, “Let Hitler try his hand.” CBS national radio interviewed the *Times* Berlin bureau chief, Frederick Birchall, who said the Nazis were not intending “any slaughter of their enemies or racial oppression in any vital degree.” While the Soviets were being portrayed as ever on the edge of launching aggressive attacks against any and all, Birchall reassured listeners that the Nazis had no

INVENTING REALITY

desire to go to war and Hitler could not be called a dictator. With that keen eye for the irrelevant that is the hallmark of American journalism, he observed that Hitler was a vegetarian and a nonsmoker, attributes that were supposedly indicative of a benign nature. And he noted that Hitler had taken upon himself “the hardest job that ever a man could undertake.” The *Los Angeles Times* (April 4, 1933) also looked at the brighter side of things, seeing Hitler as a stern opponent of communism. And even though violent attacks had begun against the Jews, Nazi anti-Semitism was “understood to have been mainly rhetorical.”¹¹

While denouncing the Soviet Union as a menace to civilization, the US press manifested an open admiration for fascism in Italy and a hopeful tolerance of Nazism in Germany. Unlike the Soviets, Mussolini and Hitler were attacking not the capitalist system but its enemies. Both of them murdered leftists, imprisoned dissenters, and abolished all democratic political organizations, including opposition political parties and newspapers. They also destroyed labor unions, cut wages, reduced upper-bracket income taxes, practically abolished inheritance taxes for the wealthy, subsidized big business enterprises, and privatized large portions of the public sector, thereby winning the approval of industrialists and press moguls in the United States and elsewhere. Some US business leaders like Henry Ford accepted honorary decorations from Mussolini and Hitler, while others longed to emulate their rule. Former president of the National Association of Manufacturers, H. W. Prentiss, announced, “American business might be forced to turn to some form of disguised Fascistic dictatorship.”¹²

After Hitler built up Germany’s war machine, occupied the Rhineland, annexed Austria, and grabbed Czechoslovakia, the US press belatedly began treating him as a threat to peace and freedom. Yet even as late as 1939, *Time* magazine could claim that Hitler’s regime “was no ordinary dictatorship, but rather one of great energy and magnificent planning.”¹³

The Red Peril continued to be conjured up by the media whenever labor militancy gathered momentum. In 1934, a strike of maritime workers down the

MICHAEL PARENTI

entire West Coast, coupled with a general strike in San Francisco, caused newspapers, radio commentators, and clergy to join together in whipping up anticommunist hysteria against the strikers. A front-page story in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, headlined “RED ARMY MARCHING ON CITY,” announced that a “Communist army” was approaching the Northern California border with plans to destroy rail and road facilities and take San Francisco.¹⁴

Organized labor won some important victories during the struggles of the 1930s. American corporations spent substantial sums for spies, gun thugs, goons, and propaganda to prevent unionization and to spread anti-Red calumny among the rank and file. Despite such efforts, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) grew from less than a million to nearly four million by 1938. Massive strikes, sit-ins, and agitations swept across the country in the period between 1935 and 1941. The eight-hour day, fought for since 1866, was at last won by millions of workers. The wage gains achieved during these struggles increased the national purchasing power of wage earners in the United States by an estimated \$5 billion each year.¹⁵

Despite its victories—or because of them—the CIO was attacked as an agent of the “communist conspiracy.” The anti-labor, anti-Red ferocity emanating from the business leadership and the business-owned press was so persistent as to move Senator La Follette’s committee to declare in 1939 that business saw “Communism behind every move designed to improve the lot of labor.” The employer “cloaks his hostility to labor” under “the pretext that he is defending himself and the country against Communism.”¹⁶

Communists did play a crucial role in organizing the CIO. But they were targeted by the press and business not because they threatened to take over the nation but because their organizing efforts were helping to cut into the profits of the industrialists. The communists would be the first victims of union purges, but equally troublesome to the bosses were the noncommunist employees who were organizing and redirecting billions of dollars of would-be profits into the workers’ pay envelopes.¹⁷ It would not be until the postwar Truman and

INVENTING REALITY

Eisenhower administrations, the “McCarthy era,” that the ruling elites and the press would be able to generate enough anticommunist phobia to hunt out the leftists and weaken the labor unions.

THE COLD WAR

Anticommunist propaganda was muffled during World War II as the United States found itself allied with the Soviet Union against Nazi aggression. But with the war’s end in 1945, the longstanding antilabor, anticommunist, and anti-Soviet attitudes of government, business, and media once more came to the fore with dire warnings about Soviet plans for “world domination” and the internal threat of “communist spies and saboteurs.” In 1947 President Harry Truman declared in his “Truman Doctrine” that the United States was locked in a mortal contest defending world freedom from “Soviet expansionism” and that huge amounts of American money and arms would be used to fortify pro-US regimes in Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere. The inseparable advances of the dollar and the flag were hailed in publications like *Business Week* with captions that read, “New Democracy, New Business, U.S. Drive to Stop Communism Abroad Means Heavy Outlays for Bases, Relief and Reconstruction. But in Return American Business is Bound to Get New Markets Abroad.” And the financial editor of the *New York World-Telegram* wrote, “All of this is a much safer and profitable state of affairs for investors. It is good news of a fundamental character.”¹⁸

A few newspapers expressed concern about Truman’s bellicose challenge to the Soviets. *The Chicago Daily News* said the United States was “asking for a war with Russia.” But the great majority of the press hailed Truman’s cold war declarations with an avalanche of articles and stories about the “international communist menace.”¹⁹

As the press continued to propagate the cold war, downplaying Soviet overtures for negotiation, public opinion responded in kind. In 1945, 32 percent

MICHAEL PARENTI

of the public thought the US would be involved in a new world war within two decades or so; by March of 1948, 73 percent, according to a Gallup poll.²⁰

In 1950, *U.S. News & World Report* offered this revealing observation:

Government planners figure they have found the magic formula for almost endless [economic] good times... Cold War is the catalyst. Cold War is an automatic pump-primer. Turn the spigot and the public clamors for more arms spending. Turn another, the clamor ceases... Cold War demands, if fully exploited, are almost limitless.²¹

The real formula for “good times,” *U.S. News* was saying to its corporate readers, was big defense spending: It brought huge contracts, guaranteed markets, and the highest profits available. And how do you get the public to go along with the huge deficits and high taxes that big defense budgets bring? Turn on the cold war spigot. Create a state of alarm about the “Soviet threat.”

The anticommunist witch-hunt continued against labor. Faced with high profits, high prices, and frozen wage levels, organized labor—grown to some 34 percent of the work force by the end of World War II—embarked on a series of strikes. In 1947 Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act (written word for word by representatives of the National Association of Manufacturers, according to Congressman Donald O’Toole of New York). The new law repealed many of the hard-won gains of the prolabor legislation of the previous decade. It reinstated injunctions to break strikes and the court’s power to impose heavy fines. It outlawed mass picketing, secondary boycotts, and the closed shop. It authorized employer interference in workers’ attempts at unionizing and “right-to-work” anti-union laws at the state level. It prohibited unions from ejecting company spies as long as they paid their dues. Owners now could refuse to bargain collectively, even by shutting down their plants, and could destroy union treasuries with expensive court suits.

Taft-Hartley also required union officials to sign noncommunist oaths.

INVENTING REALITY

Those who refused were ejected from their positions. Communists who might sign risked perjuring themselves and going to jail. Thus many unionists were deprived of one of their most precious liberties, the right to work.²²

With the exception of a few liberal publications, the news media applauded the new law for its anticommunist features and because it supposedly redressed the power balance between management and labor. Succumbing to pressure from business, government, and the press, the CIO expelled many of the more militant and pace-setting unions from its organization, then launched membership raids against them. As a result, CIO membership declined by one-fourth. Burdened by the strictures of the Taft-Hartley Act, a much weakened, divided, and red-baited union movement never regained the momentum and effectiveness of previous years.²³

The anticommunist witch-hunt reached into other areas of life. Government employees and private citizens had their careers ruined and their personal lives and opinions scrutinized by legislative committees, the FBI, local police—and the press. Millions were required to sign loyalty oaths. Prosecutions of US Communist Party members under the Smith Act, state sedition trials, and contempt proceedings gave the United States a growing number of political prisoners. (By 1952, 110 persons had been indicted or imprisoned under the Smith Act, about half of them trade unionists.) A Democratic-controlled Congress overwhelmingly passed the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950; it called for the registration of “communist-front” and “communist-action” groups, and authorized the construction of concentration camps for purposes of interning without trial or hearing all suspected “subversives,” should either the president or Congress declare a “national emergency.” Of the six camps built in 1952, several were maintained on a standby basis through the 1950s and into the 1960s. The attorney general and congressional and state legislative committees periodically published lists of “communist front” organizations. Generally, these groups supported such causes as world disarmament, peace, organized labor, and greater racial and

MICHAEL PARENTI

economic equality.

Despite these repressive measures, Republicans in Congress and the Republican-dominated press repeatedly charged that the Truman administration was “soft on communism.” Truman reacted to these pressures by taking an increasingly bellicose line toward the Soviets abroad and setting up “loyalty boards” to screen the political views of federal employees at home.²⁴ Such measures did not stop the conservative-dominated press from continuing to fault the Democrats. If anything, Truman’s policies only further fed the anticommunist hype.

THE CREATION OF JOE McCARTHY

One of the more notorious figures to emerge during the anticommunist mania of the 1950s was Senator Joseph McCarthy (R.-Wisc.). Using innuendo, nonexistent “documents,” and outright fabrication, McCarthy rose in 1950 from an obscure senator to national prominence with a series of alarming charges about “communist subversives” who supposedly had infiltrated the State Department, other branches of government, the universities, the clergy, and the press itself. McCarthy’s accusations have been described as “sensational,” but they would have been nothing more than ludicrous had not the press given them such sensational play.

Although many reporters came to hate McCarthy as a cynical liar and power manipulator, they treated his fabrications as straight news. Under the rule of “objectivity” the press reported the senator’s charges about treasonous Reds in front-page stories with banner headlines, while the refutations from his victims were buried on inside pages or lost under the next wave of charges. As Aronson acidly notes:

The portrait of the press of the United States as an objective entity is a myth. There is nothing in the Canons of Journalism that compelled

INVENTING REALITY

reporters to accept and editors to publish information allegedly contained in uninspected documents waved at them by a Senator. Such reports, if their content proved to be false, might have been excused once or twice on the grounds of deadline or overzealous reporting. But when this happened day in, day out for four years, when every reputable Washington correspondent knew that the disseminator of this information was a proved liar, there was no shred of an excuse. Objectivity was mocked when almost every story was weighted in favor of McCarthy's fraud.²⁵

More than cowardice and uncritical sensationalism lay behind the press's role in the making of McCarthyism. Active complicity and sympathy for his goals played a major part, if not among most of the working press, certainly among many media owners and editors. Some publishers entered directly into the red-baiting game, sending reporters out to conduct their own investigations to "expose" communists or excommunists and stigmatize progressive persons, organizations, and ideas. Not only did they do the senator's work by publishing his attacks but they sometimes copied his methods, purging individuals from their own staffs who had been affiliated with groups of leftist persuasion—as did the *New York Times*, CBS, and numerous radio stations.²⁶ Some media luminaries cooperated directly with the senator. Thus the professedly anti-McCarthy *New York Post* editor James Wechsler, when called before McCarthy's committee in 1953, handed over the names of sixty persons he knew to be communists during his days as a leader of the Young Communist League at Columbia College in the 1930s.

Liberal editors and news commentators who opposed McCarthy were always careful to do it on cold-war anticommunist grounds, contending that he was "playing right into the hands of the communists" because he was disrupting our institutions and "demoralizing loyal Americans." This was "not the best way to fight communism." The unchallenged assumption was that communists were

MICHAEL PARENTI

our treacherous, mortal enemies and should be hounded, hunted out, and even jailed for their political affiliations and beliefs—as many had been before McCarthy. Ben Hibbs, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, when commenting on McCarthy’s crusade, offered a view shared by most centrist and liberal editors and politicians:

My own guess is that there are some pinks in the State Department and in other government departments and agencies, and of course they should be found and ousted; but it seems to me that this can be done without besmirching innocent people and without making such broadside charges that people will lose faith in all government.²⁷

Hibbs’s observation is revealing. McCarthy’s critics defended the rights of noncommunists only. The liberal’s complaint about McCarthy was that he was attacking liberals, “besmirching innocent people,” in Hibbs’s words, “innocent” meaning anticommunist like themselves. Anyone who harbored political beliefs to the left of liberalism (“pinks”), who preferred socialism and rejected capitalism, who thought communists should be allowed their political freedom not so they can be better exposed and defeated but because it was their right as Americans and human beings and because they had good things to say—such a person was implicitly judged guilty, a worthy target of purge and attack. The liberal complaint against McCarthy was that he was attacking the wrong people. Also his wild attacks against government, as Hibbs notes, might make people “lose faith in all government”—something the established powers did not relish. Indeed, this danger proved to be McCarthy’s undoing.

McCarthy made his big mistake in 1954 when he undertook an investigation of the Army loyalty-security program. The probe was a veiled assault on the Eisenhower administration and was McCarthy’s bid for leadership of the Republican Party and dominance over national politics. This time the senator went too far. The very newspapers that had supported him

INVENTING REALITY

when he was accusing communists, liberals, and Democrats of treason now turned against him when he brought similar charges against the Republican administration of President Eisenhower. Conservative publishers “simply decided that McCarthy was harming rather than helping the Republican party and that it was time to get rid of him.”²⁸

In short time the same forces that had helped propel McCarthy to the fore in 1950 now united to undo him. The White House denounced the hearings. The Senate ordered an investigation of his actions and voted to censure him. The press ignored or downplayed his charges. The same reporters who once gave copious coverage to his every utterance now failed to show up for his press conferences. The personal instrument of McCarthyism, the senator himself, was consigned to oblivion, but not before McCarthyism had accomplished much of its task, having stigmatized as “traitors” thousands of persons and hundreds of organizations that had fought for peace and social justice.

RATIONAL HYSTERIA

American anticommunism did not suddenly emerge as a response to the “Soviet threat” but has existed since at least the first great industrial struggles of the nineteenth century—before the advent of a single communist state. There was no evidence that the immigrant union organizers and agitators who were deported during the Red scare of 1920 were anywhere close to taking over the Republic. There was no evidence that subversives had infiltrated the State Department or other branches of government or that the CIO was plotting revolution or that the Russians were getting ready to march on Paris or drop an atomic bomb on Washington. Yet these fantasies were cultivated as realities by the US press.

The Red scare of 1920, McCarthyism, the cold war, and anticommunism in general were not products of a mass hysteria that gripped the populace like some strange mania from the Dark Ages. Anticommunism was consciously and

MICHAEL PARENTI

strenuously propagated by government leaders, business representatives, and the business-owned news media. No doubt large numbers of people were enough influenced by the propaganda to provide an additional momentum and feedback to the various anticommunist campaigns. Yet the evidence suggests that when the propaganda subsided so did popular fears about the Red Menace. And when the propaganda intensified so did the fears. Although it probably never worked that automatically, the important point is that such campaigns were generated mostly from above, more in the service of elite interests than in response to popular passions.

The Red Menace was not a foolish fantasy or hysteria of the opinion makers and officials who propagated it—although its central aim was to produce fantasy and hysteria. While anticommunism may manipulate irrational images and play on irrational feelings, it, itself, is not a product of irrational politics. It serves a very real and rational purpose. It creates a climate of opinion and a political atmosphere that makes it easier to discredit and repress labor militancy and progressive and anticapitalist viewpoints at home and abroad. So much of politics is the rational use of irrational symbols, and this is what media-created anticommunism is. Because the propaganda proves to be ill-founded, and therefore foolish-sounding when refuted, does not mean the propagandists are fools. Because arguments and alarms, charges and headlines, are false does not mean the purveyors don't know what they are doing. Because the anticommunist opinion makers are misleading, does not mean they are themselves hopelessly misled.

Time and again the Red Peril theme propagated by the governmental-industrial-media complex played an effective part in (1) setting back or limiting the struggles and gains of labor; (2) distracting popular attention from the recessions and crises of capitalism by directing grievances toward interior or alien foes; and (3) marshaling public support for huge military budgets, cold war policies and—as we shall see in more detail—Third World interventions to make the world safe for corporate investment and profits.

INVENTING REALITY

Did the corporate, political, and media elites believe what they said about the Red Menace? There is evidence to suggest that in some cases, anticommunist opinion leaders were consciously and deliberately manipulative. Certainly Joe McCarthy's entire career was a monument to a self-serving, mendacious, and totally cynical anticommunism. We've already noted how *U.S. News & World Report* cynically remarked to its business readership that cold war attitudes could be turned on and off like a spigot to coincide with the dictates of the defense budget and the profit needs of the economy. In the 1964 electoral campaign, when Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater attempted to revive the "communists in the government" charge against the Democrats, he indicated that if it did not catch on, he would drop it—which he did, apparently untroubled that the country had not been alerted to the latest and most passing Red Peril. In politics, as in advertising, truth is often purely instrumental: if it sells, it's true; if it doesn't sell, it isn't true.

Yet there is no doubt that many elites believed what they said about the Red Menace and were themselves gripped by anticommunist fears, sometimes even pathologically so. One of the foremost architects of the cold war, Defense Secretary James V. Forrestal was tirelessly obsessed with the communist threat and thought of little else right up until the day he jumped to his death from the window of a hospital to which he had committed himself. Most corporate-political-media elites hated and feared communism as the enemy to their own class privileges and powers. This itself may have been enough to convince them there was truth in all they said about the imminent dangers of the Red Menace. That a belief serves an ulterior class interest does not mean it is insincerely held. If anything, the congruence between material interest and ideology makes the ideology much easier to embrace wholeheartedly.

In any case, a belief does not gain or lose merit depending on whether its advocates are sincere. Even many fascists are sincere in their views, but this says little about the merits of their beliefs. Whether the propagators of the dominant ideology believe in their own arguments is not the point, sometimes

MICHAEL PARENTI

they do, sometimes they don't. The important thing is that they are able to mass distribute these images and realities, thereby preempting the symbolic environment and severely limiting political discourse and consciousness.

TWISTS AND TURNS

To justify military intervention in places like Vietnam and Laos, the United States found another Great Red Menace to go along with the USSR, now accusing the People's Republic of China of being the purveyor of something called "Asian communism." By the 1960s the word was out: "Red China," an awesome giant, armed with nuclear weapons and bent on regional and world domination, was US public enemy number one.²⁹ This image was fortified by pronouncements emanating from Peking itself. While Soviet leaders tirelessly advocated peaceful coexistence and said relatively little about Third World revolutions, China called for "wars of national liberation" and denounced the United States as an "imperialist paper tiger."

In lockstep with official policy, the US news media began depicting China as a menacing "extremist" nation populated by hundreds of millions of communist fanatics. By the early 1960s newspaper political cartoons no longer caricatured Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev as a threatening figure but as a pudgy almost benign personage overshadowed by an awesome slanty-eyed giant labeled "Red China."³⁰

In the mid-1970s, after suffering setbacks in Indochina, Angola, and Mozambique, and confronted with a deepening recession at home, US policy-makers once more began to portray the Soviet Union as a growing menace to US security and as a purveyor of Third World revolutions. While the actual material assistance the Soviets gave to liberation struggles was (with the exception of Vietnam) not all that great and in some cases nonexistent, Moscow did offer political and moral support, and did aid nations like Cuba which, in

INVENTING REALITY

turn, directly assisted leftist insurgents in places like Angola. In contrast, the Chinese attacked the Soviet Union for being the great aggressor and instigator of “social imperialism.” At the same time Peking cultivated sympathetic relations with reactionary governments and counterrevolutionary forces in various countries.

The US media again mirrored the shift in official policy, discovering that China was no longer a menacing giant nor a mindless ant-hill but was inhabited by human beings who liked to play ping-pong, sip soda, and even fall in love and do a turn on the dance floor. The “fanatical Asian communists” were now described as “moderate.” According to *Newsweek*, Peking’s post-Maoist leaders were putting “China’s house in order” and presiding “over a strongly entrenched and resolutely pragmatic government.”³¹ In 1978 Peking’s top-man, Vice Premier Deng, appeared in a cover portrait as *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year.”

Press reports also talked of mass discontent, poverty, instability, lagging production and other “signs of political and economic disarray” in China.³² As a national entity, China was accorded a more favorable representation in the US media, but Chinese socialism was still described in essentially negative terms. The American public was not to mistake the improvement in Sino-US relations as a sign of approval for China’s economic system.

In contrast, the Soviet Union was once more the Red Menace. Almost on cue, alarmist stories appeared in the news media about the superiority of Soviet military capabilities. During this period Soviet advisers were kicked out of Egypt and Somalia; a massive country like China seemingly switched over to the Western camp; Poland experienced widespread unrest; and the revolutionary government in Afghanistan proved so unstable as to cause the Soviets to commit themselves to a politically and militarily costly intervention. Yet the USSR was portrayed in the press as an inexorably successful foe winning victory after victory, posing a mounting threat to US security.

The accession of Ronald Reagan to the White House brought with it a

MICHAEL PARENTI

confrontational belligerency not displayed by American policy-makers since the 1950s. In his first press conference as president, Reagan declared that the Soviet Union's goal was to impose "a one-world Socialist or Communist state" over the entire globe. "They commit any crime; to lie, to cheat, in order to obtain that." The United States, Reagan observed, had no choice but to counter the USSR's aggrandizing moves wherever possible.³³

As if on cue, the national media took up the cry. The press seldom mentioned Moscow's calls for rapprochement; instead references were to "Soviet global expansionism" by a "totalitarian" Soviet system that "poses the most serious military threat and political challenge facing the West."³⁴ The news media revived cold war stereotypes that had been dormant for over a decade of detente. Soviet concerns were now "Soviet designs." The Soviet Union was again the "Soviet empire." "Soviet defenses" were now "Soviet attack capabilities." Soviet leaders were once more "ruthless Kremlin powerbrokers" whose main interest in life was "power for power's sake."³⁵

Media pundits and columnists speculated with chilling calm about the likelihood of nuclear war with the Russians. Within a short period during 1981, officialdom and the press put World War III back on the agenda, treating the public to a steady diet of "delivery systems," "civil defense evacuations," "throw weight," and "retaliatory capability."³⁶ All the grotesque Dr. Strangelove imagery that had been considered an aberration of the nuclear-minded 1950s again became part of the mainstream media's vocabulary.

As in the 1950s, so in the 1980s: The Red Menace theme so saturated the media and the opinion climate that even left-leaning and progressive publications felt obliged to lay down an anti-Soviet barrage of a kind they had not found necessary during detente. Skittish liberal and leftist intellectuals, concerned above all with their credibility, once more shifted with the prevailing tide and flashed their anti-Soviet (or anti-Marxist, anticommunist, or even just anti-class analysis) credentials, sometimes in articles or reviews, more often in parenthetical almost casual asides, just enough to cover themselves.

INVENTING REALITY

The ploy is a familiar one, dating back to the McCarthy era, when one sought to establish one's political respectability by anticommunist and anti-Soviet genuflection. However, this outpouring only strengthened the very cold war mania and anticommunist orthodoxy that intellectuals ostensibly opposed. Rather than creating more space for themselves, they created less. Those who refused to play this game were called "hardliners," "orthodox Marxists," "Soviet apologists," and the like, and were treated as pariahs within the left itself. Though many of them were actually critical of features within Soviet society, their sin was that they had the temerity also to see positive attributes. This was something the me-too anticommunist leftists would not tolerate. The "hardliners" had failed the legitimacy test.

In the early 1980s the Soviets (1) asked for another round of arms limitation agreements, (2) unilaterally supported a no-first-use nuclear pledge and repeatedly invited the United States to do likewise, (3) offered to reduce the number of their medium-range missiles in Europe from 600 to 162, (4) unilaterally put a freeze on any further deployment of their updated medium-range SS20 missiles, (5) urged the Americans to refrain from deploying their more advanced Pershing 2 and cruise missiles, (6) called for a ban of all weapons in outer space, and (7) proposed a 25 percent cutback in intercontinental strategic missiles. These kinds of conciliatory gestures were either ignored by the press or dismissed as "initiatives" in "a propaganda war."³⁷

While the Soviets were calling for arms cutbacks, *U.S. News & World Report* (Nov. 22, 1982) was alerting its readers to "an unremitting Soviet arms buildup." A CIA report released in December 1982 contradicted the "arms buildup" charge, noting that the share of Soviet GNP devoted to the military had "increased slightly since 1965." But this datum went largely unreported in the press. On December 22, 1982, both the Supreme Soviet and the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party unanimously approved a nuclear weapons freeze resolution virtually identical to the version that had been passed by numerous municipalities and states throughout the United States—an action

MICHAEL PARENTI

that went unreported by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the major networks, and just about all the US media.

The campaign against the Red Menace was not exclusively a media creation but reflected the interests of the dominant corporate-political class of which the media is a part. The twists and turns of media anticommunist alarmism largely paralleled similar shifts in an official policy that was and still is dedicated to making life safe for corporate capitalism at home and abroad. It is not enough to denounce this anticommunist policy as a product of wrong thinking. We must also try to understand why it has been so functional to the interests that nurture it.

In truth, the real threat to the “American Way of Life” has come not from without the system but from within, in the form of poverty, unemployment, a decline in real wages, inequitable tax burdens, urban blight, and environmental devastation and attacks on our civil liberties. With economic crises and material injustices there often come popular unrest, strikes, demonstrations, riots, sit-ins, and a threatened disruption of class order. The Red Menace image propagated by government and media repeatedly attempted to direct popular discontent away from domestic realities and toward imaginary foes. Not the capitalist system but those who criticized it were made the problem. The crisis within the system was transformed into an external threat against it. Just as Hitler sought to blame Germany’s misery on the Jews, so US political leaders, with the help of media opinion-makers, targeted the Reds.

Holding the Red Menace at bay became the preoccupation of our national leaders and national media. It also served as justification for a US global military machine, armed interventions abroad, a nuclear arms race, a gargantuan military budget, and a highly profitable armaments industry.

Throughout the superpowers negotiations of the 1980s, the media continued to portray the White House as ready for improved relations and the Soviets as recalcitrant and belligerent. When President Reagan declared he was going to abrogate the SALT II treaty that limited nuclear arms, CBS’s Dan

INVENTING REALITY

Rather announced (May 27, 1986): “President Reagan prodded Moscow again on arms control.” A few weeks later (June 19), Rather described another of the president’s talks as “prodding the Soviets. He prodded them both on arms control and a new summit meeting.”

Soviet attempts to cap the arms race and develop better East-West relations were regularly dismissed as manipulative “public relations campaigns,” “propaganda ploys,” and “posturing.”³⁸ An ABC newscaster (July 16, 1989), discussing the Soviet offer of a comprehensive test ban on nuclear weapons, reduced it to “the Kremlin’s smile campaign” designed to influence the Western allies. The offer, he added, represented a tactical departure from previously unsuccessful “strongarm methods.” He did not specify what those methods were. The implicit conclusion was that the Soviet proposal was inherently suspect because it came from the Soviets.

In the news coverage of the 1988 Moscow summit, the only American views publicized were those of the White House and ultraconservative US critics who were even further to the right than President Reagan. The media gave generous coverage to these critics who were displeased with the prospect of friendlier relations with Moscow. The public was left with the impression that the conservative Ronald Reagan represented the only alternative American perspective on US-Soviet affairs. Progressive views were virtually shut out, including criticisms of the US government’s pursuit of space weaponry (Star Wars), its unwillingness to agree to a ban on underground nuclear bomb tests offered by the Soviets, and its failure to note the human rights abuses within US-supported client-states, while harping on Soviet violations.³⁹

When US peace activists spoke in Moscow the *Washington Post* declared on its front page: “Disgruntled U.S. peaceniks participate in Soviet leadership’s counteroffensive.” Using the stale pejorative “peaceniks” three times, the *Post* labored to portray these American dissidents as tools of the Kremlin.⁴⁰

At the president’s news conference in Moscow, NBC’s Andrea Mitchell asked how the president felt about the fact that Soviet officials kept dossiers on

MICHAEL PARENTI

dissidents. But neither she nor anyone else made any mention of the FBI's extensive maintenance of dossiers on US protestors and dissenters.⁴¹

CELEBRATING THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM

For decades, coincident with the view enunciated by US leaders, the press portrayed the communist nations of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as immutable and totalitarian, wielding an all-permeating, monolithic power over their hapless citizens. When most of these same states swiftly collapsed with a minimum loss of life in 1989-91 in the face of peaceful demonstrations, the US news media gave the historic events months-long saturation coverage. Demonstrations in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania and various other places were accorded favorable and generous exposure of a kind not given to mass demonstrations by dissenters in the United States. The US press celebrated the demise of one-party state communism and the emergence of political democracy, with its independent parties, opposition newspapers, and competitive elections.

The “captive nations” were said to be throwing off their shackles and “regaining their past freedoms.” It remained one of the media's best kept secrets that the countries in question—with the exception of Czechoslovakia—had enjoyed few “past freedoms” before becoming communist states, and in fact had been right-wing autocracies or outright fascist regimes.

Consider the unpublicized history of Lithuania. In 1926 that country became the second fascist state after Mussolini's Italy, upon which it modeled itself. Openly attempting to ally with Nazi Germany during the 1930s, the Lithuanian government banned all labor unions and opposition parties and newspapers. Thousands of political dissidents were executed or interned in concentration camps. A large portion of Lithuania's industry and natural resources were sold off to foreign investors. Land was returned to rich owners, including the church. During the Nazi occupation, Lithuanian nationalists

INVENTING REALITY

vigorously cooperated in the extermination of Jews, communists, and other “undesirables.”⁴² The US press was too busy celebrating Lithuania’s “democratic restoration” to take notice of its decidedly undemocratic background.

With the overthrow of communism in 1990, a variety of xenophobic, anti-Semitic, right-wing parties resurfaced in Lithuania. The Lithuanian Constitution was rewritten to make non-Lithuanians second-class citizens, including Poles, Ukrainians, Russians and other foreigners, some of whom had lived in the country for upwards of half a century. The Communist Party was outlawed and communist print and broadcast media were suppressed. In September 1991, one of the first acts of the newly independent Lithuanian government under President Vytautas Landsbergis (the son of a right-wing militia member who collaborated with the German occupation during World War II and signed a telegram of congratulations to Hitler) was to exonerate thousands of Lithuanians who had been judged guilty of assisting the Nazis, including some 120 members of the notorious Lithuanian 12th Battalion who had actively engaged in rounding up and murdering Jews. The new government even compensated former war criminals for the years they had served in jail.⁴³

These moves evoked mild editorial rebukes from US newspapers and almost no mention in television newscasts. The US media celebrated the Lithuanian, Estonian, and Latvian secessions with front-page headlines, as in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “BALTICS SAVOR THEIR NEW INDEPENDENCE”—giving little notice to how “democratic Lithuania” manifested an uncomfortable likeness to prewar fascist Lithuania.⁴⁴

For decades the US press had characterized the East-West struggle as one of democracy versus communism, with no mention made that US foreign policy was dedicated to a defense of multinational corporate capitalism throughout the world. But when right-wing governments emerged in Eastern Europe determined to abandon state planning and move toward what they saw as the marvels of the “free market,” US political leaders and media began to acknowledge that a goal of US policy was to restore capitalism in the formerly

MICHAEL PARENTI

communist nations. The struggle was not only—or even primarily— one of freedom versus communism but of capitalism versus socialism.

There were television interviews aplenty with Warsaw, Prague, and Moscow intellectuals singing hosannahs to the cornucopia that would come when private ownership and the profit system were introduced into their lands. At times, democracy and capitalism were even treated as coterminous and inseparable—even though there are many undemocratic and repressive capitalist countries (as we shall see in the next chapter). The “free market” was equated with political freedom, despite the fact that the free market gives freedom mostly to those who have money and can impose tyrannical travails on those who do not. Likewise state socialism was treated by the media as inherently inhospitable to democracy even though dramatic democratic reforms were instituted in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev well before capitalism was installed there.

Right-wing free-market advocates in the formerly communist countries were repeatedly described as “democrats,” “reformers,” and “liberals,” in the US news media. Their efforts to dismantle public ownership were called “reforms.” Those who resisted such steps, or who were not prepared to go the full measure, were called “Stalinists,” “conservatives,” and “hardliners.”

The newly installed “reformist” governments in Eastern Europe eliminated price controls and subsidies for food, housing, transportation, clothing, utilities, and a host of other items. They cut back on medical benefits and support for public education. They abolished job guarantees, public employment programs, and work place benefits. They sold publicly owned lands, factories, and news media at bargain prices to rich Western investors. They eliminated or reduced services for women, making it increasingly difficult for them to get employment, apartments, day care, safe and legal abortions,

birth control, divorces, and access to public office. The overall effect of this “shock treatment” was severe economic recession. In Poland, for instance, the moves toward a market economy brought a drop in real income of about 33

INVENTING REALITY

percent by 1991.⁴⁵

In a country like Hungary, long considered one of the more prosperous socialist countries, these capitalist reforms resulted in serious unemployment, a 30 percent inflation rate, a doubling of rents, and a 45 percent rise in consumer energy costs. In order to survive, most employed Hungarians held more than one job, working twelve to fourteen hours a day. Street robberies and violent crime increased by 40 percent, while homelessness, suicides, and mental depression rose dramatically.⁴⁶ But the *New York Times* and most other US media had little to say about these things. Instead the *Times* ran upbeat articles on how retail stores were being privatized in Budapest and how Hungary now enjoyed a “higher standard of living” with an abundance of quality commodities and foods.⁴⁷ The *Times* failed to note that most Hungarians could not afford to buy these items. Real wages had fallen 35 percent; food purchases were off 4 percent; clothing sales, 7 percent; and meat sales, 30 percent. Too often shoppers had to spend all their money on food.⁴⁸

Along with higher crime rates and severe economic hardship, the market reforms in Eastern Europe brought increased corruption in the banking and finance systems, together with a resurgence of nationalistic hatreds, ethnic clashes, anti-Semitism, and neo-fascist organizations.⁴⁹ While the corruption and abuses of the former communist regimes received repeated attention from the media, these new developments were accorded relatively brief mention and failed to dampen press enthusiasm for the “democratic capitalist” era in the East. Instead, the hardships were universally dismissed as part of a temporary “transition” from state socialism to capitalism. Thus the *Washington Post* referred to “the painful transition to a free- market system.”⁵⁰

In one NBC telecast, Tom Brokaw explained the tribulations of transition to a Soviet official: “In order to go up you have to first go down.”⁵¹ Thus the press transformed the harsh cutbacks inflicted upon the working people of these nations into nothing more than the pains of change, a brief passing through purgatory on the way to heaven. In fact, the Thatcher-like

MICHAEL PARENTI

cutbacks were not the products of transition but of free-market capitalism, the raw, undiluted variety practiced throughout the Third World and increasingly within Western industrial nations.

The elections that brought anticommunists to power were, according to the *New York Times*, the work of “inspired amateurs and improvisers.”⁵² Largely unmentioned was how the United States poured millions of dollars into the Eastern European elections through the National Endowment for Democracy (funded by the US Congress) and other US agencies, monies that went exclusively to anticommunist opposition parties.⁵³ While US laws prohibit foreign nationals from injecting themselves into the finances and campaign operations of American elections, US interference in the Eastern European political contests went unnoticed—or was depicted as benign assistance to peoples unpracticed in the ways of democracy.

Not even lavish US financial support could guarantee anticommunist victories in all the former communist countries. As elections approached in Romania and Bulgaria, the press, anticipating the same anticommunist results as had occurred in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany, heralded the impending contests as a faceoff between communists and “democrats.” When the communists won surprising victories in both Romania and Bulgaria, the press began to offer excuses. The *New York Times* reported that Bulgarians failed “to break old habits,” while the opposition “was handicapped because its candidates were less well known.”⁵⁴ In a follow-up story, the *Times* noted—in a grudging single sentence—that British observers found the election in Bulgaria to have been fair. More emphatically, the story quoted the anticommunist losers who claimed there had been “fraud and intimidation” (of a kind that had escaped the view of foreign observers). But the losers oddly “stopped short of calls to invalidate the vote.” The *Times* also reported the bizarre claims of the National Democratic and Republican Institutes (financed by the National Endowment for Democracy) that found “evidence of the legacy of dictatorship—‘psychological and sociological’ pressures ‘not visible to the

INVENTING REALITY

naked eye.”⁵⁵

Despite what most foreign observers described as free and fair democratic elections in Romania and Bulgaria, the US press continued to apply the “democrat” label exclusively to the conservative minority that had lost. When these same opponents refused to accept the majority vote in Romania and carried out a series of protests and riots, the press treated this as a clash between “democrats” seeking reforms and communists unwilling to relinquish power to the people. The impression left was that democratic elections had never occurred and that totalitarianism was still in the saddle. As press critic Ellen Ray ironically noted: “According to the media, if the Communists win, then by definition the election is not free.”⁵⁶

After puffing the anticommunist government of Hungary for its systematic dismantling of socialism, the *New York Times* tried to explain why that same government took such a beating in the October 1990 local elections. It was all because the voters were weary of frequent elections and felt “distaste for the noise and confusion of unaccustomed political debate.” Furthermore, the anticommunist government was burdened by the “legacy inherited from 40 years of Communist rule”—not by its own harsh free-market policies.⁵⁷

Blaming the baneful effects of Eastern European anticommunist governance on a “legacy” inherited from past communist regimes became a regular exercise in the US press. The *Washington Post* noted some of the autocratic tendencies of Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a ferocious anticommunist who won election in 1991 and then arrested opposition leaders and shut down newspapers. But the *Post* attributed his behavior to “the old psychology of Bolshevik politics... Many leaders appear to be prisoners of their own pasts,” and were suffering from “the sort of messianic arrogance perfected by the Bolsheviks”—apparently even the anti-Bolsheviks.⁵⁸

In August 1991, Russian Republic President Boris Yeltsin took advantage of a bungled coup attempt by some anti-reform Soviet leaders. He suppressed six Communist Party newspapers, suspended the Communist Party, seized its

MICHAEL PARENTI

funds and assets, and prohibited workers from forming political organizations of any sort at the work site. These moves were hailed in the US news media as democratic initiatives.

The defeat of the coup was hailed as a triumph of the Soviet people. Only a month later did the *Washington Post* note that it was especially a triumph of moneymaking speculators. The coup's most militant opponents consisted of thousands of "yuppies," members of the Russian stock exchange and "private entrepreneurs, who routinely make ten times the average wage of ordinary Soviets." They headed "into the streets of Moscow to defend their right to wheel and deal. The coup collapsed. Democracy triumphed," concluded the article with a straight face.⁵⁹ The *Post* went on to report that "private business men contributed more than fifteen million rubles to buy food and equipment" for the anti-coup defenders of the Russian legislature. One broker "was struck by how few workers responded to Yeltsin's call to defend democracy." Another broker noted: "Up until the coup, we were just interested in making money... We did not want to become involved [in politics]. But after the coup, we realized that we risked losing everything we had won."⁶⁰ Once again democracy was equated with the right to make lots of money.

In September 1991, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev went before the democratically elected Soviet Congress to urge it to dissolve itself. During a heated session he threatened to dissolve the chamber himself, amend the constitution, or rule by presidential edict without the Congress's consent. For one particularly controversial clause of the law revamping the legislature, he conducted three consecutive ballots until the Congress gave him what he wanted. At one point he smothered debate by refusing to yield the floor. He also refused to switch on microphones and talked loudly into his own to drown out protests from delegates.⁶¹ These tactics either went unreported or were presented matter-of-factly without critical editorial comment in the US media.

At that same time in Warsaw, the Polish president urged parliament to grant him temporary special powers to issue economic decrees. The parliament

INVENTING REALITY

was holding up “many free market reform measures,” including “cuts in public spending” that the president wanted to introduce. The emergency presidential powers would apply to “commercial codes, political parties, associations and trade unions.”⁶² While the proposal drew strong opposition from former communists and members of the Peasant Party, some of whom accused the president of dictatorial tendencies, it was but routinely noted in US news reports and caused hardly a stir among our TV pundits, commentators, columnists, and editorialists. One could imagine the reaction if such requests for dictatorial powers had been made by elected communist officials. Having used the populace to sweep away unpopular communist rule, the “democratic reformers” now sought to put democracy back in the bottle, so as to impose a draconian free-market capitalism upon that same populace. The US press seemed to have no problem with that.

IX. Doing the Third World

Despite a vast diversity of cultures, languages, ethnicity, and geography, the nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, with some exceptions, show striking similarities in the economic and political realities they endure. Lumped together under the designation of the “Third World,” they are characterized by (1) concentrated ownership of land, labor, capital, natural resources, and technology in the hands of rich persons and giant multinational corporations; (2) suppressive military forces financed, trained, equipped, and assisted by the United States—their function being not to protect the populace from foreign invasion but to protect the small wealthy owning class and foreign investors from the populace; (3) the population, aside from a small middle class, endure impoverishment, high illiteracy rates, malnutrition, wretched housing, and nonexistent human services. Because of this widespread poverty, these nations have been mistakenly designated as “underdeveloped” and “poor” when in fact they are overexploited and the source of great wealth, their resources and cheap labor serving to enrich investors. Only their people remain poor.

For the better part of a century now, successive administrations in the United States have talked about bringing democracy and economic

INVENTING REALITY

advancement to the “less-developed” peoples of the Third World, when in fact, the overriding goal of US policy toward these countries has been to prevent alternate social orders from arising, ones that would use the economy for purposes of social development and for the needs of the populace, rather than for the capital accumulation process. The purpose of US policy has been not to defend democracy, in fact, democracies—as in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Indonesia (1965), and Chile (1973)—are regularly overthrown if they attempt to initiate serious economic reforms that tamper with the existing class structure. The US goal is to make the world safe for multinational corporate exploitation, to keep things as they are even while talking about the need for change and reform.¹

In all this, the US corporate-owned news media have been, intentionally or not, actively complicit. As one critic of the press observed, “It is a truism that in U.S. foreign reporting the State Department often makes the story”²—to which we might add: when not the State Department, then the CIA, the Pentagon, or the White House itself.

THE VIETNAM APOLOGY

The US press, especially television news, is credited with bringing the Vietnam War home to millions of Americans, thereby inciting their impassioned opposition. Certainly daily media exposure to the fact that the war existed served as a continual reminder of the seemingly endless and senseless nature of the conflict. But in fact most of the really damaging news about the cruelties and costs of the Vietnam War reached Americans through alternative popular channels such as campus teach-ins; student, church, and labor groups; peace organizations; the radical press; and the underground press. What the corporate-owned media left unreported was far more spectacular than what it reported.

From 1945 to 1954 the United States spent several billion dollars

MICHAEL PARENTI

supporting a ruthless French colonialism in Vietnam, but the American public was never informed of this. In the following decade Washington assumed full responsibility for the maintenance of the South Vietnamese right-wing dictatorship, but the public neither read nor heard a word of debate in the media about this major policy commitment. In 1965 the US government began a massive build-up of ground forces in Vietnam, but Americans were told that the troops were merely a small support force. The *New York Times* and other major news agencies knew the real nature of the escalation but felt it was in the “national interest” to keep this information from the public.³ Reporters who covered the Vietnam War were expected to “get on the team”—to share the military’s view of the war and its progress—and most of them did. The press, with few exceptions, censored the worst of the war, saying almost nothing about the massive saturation bombings of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the “free-fire zones,” US-sponsored torture, the Phoenix death squad program, the massive destruction of Indochinese rural life, the indiscriminate killing of the civilian population, and the dumping of 12 million tons of Agent Orange and other toxic chemicals on the countryside—the effects of which are still being felt in Vietnam in the form of premature deaths, deformed births, and abnormally high cancer rates.

On those relatively infrequent occasions when journalists reported some of the more unsavory aspects of the war, they encountered difficulties. The experience of Martha Gellhorn, a veteran war correspondent, is instructive. No newspaper in the United States would publish the articles she wrote documenting the death and destruction wreaked upon the Vietnamese peasantry. Eventually the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* ran the two mildest ones. Gellhorn had to turn to the *Manchester Guardian* in Great Britain to get all five published. But she paid a price even for that. When she tried to return to Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government repeatedly turned down her requests for a visa.⁴

When Nicholas Tomalin gave the *Washington Post* his graphic account of

INVENTING REALITY

how US troops gunned down Vietnamese from helicopter gunships, that newspaper refused to run the story.⁵

Philip Jones Griffiths concentrated on photographing what the war did to Vietnamese civilians but could not get his pictures published. “I was told time after time that my photographs were too harrowing for the American market.” After he eventually published a book of his work, the US-supported South Vietnamese government prohibited him from returning to Saigon.⁶

A former staff member of *Time* magazine recalls that during the sixties she witnessed how *Time* rewrote the news from Vietnam “because of weekly phone calls [President] Lyndon Johnson would make to Otto Fuerbringer urging him to call his own reporters in the field ‘liars.’ Some of the best reporters and writers *Time* had in those days quit over these distortions.”⁷

The My Lai massacre of over one hundred unarmed Vietnamese women, children, and elderly men by US troops was not publicized until over a year after it happened—and then by a small independent news service.⁸ Belatedly picked up by the mainstream press after initially being turned down by *Life*, *Look*, and numerous newspapers, the My Lai story was treated as an isolated incident not representative of US conduct in the war. In fact, the systematic obliteration of villages, described as “pacification,” was a commonplace occurrence and a conscious US counterinsurgency goal.

The murder of Vietnamese civilians on a much larger scale than My Lai was documented by two *Newsweek* correspondents in 1971. *Newsweek* refused to print their story for six months and would not release it for freelance submission to other publications. In 1972, the magazine finally ran a heavily cut version of the story. When the reporters asked to do a follow-up, they were turned down.⁹

Critical reports on Vietnam were usually treated by editors and public officials as an unpatriotic attack on the US government and the war effort. As *Time* reporter John Shaw noted, “For years the press corps in Vietnam was undermined by the White House and the Pentagon. Many American editors

MICHAEL PARENTI

ignored what their correspondents in Vietnam were telling them in favor of the Washington version.”¹⁰ Regardless of what the White House thought, most reporters actually were just as interested in having their country win the war as was the US military. What they questioned was not US policy but the measures taken to implement it, not the violent interventionism and all the suffering it inflicted but its effectiveness.

One could argue that the news media’s job was not to judge or denounce the war but to report it. But the criticism here is that they failed to report it honestly. Only late in the war were some atrocities revealed on television: the execution of a Vietnamese resistance fighter by an American-trained South Vietnamese military officer, a naked Vietnamese girl running down a road in terror and pain after being napalmed. But the essence of the war, the magnitude of its death, destruction, and atrocity was never shown. In that sense the press—with its favorable treatment—did make a judgment about the war.

Even among those whose job was to evaluate policy and express an opinion—the columnists, editorialists, and TV news commentators—there was almost no criticisms of the premises and claims behind US intervention. Few if any in the press questioned whether the US had a right to inflict such death and suffering upon another nation. Few if any questioned whether the professed goals: to “stop communism” and “Asian aggression,” and to “build democracy,” were not a cloak for other interests.

Questions were confined to operational concerns: Will our efforts succeed? Are we overcommitted? Have we seen the light at the end of the tunnel? Are we relying too heavily on military means? Throughout this limited public discussion, the implication was that if the United States could have won, then the intervention and all its dreadful devastation would have been justified.

All the major TV discussion programs were dominated by official supporters of the war such as Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Henry Kissinger. Antiwar activists, including political leaders like George McGovern, were either completely absent or accorded scant exposure.¹¹ A survey of the

INVENTING REALITY

editorial stance of thirty-nine leading American newspapers found that, while several eventually became more critical of the US military escalation, not one newspaper advocated withdrawal from Vietnam, despite the strong antiwar sentiments expressed by millions of people in the United States and abroad.¹²

If coverage was so slanted toward the official line, why do we credit the media with turning public opinion against intervention by “bringing the war into our living rooms”? Maybe the credit is not deserved. A study of TV coverage between 1968 and 1973 found less than a quarter of the stories of a 180-program sample concerned Vietnam, and only rarely did the stories include footage of combat. Pictures of the dead or wounded were featured in only about 2 percent of war-related reports. American battlefield dead were never shown; body counts appeared only as pictureless statistics.¹³ Likewise, a recent army study rejected the notion that negative press coverage was responsible for eroding public support for the war. The American people were alienated not by the news coverage but by the casualties.¹⁴

After the war, the news media strove to put the best face on US involvement, describing it as either a well-intentioned venture gone awry or a foolish mistake. US intervention in Vietnam, declared Richard Stout in the *New Republic*, “was not wickedness; it was stupidity ... one of the greatest blunders of our history.”¹⁵ James Reston in the *New York Times* chided those who thought that “somehow the United States was responsible for the carnage in Southeast Asia.”¹⁶ Assisted by academics and officials, the national media rewrote the history of the war, asserting that the United States had selflessly intervened to try to install a Western-style democracy.¹⁷ Left out of this view was any thought that our leaders had waged a horrific war in support of a dictatorship and against a largely civilian population to prevent a popularly supported but noncapitalist alternative social order from gaining power.

After the war, the news about Vietnam was all bad. The country was reportedly impoverished because of “economic failure” and not because of the massive destruction of capital resources inflicted by US forces. Little if anything

MICHAEL PARENTI

appeared in the major media about the tens of thousands of Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange, the tens of thousands of Vietnamese amputees and others permanently crippled and disabled by US firepower, the 100,000 Vietnamese drug addicts hooked by the same suppliers who serviced the invading troops, and the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese prostitutes, petty criminals, mentally disturbed persons, and other victims of the war. Or if attention was given to them, nothing was said about US responsibility in their creation. Nor did the American press give much attention to the educational, health, housing, and agrarian development programs of the revolutionary Vietnamese government. Relying on the establishment news media, one came away with the impression that the US defeat in Vietnam, rather than the murderous intervention, was the only thing Americans needed to regret.

MURDER IN CHILE

In 1970, when a socialist candidate, Salvador Allende, was elected president of Chile and began initiating reforms, that country suddenly became the hottest news story in Latin America. From the beginning the US press saw the democratically elected government as an ominous threat to democracy. ABC's Howard K. Smith observed that the new "Marxist" government had "outright Communist internal policies." Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* pondered whether Chile's "free institutions" could survive what the *Times* termed a "sharp turn to the left." And a *Los Angeles Times* editorial discerned "totalitarian inclinations" in Chile.¹⁸

In fact, for almost three years President Allende presided over a country whose citizens enjoyed a wide range of civil liberties, including freedom for all political organizations, even ultra-rightist ones. Most of the television stations and some two-thirds of the country's radio stations were controlled by the opposition, as were all the privately owned newspapers.¹⁹ The US media never mentioned these facts.

INVENTING REALITY

The US press questioned the legitimacy of Allende's mandate by repeatedly reminding its audience that he was a "minority president," having won only a 37 percent plurality. The press never mentioned that a conservative predecessor, Jorge Alessandri, had also been a minority president, not an unusual occurrence in Chilean multiparty politics, nor for that matter in American politics. Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Richard M. Nixon had all been elected with less than a majority of the popular vote.

What exactly was Allende doing to deserve such a bad press? He was moving toward an egalitarian socialized society, having begun by nationalizing the copper mines owned by US multinational corporations. And, under a statute passed in 1967 by a conservative Chilean Congress but left largely unimplemented, his government was taking unused land from big estates and distributing it to landless peasants. Through a variety of government programs, agricultural production showed a dramatic upsurge, the inflation rate dropped by half, construction was up 9 percent and unemployment down to less than 5 percent, the lowest in a decade. Beef and bread consumption increased by 15 percent in the 1971—72 period. A government program sought to provide every Chilean child with a half-liter of milk daily. During Allende's first year, the economy enjoyed an 8.5 percent growth in GNP, the second highest in Latin America. Generally, Allende pursued policies that threatened the prerogatives of the rich, cut into profits while increasing wages, and brought a modest redistribution of goods and services in favor of the poorer strata.²⁰

In response, the Chilean business class withheld investments, hoarded supplies and destroyed livestock. The United States eagerly assisted in this campaign to "make the economy scream" (President Nixon's phrase) by cutting off food aid, denying Chile any new loans, and cutting exports to Chile by some 40 percent and imports from that country almost by half. Only the Chilean military flourished, being the recipient of a sumptuous \$47 million in US aid.

The US news media chose to ignore the fact that the Chilean economy

MICHAEL PARENTI

was under assault from within and without and nevertheless had been performing more democratically than under previous administrations. Instead the press ran alarming reports of impending economic collapse.²¹ By 1973 acts of economic sabotage and political violence by rightists had become a daily occurrence.²²

The democratic government was overthrown in September 1973, in a violent coup led by right-wing generals who abolished the constitution, suppressed all political parties, closed all newspapers except two right-wing dailies, outlawed all independent trade unions, and arrested, tortured, and executed thousands of persons. Editorial opinion in the United States was remarkably mild, considering the press's seemingly arduous concern for the survival of Chilean democracy during Allende's tenure. The *New York Times* observed, "Dr. Allende and his Popular Unity Coalition dominated by socialist and Communist parties attempted to socialize Chile. The Government met stiff opposition from the upper and middle classes, and the armed forces, traditionally nonpolitical, finally sided with the regime's opponents."²³

These few sentences carry a bundle of deceptions. The socialist and communist parties who supposedly "dominated" the government were duly elected by the Chilean people and adhered strictly to constitutional procedures. They attempted to "socialize Chile," but the *Times* did not explain what that phrase meant, what the government actually did, what programs it started for the people. Instead, "socializing Chile" was presumed to have been something reprehensible. The *Times* said the government met "stiff opposition from the upper and middle classes. In fact, it met political violence and economic sabotage. Nor did the armed forces "finally" side with the regime's opponents after much scrupulous neutrality; far from being "nonpolitical," they plotted and conspired from the first months Allende took power, purging their ranks, aiding the efforts of right-wing terrorists, and disarming the few on the left who had guns.

For the destruction of Chilean democracy, the US press tended to blame

INVENTING REALITY

the victims themselves. Thus in an editorial immediately after the coup, the *New York Times* noted, “No Chilean party or faction can escape some responsibility for the disaster, but a heavy share must be assigned to the unfortunate Dr. Allende himself. Even when the dangers of polarization had become unmistakably evident, he persisted in pushing a program of pervasive socialism for which he had no popular mandate.”²⁴

The last to be blamed by the US press for the military takeover was the military itself. Also free of blame was the US government, which financed, equipped, trained, advised, and assisted the Chilean military before, during, and after the takeover. The leading US newspapers took pains to report there was no evidence of US involvement in the destruction of Chilean democracy. To reach this conclusion they also had to ignore the economic war waged by Washington and the CIA’s funding of opposition right-wing political parties and media in Chile.

When Allende was in office, and long after his death, he was inevitably described as a “Marxist” by the US press, which he was, and his government was often called “Marxist,” which it was not, being a loose coalition of left-leaning political groups, some of which were reformists and decidedly non-Marxist. In contrast, neither General Augusto Pinochet nor his government was ever described as “fascist”—which they were—by any of the establishment news organizations in the United States.²⁵ Allende’s democratically elected government was “the Allende regime” while Pinochet’s dictatorship was more respectfully described as “the Chilean government” in the years immediately following the coup.

The day after he was murdered by the generals, Allende was portrayed unsympathetically in the *New York Times* as “a man of the privileged class turned radical politician,” known for his “dandy” ways and “stylish dress.”²⁶ And a few days later: “Allende was very much a political animal, a small stocky, quick-moving man with gray moustache, ruddy face, thick, heavily rimmed spectacles.”²⁷ In contrast, the *Times* described Allende’s executioner, General

MICHAEL PARENTI

Pinochet, as “a powerfully built six-footer,” “energetic and very disciplined and until recently he never talked politics.”²⁸ He was also “quiet and business-like” and though “tough” he had a “sense of humor.” Certainly here was a mass murderer we could all warm up to.

It was Pinochet’s unmentionable fascism rather than his vaunted “sense of humor” that had the upper hand in his regime’s treatment of political prisoners arrested after the coup. The tortures delivered upon Pinochet’s victims included application of electric shock to different parts of the body, particularly the genitals; forcing victims to witness the torture of friends and relatives; raping women in the presence of other family members; burning sex organs with acid or scalding water; placing infected rats into the vagina; mutilating, puncturing, and cutting off various parts of the body, including genitalia, eyes, and tongue; injection of air into women’s breasts and veins (causing slow, painful death); shoving bayonets and clubs into the vagina or anus, causing rupture and death.²⁹

By 1980, six and a half years of Pinochet’s rule had given Chile continued political and economic oppression. Yet the *New York Times* could headline a story: “CHILE’S REGIME SEES NEW ECONOMIC HOPE,” a kind of positive framing never accorded the Allende government. In upbeat tones, the opening paragraph told how Pinochet ordered the construction of a new \$20-million jail. His willingness to respond to prison overcrowding, the *Times* maintained with a straight face, reflected “both sensitivity to social criticism” and “a new ability to pay for public investments.” Pinochet believed his policy of free-market capitalism “offers solutions to basic problems like jobs, housing, health and social security.”³⁰ The *Times* remained willing to give the freemarket dictator the benefit of the doubt, even if it meant offering doublethink sentences like this:

Critics of [Pinochet’s economic policies] generally agree that the situation today is an improvement over the breakdown in 1973, but they emphasize persistent unemployment, which is about 15 percent of the

INVENTING REALITY

labor force, and indications that wealth is increasingly concentrated in an elite, with wage earners and peasants making less than before.³¹

In other words, the economy had improved but the people were worse off. In fact, Pinochet's critics did not agree that the economic situation in Chile under the dictator represented an improvement over the Allende years.

Outdoing the *Times* was Shirley Christian of the Miami Herald. For years she produced stories about how Pinochet was adored by his subjects, how he had rescued Chile's economy from Marxist ruination, how he was "like an iron-willed father pounding at the head of the table," and how he was "tough" and "in charge. ... He speaks his mind... Peace. Tranquility. Order. Pinochet has brought Chile those things"³² (not the tyranny of military rule, mass arrests, executions, disappearances, and torture).

In 1984, eleven years after the coup, the *New York Times* was still cooing over General Pinochet, describing him in one news story as "the Chilean President" and "Chile's leader" (never as "Chile's dictator") whose "68 years are belied by his boxer's physique, matched by a trim grey moustache." He "seemed relaxed and expansive as he sat down to breakfast in ... Moneda Palace." The Moneda's previous occupant, "Salvador Allende Gossens, a Marxist, died inside." (Allende was murdered by Pinochet's forces.) Pinochet, continued the *Times*, "has managed to stay in power through what even his opponents recognize is political acumen . . ." ³³ (not terror, death squads, and US military aid).

After chiding Pinochet for "his excesses," a *Times* editorial praised him for having "brought order to street and factory and renewed economic growth," while "the poor were consoled with record levels of social spending."³⁴ In fact, Pinochet's policies brought a drastic drop in real wages, an upward redistribution of income to benefit the rich, a sharp growth in unemployment, a huge increase in the foreign debt, a fall in savings, massive corruption and racketeering by the military, and heartless cutbacks for the poor. The milk

MICHAEL PARENTI

program for Chilean children was abolished almost immediately after the generals came to power, and health, sanitation, housing, and community services were subjected to drastic cuts. The public sector was sharply reduced in a massive bargain-priced sell-off to private business.³⁵

In 1988, fifteen years after the coup, the *Times* still could not stop heaping praise upon the Chilean dictator for having transformed Chile's "sluggish, copper-dependent economy" into a success story "based on private investment... . This transformation would not have gone so far so fast had not his economists been backed by the regime's dictatorial powers. Reform attempts in such nearby democracies as Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador are even now continuing to falter." Here the *New York Times* endorsed dictatorship over democracy as the means to creating "economic success." But success for whom? Even the *Times* had to admit that "left behind [were] large numbers of the urban poor, who live less well today than they did 15 years ago."³⁶ What we were not told is that the prime beneficiaries of Chile's "economic success" were the top military and the rich corporate investors.

For all their professed dedication to democracy, the US media have been less critical of democracy's mortal enemies in Chile than of capitalism's democratic opponents.

STOMPING ON GRENADA

In 1983, when the US government invaded the tiny and relatively defenseless sovereign nation of Grenada (population 110,000), in an unprovoked assault and in blatant violation of international law, killing scores of the island's occupants and defenders—the American press pretty much went along with it. To be sure, there were editorials in newspapers like the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* denouncing the invasion. (The *Post* eventually flip-flopped and came out in support of the aggression.)³⁷ And there was a long article in the *Times* that, while not criticizing the invasion itself,

INVENTING REALITY

raised questions about the Reagan administration's "deliberate distortions and knowingly false statements" in regard to the military action.³⁸ The press also strongly criticized the barring of reporters and the censoring of information from Grenada during the first two days of the invasion.

The overall media thrust, however, was to accept the US action as a kind of natural happening. The first question reporters asked President Reagan during the press conference at which he announced the invasion was "Is it true that two of our helicopters were shot down?" an inquiry that implicitly accepted the legitimacy of the attack, focusing on how we were doing and not on what we were doing. Correspondents like Jack Smith of ABC News and commentators like Bill Moyers of CBS positively aligned themselves with the aggression, seeing it as a necessary "mission" to restore democracy.³⁹

Most of the press went along with the White House claim that the invasion was a rescue operation on behalf of American students at the St. George medical school. *Time* magazine headlined its cover story: "Rescue in Grenada."⁴⁰ Ignored were the medical students who testified that they were never threatened by the Grenadians nor by Cubans, nor prevented from leaving the island. (The *New York Times* did mention these latter students a week later—in the thirty-eighth paragraph of an article on Grenada.⁴¹)

The press accorded generous exposure to the official view that Grenada was a Cuban military bastion. Grenada's "defenders were Cuban—and extremely well armed," reported *Newsweek*.⁴² *Time* described them as "well-armed professionally trained soldiers."⁴³ They were reported to number as many as "1,000 to 1,500 Cuban troops."⁴⁴ In fact, only 784 Cubans were found on Grenada by US forces, exactly the number Castro said were there. Only a handful were military personnel, the rest being construction workers, medical personnel, and diplomatic personnel with their children and other relatives.⁴⁵

On the second day of the operation, when the Reagan administration announced that the invasion was not merely a rescue operation for the students but for the entire Caribbean, the US press went along with the revised and

MICHAEL PARENTI

expanded version. The administration claimed it had discovered enormous warehouses full of “deadly armaments” and “secret documents” that purportedly showed Grenada was, in President Reagan’s words, “a Soviet-Cuban colony being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy.” Footage of seized arms caches supposedly representing a “massive arsenal” sufficient to arm “8,000 to 10,000 terrorists” was given top play by the three major networks, the newsweeklies, and most newspapers. “American military sources say they were staggered by the depth and strength of the Cuban military presence,” reported ABC.⁴⁶

Eventually when journalists were allowed to visit the island, some sent back reports indicating that the arms cache actually consisted mostly of defensive small arms, enough to equip an army of about two thousand, hardly the stuff to terrorize and dominate the entire Caribbean.⁴⁷ Contrary to what the State Department claimed, the “secret documents” contained “no evidence that a terrorist training base existed or that Cubans had planned to take over Grenada,” the *New York Times* belatedly and inconspicuously reported.⁴⁸ The major media gave these corrective reports nowhere near the prominent play accorded the government’s original charges.

All three networks accepted Reagan’s view that tiny Grenada was of enormous military and strategic value to Cuba and the Soviet Union without explaining why, except to transmit unquestioningly the Pentagon’s fantasy that a revolutionary Grenada would allow Havana and Moscow to control crucial oil tanker lanes through the Caribbean. A CBS correspondent argued the US government’s case this way:

The Grenadians said their new all-weather night-and-day airport, with its 10,000 foot runway built by Cubans was for jumbo jets carrying tourists. Washington said, “Nonsense.” The Grenadians said the new port facilities under construction were for banana boats. Washington said, “No way.” Washington believed this tiniest Caribbean country was being

INVENTING REALITY

redesigned from a tourist haven to a Communist airbase and a way station, a stopping-off point for Cuban soldiers on their way to Africa, for East Bloc supplies on their way to Nicaragua.⁴⁹

And what Washington believed was what the press told us. The State Department offered no evidence, nor did the press demand any, to support the assertion that the airport was for military purposes. Anyone familiar with the special requirements of military airports, including their underground storage and special defense facilities, would know that the Grenadian airport was a civilian one—and was being built not only with Cuban help but with investments from a number of Western capitalist countries, including Great Britain.⁵⁰

The experiments in grassroots economic democracy and social justice, which were the hallmark of the New Jewel government, constituted a side to the Grenada story that the press left entirely untouched. Under the New Jewel, grade school and secondary education were free for everyone for the first time. Free health clinics were opened in the countryside (thanks mostly to Cuban assistance). Unemployment dropped dramatically from 49 to 14 percent in three years. Free milk and other foodstuffs were being distributed to the needy, as were materials for home improvement. Cultural and sports programs were set up for young people. Measures were taken in support of equal pay and equal legal status for women. The government leased unused land to establish farm cooperatives, and sought to turn agriculture away from cash-crop exports and toward self-sufficient food production.⁵¹ None of these developments was reported in the US media, either while they were happening or as background material during the invasion.

The 1984 election in Grenada, like the invasion itself, was a US-sponsored and -financed operation. The New National Party (NNP), described unblinkingly by the *Washington Post* as “forged under the guidance of Caribbean leaders who worked with Washington in last year’s invasion,” won every seat in

MICHAEL PARENTI

the parliament, while American soldiers policed the island. The NNP, continued the *Post*, was “singled out by U.S. diplomats in private conversations as the best vehicle to return Grenada to stable government.”⁵² Headed by a pro- US unknown named Herbert Blaize, the NNP and groups sympathetic to it received substantial funding from various conservative organizations in the US and from the Free Trade Union Institute (funded by the US State Department through the AFL-CIO).

After the New Jewel government was destroyed by the US invasion, unemployment and economic want in Grenada began to increase sharply. Oblivious to the possibility of negative developments, the *New York Times* talked about “a new moderate Parliament and Prime Minister committed to peace and stability”—thereby implying that the New Jewel government had been committed to war and instability. “Since the avalanche [NNP] election victory,” the *Times* claimed, “Grenadians have been in an especially cheerful and festive mood.”⁵³ The only supporting testimony by Grenadians that the *Times* offered was from an unidentified “young man” who reportedly said: “We’ve got a good man [Blaize] now and everything’s going to be O.K. ... We’ve got the Americans with us.”

To the above cases we could add studies of how the media have treated—or mistreated—Cuba, Zaire, Guatemala, El Salvador, Indonesia, East Timor, South Africa, Cambodia, Turkey, the Dominican Republic, the entire Arab world, including Palestine, and most other Third World nations and regions, an undertaking that would fill many volumes. What becomes apparent in the cases already presented are the patterns of omission and distortion, specifically the way the news media (1) leave unexamined the premises and self-serving claims of US foreign policy and accept the White House perspective at face value, confining critical commentary to operational matters; (2) downplay or ignore US sponsorship of reactionary repression and the repression itself; (3) suppress descriptions of the content of Third World struggles for national independence, economic justice, and revolutionary

INVENTING REALITY

change; (4) reduce Third World struggles to an encounter between a virtuous United States and demonic adversaries. I will deal further with these and other patterns in the next chapter.

X. For the New World Order

As seen in the previous chapter, the news media transform pro-US autocrats into “tough leaders” and popular insurgencies into “totalitarian aggressions.” This chapter offers several more case studies of how the press does its part to sanitize the use of US force and violence against countries that adopt a course not in keeping with the interests of US global hegemony.

THE “TOTALITARIAN” SANDINISTAS

The United States invaded Nicaragua seven times in this century, crushing popular insurgencies, occupying that country for an extended period, then installing a puppet military autocracy under the wealthy Somoza family. Nicaragua was made safe for big landowners and American investors. Labor unions were enfeebled or banned outright, thereby helping to depress wages and keep profits high. During these times Nicaragua had a rich ruling class and an impoverished people: 5 percent of the population owned 58 percent of the arable land; the Somoza family alone owned 23 percent; almost 60 percent of the people were unemployed, and 50 percent had a yearly income of \$90; about 80

INVENTING REALITY

percent of the population was illiterate. Half of Nicaragua's children suffered from malnutrition and almost half died before the age of four.¹ The press had little to say about these class inequities and the role of US power in maintaining them. Like so many other US-supported dictatorships, Nicaragua was treated as part of the "Free World" to be defended from communist aggression by Washington's global military machine.

In 1979, a popular revolutionary movement led by the Sandinista party (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dictatorship but not before Somoza's national guard destroyed one-third of the farmlands, hundreds of factories and smaller work places, utility plants, and thousands of homes; 50,000 people were killed (mostly by Somoza's forces); 160,000 were wounded or maimed; 40,000 children were orphaned—out of a population of 2 million.²

In 1984, after five years of Sandinista rule, infant mortality dropped to the lowest in Central America; unemployment declined from 60 to 16 percent, while inflation was reduced from 84 to 27 percent. The portion of the national budget spent on health increased 600 percent. Staple foods consumption increased 30 percent. Rural clinics, free hospitals, and vaccination campaigns produced a 50 percent drop in malaria. These medical services, along with an improved diet, brought a dramatic decline in children's diseases. Land was distributed to more than 40,000 families and to farm cooperatives. Over 85 percent of the population was now able to read and write at third-grade level or better.³

Like the Allende government in Chile, the FSLN in Nicaragua incurred the ire of US leaders not because it was a failure but because it was beginning to succeed in ways that were inimical to the interests of wealthy owners and corporate investors, most of whom believed that if rolling back poverty was to be accomplished by infringing on their class privileges, then poverty would have to stay put.

The Reagan administration cut off all aid and trade to Nicaragua, imposing a crippling economic embargo on that country. US forces mined

MICHAEL PARENTI

Nicaragua's harbors, blew up its oil depots, and openly armed, trained, and financed a mercenary army of "contras," who engaged in a premeditated war of bloody attrition to terrorize civilian noncombatants. US fleets stood at the ready off both Nicaraguan coasts and US planes regularly invaded that country's air space. President Reagan said he wanted the Sandinistas to cry "uncle" and Secretary of State Shultz promised to "cast out" the Sandinistas from "our hemisphere." Yet, in 1984, when Managua charged that Washington was pursuing a policy of aggression against Nicaragua and was planning an invasion, ABC News dismissed this as "the Sandinista paranoia" and the *Washington Post*, as "Nicaraguan paranoia."⁴ The paranoia diagnosis was inadvertently put to rest in June 1985 when Reagan and Shultz both announced that the United States might have to invade Nicaragua before too long.

US leaders sold their interventionist policy to the American public by wrapping themselves in the mantle of peace and democracy. First, they claimed they were intervening in Nicaragua to "interdict" Sandinista weapons that supposedly were being sent to the Salvadoran rebels—even though the arms were flowing the other way, from El Salvador to the US-supported contras. Then, they claimed it was to prevent the Sandinistas from carrying out a plan of aggression against its neighbors. Next, it was to force democratic reforms within Nicaragua. "Even a cub reporter grows skeptical about a courtroom defendant who continually changes his alibi. Yet many veteran journalists hardly blinked at the ever-changing rationale invoked to justify U.S. support for the contras."⁵ Each day the White House, State Department, and Pentagon flooded the news media with scores of press releases, briefings, leaks, staged events, and interviews, saturating a receptive press with anti-Sandinista propaganda.⁶

While the US media uncritically disseminated the White House's charges of Sandinista "totalitarianism," elections were held in Nicaragua in 1984. Seven parties ran for seats in the National Assembly and for the presidency, representing a broad ideological range from left to right. Regardless of size, all

INVENTING REALITY

parties enjoyed relatively easy ballot access, public financing of 12 million cordobas (about \$431,000), and an equal amount of time each day on the state-run radio stations and television channels. Each party was also permitted to receive unlimited funds from private donors, including organizations outside Nicaragua, a provision that worked to the advantage of the more affluent conservative candidates. Some 460 official foreign observers from all over the world, who were free to check all aspects of the voting process and ballot counting, agreed that with the exception of a few incidents, the campaign was fair, honest, and noncoercive.⁷

Yet these democratic efforts won scant and skeptical coverage in the US media. The impression left by the media was that if the FSLN were to win, then the election simply could not be considered democratic. Stories carried in the *New York Times* were typically headlined “SANDINISTAS MAY WIN BIG IN ELECTIONS BUT AGAINST WHOM?” and “GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS IN NICARAGUA,” the gist of these articles being that the election was somehow rigged by the Sandinistas.⁸ A *Washington Post* story, headlined “CONTROVERSIAL VOTE SET TODAY IN NICARAGUA,” emphasized the “pervasive presence in the society” of FSLN supporters, thereby treating Sandinista popularity as a sign of undemocratic political monopoly.⁹ The Sandinistas won the 1984 election with almost 65 percent of the vote, while two conservative parties gleaned 13 percent and 9 percent, respectively. Since the National Assembly had proportional representation, the minority parties were assured of seats. Ignoring the realities of Nicaragua’s election, an editorial in the *New York Times* several months later attacked the Sandinistas for refusing “to subject their power to the consent of the Nicaraguan people.”¹⁰

Much was made of the fact that on a number of occasions, the Nicaraguan government censored pages in *La Prensa* or suspended publication for brief periods. *La Prensa* was a right-wing daily that received funds from the US Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy. It openly supported the US-financed contra army and had several

MICHAEL PARENTI

contra members on its editorial board, yet it was allowed to continue publication throughout the war. La Prensa was not the only opposition voice. About half the radio and television stations in Nicaragua were privately owned and many of these gave the government a daily ideological pounding of a kind that made the US mainstream press look like the tepid establishment mouthpiece it is.¹¹ Nicaragua was under invasion from hostile forces and had suffered much loss of life and destruction of property, yet the “totalitarian” censorship imposed by the Sandinistas was much less restrictive than what the US government imposed during World War I and World War II.

By 1990, conditions in Nicaragua had gone from bad to worse due to the punishing effects of the US-sponsored contra war and US economic sanctions. In the national election that year the Sandinistas faced a coalition of opposition parties (UNO) that was heavily financed by the US government. In anticipation of another possible Sandinista victory, the US media once more began to question the fairness and legitimacy of the impending election. One *New York Times* story was headlined “FEAR OF DISORDER SHADOWS OPPOSITION CAMPAIGN.”¹² Another *Times* article asserted that “controversy has raged about Sandinista campaign techniques ... and the Sandinista refusal to admit [a U.S.] Administration delegation to monitor the vote.”¹³ The story failed to note that hundreds of neutral foreign observers from all over the world were in the country, making the election the most closely monitored in history. As the voting began, the *Times* reported that persons in contra-controlled regions were afraid to go to the polls because they feared Sandinista retaliation. Yet, deeper into the story we read that “despite the anxiety, the turnout ... appeared high.”¹⁴

The story offered no evidence that the Sandinistas had intimidated anyone.

Having been promised an end to war and economic embargo if the US-supported opposition party were elected, a battered population voted the Sandinistas out of power. US press commentators and editorialists suddenly dropped their reservations about the election’s legitimacy and hailed the results

INVENTING REALITY

in superlative terms.¹⁵ Without exception the media referred to the 1990 contest as Nicaragua's "first free election" thereby ignoring the 1984 election described above.¹⁶ The press never questioned the legitimacy of the US government's injecting large sums into the contest to help UNO to victory. On the contrary, such intervention was presented as a laudatory attempt to "level the playing field."¹⁷

The news media recognized that US policy had undermined the Sandinistas' rule but this also was treated as a good thing. The FSLN defeat was ascribed to three causes, in descending order of importance: (1) Sandinista "mismanagement of the economy," (2) weariness with the eight-year contra war and resentment about the military draft, (3) the US embargo. The United States was seldom linked to the contra war and the war was seldom treated as a cause of economic ruination. US economic sanctions were extensive and brutally effective. But the American public had the opportunity to read only one or two words ("embargo" or "sanctions") to describe the terrible toll taken. Sandinista "mismanagement"—of which there was no doubt some—was seldom described in any concrete detail but was repeatedly and unfairly blamed for the catastrophic attrition inflicted by the US war and embargo.¹⁸

The Nicaraguan people did not vote out the Sandinista government. They voted for an end to the US campaign to destroy them. It was not a vote against "Sandinista tyranny" but for Washington's candidates. The hope was that the United States would then do what Bush had repeatedly promised: lift the sanctions and stop the war.¹⁹ In no pre-election article did the US press mention this influential factor.

After the UNO government took office, US aid was used to speed up the "free-market" reconstruction of the economy in order to integrate it into the client-state "new world order." Aid also went to right-wing political organizations and anti-Sandinista media and for school textbooks that taught "traditional" counterrevolutionary values.²⁰ Meanwhile the population suffered even greater economic calamity than during the war. The Bush administration,

MICHAEL PARENTI

like its predecessor, was interested only in rolling back the Sandinista revolution. The people simply would have to endure the awful results. The White House was letting other nations know what awaited them if they dared to move away from a client-state status. Panama was next.

A DEVIL IN PANAMA

In 1978, the United States and Panama signed a treaty to give the latter sovereignty over the Panama Canal by 1999. The canal had diminished in importance because of technical advances in transportation. But the US remained concerned about the fourteen US military bases in Panama and the Southern Command headquarters, which was the site for US military and covert operations in Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition, Washington was uneasy about the Panamanian government under General Omar Torrijos. Unlike most Latin American military leaders, Torrijos was a populist-reformist. He maintained friendly relations with the communist government in Cuba, and used monies extracted from businesses and banks to fund social programs, some of which were beneficial to the people.²¹

In 1981 Torrijos was killed when his plane mysteriously blew up in mid-air. His place was taken by the head of Panamanian military intelligence, Colonel Manuel Noriega. It is likely that Noriega, on the CIA payroll since 1967, engineered the crash that killed Torrijos. Noriega blunted much of the progressive character of the Torrijos administration. A Costa Rican legislative commission concluded that during the 1980s Noriega had engaged in running guns to the Nicaraguan contras and drugs to North America. He also collaborated with Oliver North in setting up corporate fronts to finance the contras and an airfield in Costa Rica to supply them. Noriega's involvement in drug-trafficking dated back to his days as head of Panamanian military intelligence and was well known to US leaders and the CIA. Noriega received \$200,000 a year as a CIA agent—even when George Bush was the agency's

INVENTING REALITY

director. Yet, in the 1988 presidential campaign, Bush claimed he had known nothing about Noriega's narcotics activities.²²

There were limits to Noriega's willingness to serve Washington. He reasserted Panama's independence with respect to control of the Canal Zone and the extension of leases on US military bases. He reportedly refused to participate in an invasion against Nicaragua and apparently became a less eager collaborator in US espionage. Furthermore, he continued to maintain friendly relations with both Managua and Havana. Hostile reports about him began appearing in the United States. In 1987 the US Justice Department indicted Noriega for drug-smuggling. A crippling economic embargo was imposed on Panama, causing unemployment to double in that country of two million inhabitants, and social benefits to be cut drastically. Despite the tough US sanctions and US troop build-ups in the Canal Zone, Noriega refused to step down from power, as Washington demanded.

In the US press, our erstwhile friend and ally, Manuel Noriega, was swiftly transformed from "military leader" to "strongman dictator." A media blitz demonized the Panamanian leader as a drug dealer and prepared the American public for the ensuing invasion. During the aborted 1989 elections in Panama, the US press widely publicized the beating of an opposition candidate by Noriega supporters. The press repeatedly referred to Noriega's "goons" and "thugs." Never did it refer to "Botha's goons" in South Africa or "Duarte's goons" in El Salvador or the various other thugs who practiced torture and murder in a host of US-supported client states.²³

In mid-December 1989, just days before the US invasion of Panama, ABC's Ted Koppel reported that Noriega had declared war on the United States. Other media announcers made the same unsupported assertion. In fact, Noriega, who was making peace offers at that very time to opposition leaders, was quoted in a Reuters dispatch as saying that the United States, "through constant psychological and military harassment, has created a state of war in Panama."²⁴

MICHAEL PARENTI

On December 20, 1989, President Bush ordered US forces to attack Panama. Television news, the medium reaching the largest audiences, provided coverage of “Operation Just Cause” that resembled a US Army recruitment film: helicopters landing, planes dive-bombing, troops trotting along foreign streets, the enemy’s headquarters engulfed in flames, friendly Panamanians welcoming the invaders as liberators. No TV reporter thought to point out that the Panamanians they interviewed were almost always well-dressed, light-skinned, and spoke English in a country where the majority were Spanish-speaking, dark-skinned, and poor. Left out of the picture were the many incidents of armed resistance by Panamanians.²⁵

TV correspondents enthusiastically or matter-of-factly reported the heavy bombings of El Chorillo and other working-class neighborhoods, treating these aerial attacks of civilian populations as surgical strikes designed to break resistance in what were considered “Noriega strongholds.” While admitting that the heavily populated working-class districts supported Noriega, the press continued to assert that he was without popular support in his own country.

As usual, the news media focused on operational questions: Was the invasion going well? Was there much resistance? And the most important question of all: How many American lives were lost? Questions of international law and the critical responses of other nations were pretty much ignored. The United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn the US invasion, but this was given scant notice in the mainstream media.

The Pentagon claimed only twenty-three US troops were killed. Scores of others were wounded or injured. No consideration was given by our government or media to the thousands of Panamanian soldiers and civilians killed, wounded, or in other ways harmed by the invasion. Nothing was said of the many thousands left homeless. After a studied silence, the White House came up with the figure of 516 Panamanian dead, claiming that most of these were military casualties.

On this question, the press did little investigation of its own. The media

INVENTING REALITY

decided there was no way of verifying Panamanian losses, so no losses were reported. When television correspondent Fred Francis was asked about civilian casualties, he said he did not know because he and the other journalists in the Pentagon's pool were traveling with the US Army.²⁶ (At that same time, problems of verification did not deter the media from offering fantastically inflated reports about 80,000 to 100,000 demonstrators killed by the communist government in Romania. These figures—greater than the immediate Hiroshima death toll— should have been dismissed out of hand by any sane editor.²⁷) Only months later did a few brief reports appear regarding mass graves of Panamanian dead buried hastily by US Army bulldozers.

The demonization of Manuel Noriega continued in full force during the invasion of his country, thereby reversing the roles of aggressor and victim. TV footage of him brandishing a machete at a rally was repeatedly run, projecting the image of a violent individual. CBS anchor Dan Rather referred to the Panamanian leader as a “wily jungle snake” and a “swamp rat,” and “at the top of the list of the world's drug thieves and scums.” ABC anchor Peter Jennings called Noriega “one of the more odious creatures with whom the United States has had a relationship.” ABC “Nightline” host Ted Koppel announced: “Noriega's reputation as a brutal drug-dealing bully who reveled in his public contempt for the United States all but begged for strong retribution.”²⁸

The Pentagon reported that US troops entering Noriega's headquarters discovered a desk stuffed with pornography, a portrait of Hitler, voodoo paraphernalia, and one hundred pounds of cocaine.

Subsequent investigation found the pornography to be Spanish-language copies of *Playboy*. The picture of Hitler was in a *Time-Life* photo history of World War II. The “voodoo” implements turned out to be San Bias Indian carvings. And the “cocaine” was nothing more than an emergency stockpile of tortilla flour. But these belated corrective revelations received scant coverage compared to the original hype.²⁹

Supposedly the United States had invaded Panama to bring a drug-crazed

MICHAEL PARENTI

dictator to justice. But once Noriega was captured and jailed in Miami, US military forces continued to occupy the entire country. US authorities installed Panama's "new democratic" leaders: President Guillermo Endara, Vice President Guillermo Ford, and Attorney General Rogelio Cruz. Jonathan Marshall reported in the Oakland Tribune that all three of these rich White oligarchs were closely linked to companies, banks, and individuals heavily involved in drug operations or the laundering of drug money.³⁰ Marshall's revelations received little, if any, attention from the major media.³¹

With Noriega deposed and the US military in firm control of Panama, conditions in that country deteriorated. Unemployment, already high because of the US embargo, climbed to 35 percent as drastic layoffs were imposed on the public sector. Pension rights and other work benefits were lost. Eight radio stations, two television stations, and two newspapers were shut down by US occupation authorities. A number of newspaper editors and reporters critical of the invasion were jailed or detained. Union heads were arrested by the US military, and some 150 local labor leaders were removed from their elected positions within their unions. Public employees who did not support the invasion were purged.³²

Some fifty deposed officials from Noriega's government were still in jail as of late 1991, being held without charges or trial. Prisons, built to accommodate 1,500 inmates, held nearly three times that number under the occupation. Crime rates climbed dramatically after the invasion, along with poverty and destitution. Thousands remained homeless. Corruption was more widespread than ever. More money-laundering and drug-trafficking was going on under the US-sponsored Endara administration than under Noriega. These facts received little play in the major media.³³

A glimmer of truth peeked through now and then. Several years after branding Noriega the leading criminal of Central America, the *New York Times* observed that his alleged drug dealings were "relatively small scale by Latin American standards... American officials strongly suspect high-ranking military

INVENTING REALITY

officers in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador of similar, and in some cases even greater involvement in drug dealing—yet have not taken harsh action against them.”³⁴

A *Washington Post* story about Panama’s overcrowded prisons reported that none of Noriega’s incarcerated associates had been brought to trial. The *Post* ascribed this delay to inefficiencies in the judicial system and not to the fact that there was little incriminating evidence against them. The story concluded—without benefit of any specifics— that human rights under the new regime had improved and “press freedoms have been restored.”³⁵

Thus did the news media hail the accomplishments of “Operation Just Cause.”

CELEBRATING THE MASSACRE OF IRAQ

For decades, US officials and media commentators told us that the US global military machine, with its 300 major bases around the world, was needed to protect us from a Moscow-directed Red Menace. But when the communist nations of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union dissolved into anticommunist, pro-capitalist states, the US global military machine did not dissolve along with them but remained largely intact. US leaders now maintained that the world was full of dangerous noncommunist adversaries, who apparently had been previously overlooked.

Any foreign power, even a noncommunist one, that tries to reclaim its own development at the expense of multinational corporate investors—risks feeling the crush of US power. American politico-corporate elites have long been engaged in a struggle to make the world safe for capital accumulation; to retain control of the markets, raw materials, and cheap labor of poorer countries; and to prevent the emergence of revolutionary socialist, populist, or even nationalist military regimes that challenge this arrangement. For this, a global military machine is still needed. The goal is to create a world populated

MICHAEL PARENTI

by client states, ones that leave themselves completely open to multinational corporate penetration, on terms set by the penetrators.

In early August 1990, Iraq, a nationalist state under the rule of Saddam Hussein, invaded the emirate of Kuwait after repeated disputes with that country over oil pricing and Kuwaiti border incursions— differences that Kuwait refused to negotiate. Shortly before the invasion, Hussein had received assurances from April Glaspie, the US ambassador in Baghdad, that the United States had no interest in Iraq's dispute with Kuwait. Similar assurances were made by US officials to a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee and to the press.³⁶

Soon after the invasion, however, President Bush called for United Nations economic sanctions against Baghdad. He then sent US troops to Saudi Arabia, contending that Hussein intended to invade that country also. Making no independent investigation, the US news media uncritically transmitted the president's assertion to the American public. Bush also claimed, "Our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if all the world's great oil reserves fell into the hands of that one man, Saddam Hussein."³⁷ Again, most major news organizations unquestioningly reported this scare story, failing to note that it was impossible for Hussein or any other Arab leader to monopolize "all the world's great oil reserves." Little of the Gulf's reserves came to the United States. American consumers were getting all the oil they wanted from other sources.

Bush then claimed that Hussein planned to destroy Israel, another charge treated as established fact by the press. Hussein did eventually attack Israel with relatively ineffectual Scud missiles, but only in retaliation for the massive US aerial attacks against Iraq. Bush's war policy did not prevent an attack on Israel; it incited one— a point the media consistently overlooked.

Immediately after public opinion polls showed that Americans reacted negatively to the idea of an Iraqi nuclear capability, the White House charged that Iraq was a nuclear threat. Again, the press obligingly went along, never

INVENTING REALITY

raising any question as to why a nuclear-armed Iraq was any more of a threat to the world than an already nuclear-armed China, Pakistan, Israel, or South Africa.³⁸

Bush claimed he was upholding the United Nations commitment to defend its member-states from aggression. A year before, when the UN voted 75 to 20 to condemn Bush's invasion of Panama as a "flagrant violation of international law," NBC evening news completely ignored the vote, while CBS gave it all of ten seconds. But now, without blushing, the press hailed George Bush as a defender of the UN Charter. The UN Security Council could act against Iraq as a collective peacekeeper "for virtually the first time in its history," claimed the *New York Times*.³⁹ When the United States was repeatedly outvoted in the UN General Assembly on resolutions relating to nuclear "first use," the nuclear freeze, the militarization of outer space, US support for the contra war in Nicaragua, US support for Israeli aggression in Lebanon and on the West Bank, and the US invasions of Grenada and Panama, these developments received slight attention in the mainstream media.⁴⁰ When the United Nations took positions critical of the White House line, the US news media treated it virtually as an invisible organization. When the United Nations went along with White House policy, as with the Gulf war, the media lavished attention on that organization.

No questions were raised in the US media about why Iraq had to be ferociously attacked, while other aggressors went unpunished or were actually rewarded with US aid. Thus the White House never demanded that sanctions or military force be used against Syria's invasion of Lebanon, Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Turkey's invasion of Cypress, South Africa's invasion of Angola, or Indonesia's invasion of East Timor. And certainly no UN member-state called for collective military action against the United States when it invaded Grenada and Panama, or when it waged covert action assaults on various other countries. UN collective security was something only the strong used against the weak.

In August 1990, as already noted, Bush said that he was trying to prevent

MICHAEL PARENTI

Hussein from grabbing “all the world’s great oil reserves.” But in October he asserted that, “the fight isn’t about oil, the fight is about naked aggression.”⁴¹ The aggressor was Hussein, who the president now described as having done things that were “worse than Hitler.” No major media commentators questioned that characterization. Saddam was labeled the “Butcher of Baghdad,” a “madman,” “psychologically deformed,” and a “beast.”⁴² The *New York Times* ran a David Levin cartoon across the top of its op-ed page entitled “The Descent of Man,” showing in descending order: a man, a gorilla, a monkey, a snake, and a distorted, dwarfed Saddam Hussein.⁴³ *Times* journalist Leslie Gelb dehumanized Hussein with an odd science fiction metaphor: “If he were to survive the war as a hero, he would be like a giant starship emitting undeflectable death rays.”⁴⁴

When the White House opted for a military attack against Iraq, the press once more fell into step. The networks produced experts who told us that sanctions and negotiations (the latter never attempted by Washington) would not dislodge Saddam. The *New York Times* ran a frontpage story: “CAN SANCTIONS WORK? MANY AIDES ARE DOUBTFUL.”⁴⁵ *Newsweek* asserted it was impossible to negotiate with Hussein for he violated “all standards of reasonable discourse” and rejected “every rational approach.”⁴⁶ In short order, twenty-four of the twenty-five largest newspapers editorialized in favor of military force to “liberate” Kuwait and teach Hussein a lesson.⁴⁷

By demonizing Iraq’s leader, then equating him with an entire nation, the US was able to wage a ferocious war against the Iraqi people, all the while pretending the attacks were against the wicked Hussein. NBC’s Tom Brokaw asked: “Can the United States allow Saddam Hussein to live?”⁴⁸ Cokie Roberts said the smart thing to do was to “go after him” and “end this.”⁴⁹ Others talked of “hurting,” “punishing,” and “taking him out.” Meanwhile, Hussein was one of the few Iraqis during the war with a safe, warm place to sleep and plenty to eat and drink.

Once the president began the all-out aerial war against Iraq, the US news media transformed itself into a virtual cheering squad, identifying totally with

INVENTING REALITY

US forces, using “we” to describe military actions. CBS’s Walter Cronkite crowed: “We knocked one of their Scuds out of the sky.”⁵⁰ Others talked of the heavy damages “we” inflicted on Iraqi defenses.

Telecasters interviewed US Air Force pilots who told how good it felt to drop bombs on Iraqi cities. “This was tremendous. Baghdad was lit up like a Christmas tree,” gushed one pilot on NBC. “It’s exciting. It’s the same adrenaline that a hunter has on the hunt,” enthused another on CNN. One NBC correspondent noted admiringly that the pilots were “cool under pressure.” And a CNN telecaster affirmed: “We have been hearing nothing but good comments from the pilots.”⁵¹

After the first night of aerial attacks, a CBS correspondent remarked to anchor Dan Rather: “So far things look good.” On that same show Rather mentioned that the FBI was visiting hundreds of Arab Americans to investigate possible links to terrorist organizations. Far from seeing anything wrong with equating “Arab” with “terrorist,” Rather exulted: “The FBI has done a terrific job to defend us against terrorists.”⁵²

With an enthusiasm befitting Dr. Strangelove, journalists celebrated the use of high-tech weaponry in the systematic destruction of a small Third World nation.⁵³ CBS correspondent Charles Osgood exclaimed that the bombing of Iraq was “a marvel.” CBS’s Jim Stewart praised “two days of almost picture-perfect assaults.” ABC anchor Peter Jennings extolled “the brilliance of laser-guided bombs,” but the next evening he labeled an Iraqi missile “a horrifying killer.”⁵⁴ On the NBC affiliate station in Washington, D.C., announcer Jim Vance commented: “We can be proud of our men and women who are heroically and with devastating efficiency serving our country.”⁵⁵

While there was nothing but praise for the military, Jim Lehrer of PBS’s “MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour” wondered if the media were doing their job: “Has the public been adequately prepared for this war by the press and officials?”⁵⁶ No question was raised as to why independent news organizations had to “prepare” the public for official policy. Such coordinated efforts between press

MICHAEL PARENTI

and state in communist countries are usually denounced as totalitarian.

War coverage was tightly controlled by the military, limited to rotating pools of accredited reporters, closely monitored by a military attache.⁵⁷ The major media accepted this censorship with few complaints. NBC anchor Tom Brokaw was downright sympathetic: “Officers remember Vietnam and, in fairness to them, some got burned.” So “understandably” they didn’t want the press “to cause the same damage again.”⁵⁸ *New York Times* managing editor Joseph Lelyveld was equally accommodating: “The First Amendment gives us the right to publish just about anything. It does not give us the right to go just about anywhere.”⁵⁹ Thus he ignored both ordinary logic and the body of constitutional law that say the right to publish is closely connected with the right to have access to newsworthy locations and sources.

It remained for small dissident media like the *Nation*, the *Guardian* (NY), *Harper’s*, and *Pacifica Radio News* to sue the government, claiming that the military’s censorship violated the First Amendment. The mainstream press not only refused to join the suit, it gave the case scant coverage.⁶⁰

The worse censorship came not from the military but from the press itself, in its one-sided and ideologically loaded coverage and commentary.⁶¹ News organizations punished those few who deviated from the official line. As noted in an earlier chapter, NBC president Michael Gartner suppressed footage on the destruction of Basra and forbade Jon Alpert, a twelve-year stringer for NBC who shot the film, from ever working for the network again. *San Francisco Examiner* columnist Warren Hinckle was suspended for three months for being too critical of Bush’s war. Several radio talkshow hosts and local newspaper editors were fired or forced to resign because of criticisms they raised about the war.⁶²

The media played down the human costs of the war. There were continual replays of on-target bombings, but no replays of the many missiles that missed their targets. The military emphasized the precise “surgical” nature of the aerial and artillery strikes. Indeed, the attacks were surgical in that they

INVENTING REALITY

systematically destroyed the industrial life-support systems of Iraqi society. However, over 90 percent of the bombings involved free-falling gravity bombs that hit anything standing or moving with a total of 85,000 tons of explosives, or the equivalent of seven Hiroshima atomic bombs.

A great superpower used its tremendous technological might to pound a small nation into submission, and the media gave the event a positive framing. Here was a clean war with no visible casualties. A *Newsweek* cover headline actually read: “THE NEW SCIENCE OF WAR, HIGH-TECH HARDWARE: HOW MANY LIVES CAN IT SAVE?”⁶³ Few Iraqi dead and no American dead were shown on television or in newspaper photos. Tens of thousands of retreating Iraqis were massacred by allied bombers but news pictures showed only wrecked vehicles. When representatives from several dissident publications went to the major photo services for more graphic shots, there were none to be found. The clerks had been instructed to destroy any photographs showing dead bodies.⁶⁴

At no time during the war did the major media estimate the number of Iraqis killed. As with Vietnam, Grenada, and Panama, only American lives counted. NBC commentator John Chancellor concluded: “The most important thing to be said” about the war is that “there were very few casualties.”⁶⁵ But the *London Sunday Times* quoted “senior Pentagon officials” who concluded that “as many as 200,000 Iraqis may have died in the Gulf war.”⁶⁶ This report was ignored by the US media.

Iraqi losses were briefly revealed when CNN’s Peter Arnett produced footage from Baghdad of hundreds of deaths caused by the US aerial destruction of a civilian bomb shelter. But the mainstream media quickly dismissed the incident. NBC’s Tom Brokaw was insistent: “We must point out again and again that it is Saddam Hussein who put these innocents in harm’s way.”⁶⁷ CBS correspondent Ron Allen shrugged it off: “Iraq is trying to gain sympathy.” After giving us a brief glimpse of the Baghdad casualties, a “MacNeil-Lehrer” commentator dismissed them as “heavy-handed

MICHAEL PARENTI

manipulation.” CBS’s Mark Phillips intoned: “Saddam Hussein promised a bloody war, and here [is] the blood.”⁶⁸

US forces consistently violated the Geneva Conventions in their unrestrained aerial attacks on civilian populations, on fleeing troops, and on facilities necessary to sustain civilian life, such as hydroelectrical systems, water treatment plants, residential neighborhoods, and the like. The media never correctly labeled these attacks as war crimes, preferring to gloss over them with military euphemisms like “surgical strikes,” “collateral damage,” and “target-rich environments.”

If there were war crimes, the press would have us believe they were committed exclusively by Iraq. One of the media’s favorite propaganda horror stories was of Iraqi soldiers pillaging Kuwaiti hospitals and tossing 312 babies from incubators. The *Washington Post* carried references to this fantasy some ten times during the Gulf crisis.⁶⁹ Only after the war ended did a few newspapers passingly acknowledge that the atrocities never happened. Buried on an inside page of the *Post* in the middle of a long article was a one-sentence quote from a Kuwaiti doctor indicating that the incubator story was false. The *Times* offered a hedging two-sentence retraction toward the end of a long article: “Some of the atrocities that had been reported, such as the killing of infants in the main hospitals shortly after the invasion, are untrue or have been exaggerated, Kuwaitis said.”⁷⁰ Of the various television networks only ABC briefly acknowledged the falsity of the incubator atrocities.⁷¹

US pilots were viciously beaten and tortured while prisoners of war—or so the news media had many of us believing. Pictures of captured pilots, whose faces showed signs of bruises and cuts, were repeatedly run in the broadcast and print media. “TORTURE AND TORMENT ... HOW WILL THE CAPTIVES FARE UNDER IRAQ’S BRUTAL TREATMENT?” is how *Newsweek* headlined its cover story.⁷² We were repeatedly reminded that such mistreatment was a war crime. Thus were the roles of victim and victimizer reversed. Pilots, who perpetrated criminal acts by raining death and destruction upon civilian

INVENTING REALITY

populations, were themselves depicted as victims of war crimes. In rare instances, traces of the truth could be found, as in the passing comments buried in a *Washington Post* story: There were “no indications that any [US captive] had been tortured,” and the Red Cross observed “all prisoners in rather good shape.”⁷³

The media began reporting some of the human costs, after the war was over and only when Hussein could be designated the culprit. Saturation coverage was given to the plight of fleeing Kurds stranded on mountainsides. *New York Times* columnist Leslie Gelb wrote about “Iraqi forces slaughtering Kurds and Shiites.” And NBC’s John Chancellor charged that Hussein was “slaughtering his own people.”⁷⁴ Neither Gelb nor Chancellor nor any other major commentator had used “slaughter” to describe the far more ferocious war waged by President Bush against the Iraqi people.

Well after the war was over, the dying continued. A United Nations mission reported that living conditions in Iraq were at crisis level:

Nothing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation which has now befallen the country. The recent conflict has wrought near-apocalyptic results upon the economic infrastructure of what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society. Now most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has, for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with all the disabilities of postindustrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology.⁷⁵

The report went on to describe horrendous conditions of hunger, disease, and death. These sensational findings received slight mention, if any, in the US press. The United Nations had once more become an invisible organization.

After a trip to Iraq, a Harvard study team reported in June 1991:

MICHAEL PARENTI

Without electricity, water cannot be purified, sewage cannot be treated, water-borne diseases flourish and hospitals cannot cure treatable illness.

Therefore, the increased incidence of mortality and morbidity [and] the deterioration of the medical system are linked to the destruction of Iraq's electrical power system in the Gulf war.⁷⁶

This finding, too, was largely ignored by the media. ABC and the *Washington Post* briefly reported that cholera threatened in Iraq.⁷⁷ But little explicit mention was made about the health crisis.⁷⁸

Richard Haas, a special assistant to President Bush, noted that during the Gulf war, television was “our chief tool” in “selling our policy” at home and abroad.⁷⁹ Indeed, the White House and the Pentagon should have paid the mainstream press for the way it reported the crisis. The press gave almost no attention to what critics said were the real reasons for the war: to protect the interests and profits of the oil cartels, to beat another Third World nation into economic submission, to boost the military budget and obliterate talk of “peace dividends,” to drive the savings and loan scandal off the evening news, and to bolster President Bush's image as a bold and courageous leader.⁸⁰ Lacking critical information and argument to the contrary, the public rallied around the troops and treated the war as a just undertaking.

Vietnam, Grenada, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq: Whenever leaders choose to make war, the press joins up. In 1923, referring to an earlier war, British journalist Philip Gibbs wrote: “We identified ourselves absolutely with the Armies in the field... There was no need of censorship of our dispatches. We were our own censors.”⁸¹

XI. Propaganda Themes

Most news biases are so consistent and political in nature as to suggest that they are the outcome of influences larger than the imperfect efforts of individual reporters. Regardless of who is involved in manufacturing the news, one can detect persistent themes in how the mainstream press presents our country's role in the world to us. Here are some of those themes.

AMERICAN VIRTUE AND “ANTI- AMERICANISM”

The press sometimes will criticize US foreign policy as “ill- defined,” or “overextended,” but never as lacking in virtuous intent. To maintain this image, the news media say little about the US role in financing, equipping, training, advising, and directing the repressive military apparatus that exists in US client states around the world, little about the mass killings of entire villages, the paramilitary death squads, the torture and disappearances.¹

The brutality does not go entirely unnoticed. But press reports are usually sporadic and sparse, rarely doing justice to the endemic nature of the repression, rarely, if ever, showing how the repression functions to protect the

MICHAEL PARENTI

few rich from the many poor and how it is linked to US policy. Thus when *Time* magazine devoted a full-page story to torture throughout the world, the US came out looking like Snow White.²

Following the official line, the national media will readily deny that the United States harbors aggressive intentions against other governments, and will dismiss such charges by them as just so much “anti-American” propaganda and as evidence of their aggressive intent toward us. Or the media will condone the aggressive actions as necessary for our national security or implicitly accept them as a given reality needing no justification.

For instance, in 1961 Cuban right-wing emigres, trained and financed by the CIA, invaded Cuba, in the words of one of their leaders, to overthrow Castro and set up “a provisional government” that “will restore all properties to the rightful owners.”³ Reports of the impending invasion circulated widely throughout Central America, but in the United States, stories were suppressed by the *Associated Press* and *United Press International* and by all the major networks, newspapers, and newsweeklies. In an impressively unanimous act of self-censorship, some seventy-five publications rejected a report offered by the editors of the *Nation* in 1960 detailing US preparations for the invasion.⁴ Fidel Castro’s accusation that the United States was planning to invade Cuba was dismissed by the *New York Times* as “shrill ... anti-American propaganda,” and by *Time* as Castro’s “continued tawdry little melodrama of invasion.”⁵ When Washington broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in January 1961 (after Castro started nationalizing US corporate investments and instituting social programs for the poor), the *Times* explained, “What snapped U.S. patience was a new propaganda offensive from Havana charging that the U.S. was plotting an ‘imminent invasion’ of Cuba.”⁶

Yet, after the Bay of Pigs invasion proved to be something more than a figment of Castro’s anti-Americanism, there was almost a total lack of media criticism regarding its moral and legal impropriety. Instead, editorial commentary referred to the disappointing “fiasco” and “disastrous attempt.”⁷

INVENTING REALITY

Revelations about the full extent of US involvement, including the CIA training camp in Guatemala, began to appear during the post-invasion period in the same press that earlier had denied such things existed. These retrospective admissions of US involvement were discussed unapologetically and treated as background for further moves against Cuba.⁸ Perspectives that did not implicitly assume that US policy was well-intentioned and supportive of democratic interests were excluded from media commentary.

The media dismiss conflicts that arise between the United States and popular forces in other countries as manifestations of the latter's "anti-Americanism." During the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, when ABC asked an "expert" whether being a Shiite Muslim meant being "anti-American," he replied that it did.⁹ Over footage of Muslim crowds chanting "God is great," ABC commentator Frank Reynolds voiced what he supposed was their real meaning: "hatred of America." Similarly, CBS's Walter Cronkite spoke of "Muslim hatred of this country."¹⁰ When thousands marched in the Philippines against the abominated US-supported Marcos regime, the *New York Times* reported, "Anti-Marcos and anti-American slogans and banners were in abundance, with the most common being 'Down with the U.S.-Marcos Dictatorship!'"¹¹ A week later, the *Times* again described Filipino protests against US support of the Marcos dictatorship as "anti-Americanism."¹²

After noting that the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 "grew out of a general despair with prevailing conditions, without much ideology behind it," the *Washington Post* concluded the revolution had an "anti-American thrust."¹³ More accurately, the revolution might have been called anti-feudal and anti-imperialist. Protests in Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, Nicaragua, and other Latin American nations against CIA counterinsurgency have all been reduced by the American press to expressions of "anti-Americanism." The same description was applied to the protests in England, Germany, and other Western nations against the placement of US cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe during the early 1980s.

MICHAEL PARENTI

The mainstream media begin with the unexamined premise that US foreign policy is above reproach (except for operational criticisms as to its efficacy). Therefore, if masses of demonstrators and rioters in other countries denounce that policy as imperialistic and oppressive, it can only be because they suffer from “anti-Americanism,” that is, they have an inexplicable hatred of America and Americans. “Anti-Americanism” is treated as an irrational hostility toward the American people rather than a possibly justified hostility toward the imposing and oppressive nature of US policies. By that view, West Germans did not dislike us for putting nuclear missiles on their soil, rather they opposed the missiles because they disliked us.¹⁴ The press ascribes the opposition directed against US policies to some kind of nationalistic prejudice within the protestors and thus ignores the substance of the protest.

THE NONEXISTENCE OF IMPERIALISM

While Washington policy-makers argue that US overseas intervention is necessary to protect “our interests,” the press seldom asks what “our interests” are and who among us is actually served by them. As we have seen in regard to Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, and other cases, “defending US interests” usually means imposing a client-state status on nations that might strike a course independent of, and even inimical to, global corporate investment. This is rarely the reason given in the national media. Rather, it is almost always a matter of “stopping aggression,” or “protecting our national security,” or punishing leaders who are said to be dictators, drug dealers, or state terrorists.

References may occasionally appear in the press about the great disparities of wealth and poverty in Third World nations, but US corporate imperialism is never treated as one of the causes of such poverty. Indeed, it seems the US press has never heard of US imperialism. Imperialism, the process by which the dominant interests of one country expropriate the land, labor, markets, capital, and natural resources of another, and neo-imperialism, the

INVENTING REALITY

process of expropriation that occurs without direct colonization, are both unmentionables. Anyone who might try to introduce the subject would be quickly dismissed as “ideological.” Media people, like mainstream academics and others, might recognize that the US went through a brief imperialist period around the Spanish-American War. And they would probably acknowledge that there once existed ancient Roman imperialism and nineteenth-century British imperialism and certainly twentieth-century “Soviet imperialism.” But not many, if any, mainstream editors and commentators would consider the existence of US imperialism (or neo-imperialism), let alone entertain criticisms of it.

Media commentators, like political leaders, treat corporate investment as a solution to Third World poverty and indebtedness rather than as a cause. What US corporations do in the Third World is a story largely untold. In tiny El Salvador alone, US Steel, Alcoa, Westinghouse, United Brands, Standard Fruit, Del Monte, Cargill, Procter & Gamble, Chase Manhattan, Bank of America, First National Bank, Texaco, and at least twenty-five other major companies reap big profits by paying Salvadoran workers subsistence wages to produce everything from aluminum products and baking powder to transformers, computers, and steel pipes— almost all for export markets and all done without minimum-wage laws, occupational safety, environmental controls, and other costly hindrances to capital accumulation. The profits reaped from the exploitation of a cheap and oppressed labor market in an impoverished country like El Salvador are much higher than would be procured in stateside industries. Of the hundreds of reports about El Salvador in the major broadcast and print media in recent years, few, if any, treat the basic facts about US economic imperialism. Nor does the press say much about El Salvador’s internal class structure, in which a small number of immensely rich families own all the best farmland and receive 50 percent of the nation’s income. Nor is much said about how US military aid is used to maintain this privileged class system.¹⁵

What capitalism as a transnational system does to impoverish people

MICHAEL PARENTI

throughout the world is simply not a fit subject for the US news media.¹⁶ Instead, poverty is treated as its own cause. We are asked to believe that Third World people are poor because that has long been their condition; they live in countries that are overpopulated, or there is something about their land, culture, or temperament that makes them unable to cope. Subsistence wages, forced displacement from homesteads, the plunder of natural resources, the lack of public education and public health programs, the suppression of independent labor unions and other democratic forces by US-supported police states, such things—if we were to believe the way they remain untreated in the media—have nothing much to do with poverty in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

“MODERATE AUTHORITARIAN” REGIMES

Nations like Guatemala, El Salvador, South Korea, South Africa, Indonesia, Chile, Turkey, Pakistan, Zaire, and Honduras are not just police-dominated states, they are client states of the United States; that is, their economies serve the needs of Western—especially American—capitalism, providing natural resources, cheap labor, and profitable investment in exchange for millions of dollars in aid that go to the client states’ wealthy ruling elites and military chieftains (often one and the same). As already noted, the everyday acts of repression, torture, and assassination perpetrated by these regimes with the aid and assistance of US counterinsurgency agencies are usually ignored by the major media.

The scale and savagery of political repression is less a factor in commanding the media’s attention than the politics of victim and victimizer. If the left is suppressing the right, as with the treatment of dissidents in communist countries, then the American public is treated to protracted press coverage. But if the repression is by the right against the left, even if of much greater scope and ferocity, the news is suppressed or downplayed and given none of the detailed repetition and strong editorial commentary needed to

INVENTING REALITY

create a climate of opinion on the issue.

Thus the arrest of anti-government leaders and the death of several protestors in what was communist Poland in 1981 received saturation coverage for several weeks, as did the suppression of the Tiananmen Square student protestors in communist China in 1989. But the massive political repressions in Turkey in 1980-81, involving the incarceration of over 100,000 persons and the torture and execution of about 5,000, and the 1965 massacre in Indonesia, resulting in the slaughter of about half a million (some estimates are as high as a million) received but slight attention or went entirely unreported in the mainstream media, even though the last two incidents were of a magnitude many times greater than anything that happened in Poland or China.¹⁷

Along with downplaying repression and atrocities, the press describes US client states as “friendly to US interests,” again with no precise explanation as to what that might mean. The press also regularly describes client-state leaders as purveyors of order and stability. Popular agitation is assumed to be an undesirable thing while the absence of such agitation, even if achieved with police repression, is taken as beneficial.

Terms like “the country’s strongman,” “tough,” “severe,” “firm,” “no-nonsense,” and “clampdown” give a noncriminal disciplinary framing to the coups and massacres perpetrated by the Chilean, Indonesian, Argentinian, Uruguayan, Turkish, Bolivian, Greek, and Brazilian militaries, all of whom were supposedly obliged to take firm action against the prevailing chaos. Thus the *Washington Post* could describe the bloody repression in Turkey as “a military clampdown that rescued the country from the brink of civil war”; and the *New York Times* noted how Pinochet “took power” in Chile “amid social chaos.”¹⁸

Often the “military clampdown” is portrayed as an evenhanded one, equally repressive of left and right extremists. Thus press stories about Guatemala long propagated the fiction of a besieged centrist government trying to end a “terrorist war that has been raging for years between leftist and rightist groups.”¹⁹ But reports by Amnesty International indicated that the “large-scale

MICHAEL PARENTI

extrajudicial executions of noncombatant civilians,” numbering many thousands in Guatemala had been perpetrated by government troops, and paramilitary death squads.²⁰

By portraying the military autocrats as striking a course between the violent extremes of left and right, the press is able with one stroke to exonerate them from any complicity in the government-sponsored mass terror and transform them into a middle-of-the-road peaceable leadership that is potentially, if not actually, democratic. Thus, NBC News in 1980 described the government of El Salvador, which had been terrorizing and murdering peasants and workers for several decades, as “moderate.”²¹ The *Christian Science Monitor* exonerated the Salvadoran military government of any guilt: “The country’s buffeted junta, weathering almost daily disorders and vicious verbal attacks from both the left and the right, faces its most serious tempest to date.”²² The image is touching: the “buffeted” generals steering the ship of state through disorderly waters, enduring “vicious verbal attacks” from left and right, with nothing to help them through their travails except their troops, death squads, artillery, jet bombers, helicopter gunships, and the CIA, Pentagon, and US State Department.

The *New York Times* repeated the State Department line that the “moderate” Salvadoran government was implementing “the most sweeping land reform—and fastest—ever carried out in Latin America”²³—so fast as to soon become indiscernible. Other junta activities received less media fanfare. By 1990 some 75,000 people, mostly noncombatants, had been killed by the military. Over one million refugees, or one out of every four Salvadorans, had abandoned their home regions or fled the country entirely, the military’s moderation having proven too much for them.²⁴

South Africa is another repressive regime that has been morally renovated by the US corporate news media. By 1990, the government of F. W. deKlerk was being portrayed as charting a courageous middle course between right-wing White supremacists and the Xhosa communists of the African

INVENTING REALITY

National Congress (ANC). Thousands of people were killed in what the US press repeatedly called “bloody tribal battles,” “ethnic fighting,” and “black-on-black violence” between the “opposing clans” of the ANC Xhosa and the Inkatha Zulu.²⁵ (The US media never label the bloodletting in places like Northern Ireland or Yugoslavia as “white-on-white violence.”) Government troops and police are described as “trying to stop blacks chanting war cries from slashing and stabbing each other.”²⁶ Such reports elicit the racist image of African tribal warriors who are too primitive and violent to rule themselves.²⁷

Inkatha is an atavistic, counterrevolutionary South African organization set up in 1975 by Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi. The *New York Times* enthusiastically described Buthelezi as “a man of regal bearing” and “a leader with whom both president F. W. deKlerk and Nelson Mandela must reckon.”²⁸ Buthelezi has been portrayed in the US media as an independent and popular nationalist leader who, while against apartheid, supports a moderate, democratic course, differing from the revolutionary one taken by Mandela’s ANC.²⁹

In fact, far from opposing apartheid, Buthelezi is himself a product and beneficiary of that system, having been appointed head of the KwaZulu bantustan, one of a number of racially segregated, puppet regime “homelands” set up by the apartheid regime. Democracy does not exist in KwaZulu. Chief Buthelezi tolerates no opposition parties and no dissent. While posing as a Black nationalist, he has secretly collaborated with the apartheid regime and the military, receiving large sums of money to carry out his attacks against the ANC. His Inkatha forces have been secretly trained by the South African Defense Force and are linked to terrorist groups like RENAMO in Mozambique.³⁰ The US media have done less to probe the links between the government and Inkatha than the censored South African press.³¹

Far from being nonviolent and moderate, Buthelezi has waged a war of terror and murder against ANC supporters, most of whom are unarmed.³² Buthelezi has been designated a “Zulu leader” by the US media, but surveys

MICHAEL PARENTI

reveal that relatively few Zulus outside his Inkatha organization support him, the majority indentifying themselves as feeling closest to Nelson Mandela's African National Congress.³³ Relying solely on the US mainstream media, we would not likely be privy to this debunking information about yet another "moderate" leader who carries the banner of "democracy" on his lethal weapons.

EVIL, POWER-HUNGRY LEFTISTS

The accomplishments of revolutionary or populist governments in advancing the well-being of their peoples remain one of the more thoroughly suppressed stories in the US press. "You never read anything about the good that Allende was doing," admitted one former attache to the US embassy in Chile.³⁴ Earlier we noted how the press squelched news about the economic advances of the Allende government, the New Jewel in Grenada, and the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and depicted them as oppressive regimes. The US press characterizes nations going through transformations that limit the prerogatives of private capital as taking the "totalitarian road." Once designated as "leftists," they are assumed to be up to no good and are accused of destroying individual freedom and democracy—in countries where no freedom and democracy had existed under the previous right-wing regimes.

After almost a century of propaganda, designations like "Marxist," "communist," "leftist," or "leftist guerrillas" create their own automatic negative framing. Thus, in regard to the invasion of Grenada in 1983, a *New York Times* editorial decided that the fear was "real" that Grenada could "infect the [Caribbean] region with militant leftism."³⁵ But the *Times* offered not a word about the actual programmatic content of Grenadian "militant leftism." In such instances the media do not publicize the capitalist ideology as such, they just assume it.

In actuality, the distinguishing characteristic of "Marxists" or "leftists"

INVENTING REALITY

as opposed to “rightists” is a commitment to the kind of social and economic change that benefits the less favored mass of peasants and workers at the expense of the wealthy classes of the Third World and Western financial interests. The revolutionary and Marxist left is committed to using a country’s resources and labor for the purpose of eliminating poverty and illiteracy and serving the social needs of the populace rather than the profit needs of rich investors.

From the US news media one learns that “leftists” and “communists” are not persons motivated by longings for justice, equality, and a decent life, but conspirators who “take advantage” of such longings. Discussing the struggles in Guatemala and El Salvador, *Washington Post* editor (and former CIA agent) Philip Geyelin referred to “communist exploitation of grievances,” and “the communist contribution to instability.”³⁶ We learn that leftists try to “gain strength,” “create chaos,” “take advantage of turmoil,” “destabilize,” and “grab power,” subverting whole countries in the doing.³⁷

What moves them to such perilous undertakings? As the press would have it, Marxists and other leftist revolutionaries will risk and sacrifice their lives because of nothing more than a nihilistic pursuit of power. Supposedly they do not seek the power to end misery and hunger; they simply hunger miserably for power. If they initiate land reform, public health programs, and literacy programs, it is only to win popular support and further secure their power base. The media usually do not explain why right-wing leaders are above using popular programs to secure their power base. Such reforms would defeat the very purpose of their existence—which is to live well off the impoverished labor of others. So they rely instead on death squads, police terror, and slash-and-burn counterinsurgency.

The leftists are so wanting in virtue that even their seemingly good acts can be dismissed as venally motivated. The press does not explain why—if revolutionaries are driven only by a hunger for power—they identify themselves with the oppressed and powerless rather than with the powerful oppressors.

MICHAEL PARENTI

Why do talented and highly intelligent leftist leaders take such a dangerous and painfully circuitous road to power when they might more advantageously apply their energies to winning the rewards of high position and influence by serving the existing system in the manner of countless political climbers in both rich and poor countries?

The media treat leftist revolutionary struggles in El Salvador, Angola, Guatemala, and other countries as dangerous conspiracies, not as the outgrowth of popular grievances and mass struggle. Revolutions are seen as being, by their very nature, disruptive, destabilizing, violent, and undemocratic—even when directed against oppressive tyrants, especially the “moderate authoritarian” tyrants who preside over US client states. However, revolution becomes a good thing, enthusiastically celebrated in the media, when it takes a rightward course, as when directed against communist governments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. So a *Washington Post* TV critic could gush, after viewing the PBS 1991 series “Soviets”: “Every revolution is a mystical human upheaval.”³⁸

All communist or other left revolutionary governments, be it Cuba, Vietnam, Libya, or Nicaragua (under the Sandinistas), have made friendly overtures to the United States. But even when reporting such positive gestures, the US press perpetuates the stereotype of communists as sinister aggressors. In 1984 the *New York Times* ran a “news analysis” headlined “WHAT’S BEHIND CASTRO’S SOFTER TONE.” The headline itself suggested that Castro was up to something. The opening sentence read, “Once again Fidel Castro is talking as if he wants to improve relations with the United States” (“as if,” not “actually”). Castro, explained the *Times*, was interested in “taking advantage” of American trade, technology, and tourism and would “prefer not to be spending so much time and energy on national defense.” Here seemed to be a promising basis for improved relations. Cuba’s own self-interest, Castro was saying, rested on closer economic ties with Washington and cuts in Cuban defense spending and not, as the United States was saying, on military buildups and aggressive confrontations. Nevertheless, the *Times* analysis made nothing of Castro’s

INVENTING REALITY

stated desire to ease tensions and instead presented the rest of the story from the US government's perspective. It noted that "most Reagan Administration officials seem skeptical. ... The Administration continues to believe that the best way to deal with the Cuban leader is with unyielding firmness. ... Administration officials see little advantage in wavering."³⁹ The article did not explain what justified the "skeptical" stance, nor why a negative response to Castro should be described as "unyielding firmness" rather than, say, "unyielding rigidity"; nor did it say why a willingness to respond seriously to his overture must be labeled "wavering." The *Times* left the impression that power-hungry Castro was out to get something from us but our leaders weren't about to be taken in. There was no mention in the article of what the United States had to lose if it entered friendlier relations with Cuba.

Another leftist defamed by US press propaganda was Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti, a populist priest who sided with the poor against the rich, and who blamed the United States government and its corporate system for much of Haiti's economic woes.⁴⁰ In December 1990, shortly before Aristide won an overwhelming 70 percent vote to become Haiti's first freely elected president, the *New York Times* ran an article headlined: "FRONT-RUNNING PRIEST A SHOCK TO HAITI." The story admitted that Aristide was popular among Haiti's poor (who compose the vast majority of the country). Who then in Haiti was "shocked" by Aristide's candidacy?—the business community, the army, the church, and the landowners, the kind of people to whom the *Times* accords respectful attention? The story quotes a "downtown businessman" who alarmingly describes Aristide as "a cross between the Ayatollah and Fidel."⁴¹

During the nine months of Aristide's tenure, the US embassy gave every appearance of maintaining friendly relations with him. On September 30, 1991, the Haitian military with the support of rich landowners and the business community overthrew the president, killing two of his bodyguards and hundreds of his supporters. Aristide fled into exile. The United States refused to recognize the junta. Still it is hard to imagine that the Haitian military, trained

MICHAEL PARENTI

and aided by the Pentagon, would have taken such drastic action if it had not received a quiet nod from Washington.

At first, the US media called for the restoration of Aristide's presidency.⁴² One *New York Times* reporter, displaying his delusions about US foreign policy, wrote that the "only reason" the United States pushed "aggressively to restore President Aristide" was that his democracy was "the last link in a chain of democratic governments Washington has been trying to nurture next door for the last 20 years."⁴³

President Bush, who earlier that year had used massive military violence to restore a feudal aristocracy in Kuwait, now made it clear he would not consider using force to reinstate a democratically elected president in Haiti. Bush was even reluctant to impose sanctions on Haiti, supposedly out of fear of hurting the Haitian people, a consideration that did not deter him in regard to Nicaragua, Cuba, Vietnam, or Iraq.⁴⁴

Once they realized that Washington was not really unhappy about the overthrow of a leftist priest who was more loyal to the poor than to the class that Bush and their own media bosses represented, mainstream journalists began to give Aristide the usual mistreatment. A *New York Times* story referred to his "provocative and legally questionable behavior."⁴⁵ A *Times* news analysis found him to be "an insular and menacing leader" who "alienated his allies."⁴⁶ The *Washington Post* reported that "independent observers and diplomats" were troubled because Aristide had used "explicit and implicit threats of mob violence to intimidate opponents in the wealthy business class, in the National Assembly and in the army." For years, the *Post* story continued, there had been concern about "Aristide's rhetoric," and his using "the threat of violence to enforce his will," and "fomenting class warfare in his sermons."⁴⁷ (The media refer to "class warfare" only when the poor fight back against the class warfare that is continually waged against them by the rich.)

The *Post* had other criticisms of Aristide: When a despised leader of the Tontons Macoutes (a terrorist Duvalierist organization) was thwarted in his

INVENTING REALITY

January attempt to keep the newly elected president from office, Aristide “was only mildly critical of the mob violence that crushed the attempt.”⁴⁸ In other words, when the people mobilize as a counterforce to protect a democratic president from an unlawful and violent coup, they should be more thoroughly condemned by that same president because they too committed violent acts in the course of the struggle. The *Post* meanwhile said nothing about the failure of the Haitian business community to condemn the military violence that overthrew Aristide and killed hundreds of his followers.

A *New York Times* article headlined: “HAI HAN GENERAL SAYS MISDEEDS PROMPTED THE COUP” gave generous exposure to the coup leader, Brigadier General Raoul Cedras, a member of a counterinsurgency unit set up under the former Duvalier dictatorship and trained by US Special Forces. Cedras claimed that Aristide’s “human rights abuses” were what prompted the coup.⁴⁹ It was ironic to hear such a charge from the general who repeatedly had committed brutal violations under Duvalier and had just overthrown a popularly elected president, executing many of his democratic supporters.⁵⁰ The press seemed to forget that it was the military, not the impoverished people of Haiti, who had the guns and who were doing the killing. The US media gave more critical attention to Aristide’s rhetorical denunciations of the military’s atrocities than to the atrocities themselves. The media gave almost no attention to Aristide’s call for a minimum wage, land reform, and enforced tax collection on the affluent—the real reasons for his overthrow.⁵¹

Aristide denied ever inciting his people to violence, although he certainly did urge them to unify and defend democracy against violence.⁵² Surveys by non-Haitian groups indicate that human rights violations had fallen sharply during Aristide’s tenure in office. Even the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a branch of the OAS, admitted it had not received one human rights complaint since Aristide came to power.⁵³

By late 1991, the new prime minister of Haiti, picked by the army, was Jean-Jacque Honorat, a conservative and the recipient of funds from the Ford

MICHAEL PARENTI

Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy, a US government-funded organization that supports leaders who do what Washington wants. The message was the same as in so many other countries: If democracy picks a leftist leader, then democracy has to go.

ECONOMIC “FAILURES”

Countries that take a revolutionary or even reformist road are regularly accused of economic “mismanagement.” The press views any attempt to get out from under the domination of US policy as a first step toward economic disaster. What might be harmful to powerful corporate interests is treated as harmful to all of society itself. Likewise, any challenge to the privileged class order is portrayed as an attack on all social order and an invitation to “chaos.”

Thus, in 1964, when Brazil’s reformist president Joao Goulart was overthrown in a military coup, the *New York Times* quickly editorialized that Goulart “has been turning Brazil over to chaos.”⁵⁴ In 1975, when leftist officers in the Portuguese military overthrew the hated Salazar dictatorship and began initiating social programs for the poor and cuts in military spending, the *New York Times* concluded that such measures threatened to “dismantle the economy and cause an even deeper economic crisis.”⁵⁵ The *Times* offered not a word of evidence to support this conclusion nor any specific information about the reforms.

After the New Jewel movement in Grenada overthrew the Gairy dictatorship and began making economic changes on behalf of the people, the United States suspended aid and credits and discouraged tourism to the island. Yet Grenada’s gross national product grew by 5.5 percent and its inflation rate dropped to 7 percent.⁵⁶ But soon after the US invasion, the *Washington Post*, without any supporting information, transmitted the White House view that “the economy of Grenada was left 'bankrupt' by its former Marxist rulers.”⁵⁷

INVENTING REALITY

To better create an impression of economic failure and widespread disaffection, the news manufacturers concentrate on the discontent of “middle-class” persons—without mentioning that in Third World countries the “middle class” is usually a small and markedly privileged group. These landowners, lawyers, business-people, company managers, and conservative political leaders often lose some of their wealth and privileges under a leftist government. So they are ready to complain about their “hardships” to a receptive US press. To give only one example among many, the *New York Times* in a story headlined “IN LIBYA, WARY MIDDLE CLASS ENDURES,” described a “well-educated young woman, smartly dressed” who expressed her disenchantment with the Libyan government’s increasingly restrictive travel policies. It seems she replenished her wardrobe each year on a shopping trip to Italy but this time she was allowed to take only \$300 instead of the usual \$1,000 and, as if that weren’t bad enough, she would have to wait at least two months for an exit visa.⁵⁸ One could only admire her courageous steadfastness in the face of such hardship.

The deprivations and oppressions faced by the Third World masses usually fail to catch the attention of the US media. “I cannot say I interviewed many peasants, and nobody else did either,” admitted one reporter, referring to his experience in Chile—but he could have been talking about almost any other Third World country.⁵⁹ When a left government takes office, what wins sympathetic attention of the press is not the distribution of bread and powdered milk, the development of clean drinking water, the literacy campaigns, or the creation of jobs in government-sponsored projects in the impoverished countryside; rather, it is the “empty shops” in posh neighborhoods— which are treated as evidence of the revolutionary government’s “economic failure.”

In sum, there are several rules that govern media coverage: (1) Do not say anything positive about the democratic economic reforms of a leftist government. (2) Show sympathy for the haves and ignore the have-nots, unless you can find a have-not who does not like the government. (3) Say nothing about

MICHAEL PARENTI

the devastating effects of US policy—the proxy wars, invasions, economic embargoes, and sanctions—on the economy of the country in question. (4) Assume that economic adversity is due exclusively to the “mismanagement” perpetrated by those who would have the audacity to chart a self-determining course.

DEMOCRACY IS IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

As we have seen, elections in revolutionary countries like Nicaragua are dismissed as a sham—until the revolutionary party is voted out. But when a client state holds an election, no matter how rigged it is, US officials and the press see democracy blooming.

In El Salvador by 1981, the military had driven all opposition parties and leftist newspapers out of existence, murdered hundreds of labor leaders and thousands of political opponents. Whole villages suspected of supporting the guerrilla insurgents were massacred by the army or bombed out of existence by the air force. The military regime’s support came principally from large investors, big landowners, cryptofascist organizations, and the US government.⁶⁰

It was against this backdrop that the 1984 Salvadoran presidential election was conducted. Guided and financially assisted by the US government, the contest pitted Jose Napoleon Duarte, a right-wing Christian Democrat and long-time apologist for state terrorism, against Roberto d’Aubuisson, head of the ARENA party and long-time practitioner of death-squad terrorism. The US press was filled with stories of polling places crowded with people eager to cast their ballots, but never was it mentioned that voting was obligatory and that the failure to vote—as detected by the absence of a stamp on one’s identification card—could lead to arrest. The press also did not mention that ballots were numbered and the numbers recorded on registration lists next to voters’ names so officials could find out how any person voted.

INVENTING REALITY

Rather than dismissing the election as a meaningless charade, the *New York Times* called it “a step toward democracy.”⁶¹ The absence of a major opposition was dismissed by the Times as a “boycott” by leftwing parties.⁶² ABC reported that “the left was invited by the government to participate but refused.”⁶³

ABC failed to mention that the invitation contained a suicidal precondition: the guerrillas were to lay down their arms and campaign under the guns of the very state that had been systematically killing large numbers of their people. In sum, the background of terror and death-squad assassination that made free elections impossible in El Salvador was ignored by the press, which instead chose to treat a contest between two right-wing candidates as proof of democracy.⁶⁴

In 1991, a left opposition dared to enter candidates in the legislative and municipal elections in El Salvador. Despite an atmosphere of intimidation and terror, the left parties together won 20 percent of the vote and took third place behind the two right-wing parties, including the sinister ARENA party. The US media again hailed the election as a major achievement for democracy. True, as an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* admitted, a bombing shut down a leading opposition newspaper; at least three supporters of the Marxist Nationalist Democratic Union were murdered; and leftist candidates received threats on their lives. Still, looking at the brighter side, the *Chronicle* concluded that, election day “was relatively calm”; the election itself “was relatively clean”; and the voter fraud was “small scale.”⁶⁵ But the alternative press reported that the election was marked by “repression, intimidation, vote-buying, threats against opposition observers and manipulation of the count.”⁶⁶ Such happenings escaped the attention of most of the mainstream media.

“INFERIOR” PEOPLES AND THEIR HOPELESS WAYS

For centuries imperialists have justified their mistreatment of other

MICHAEL PARENTI

peoples by portraying them as wanting in ethical, cultural, and political development. If there be turmoil in some part of the Third World, then the trouble supposedly rests with the people themselves and not with anything the intruders are doing to them. When the US- supported coup overthrew Allende and led to the bloody repression of the Pinochet regime, “blaming the people” became the media’s favorite explanation. Thus CBS commentator Eric Sevareid opined that the Chilean people brought it on themselves, another Latin American example of “an instability so chronic that the root causes have to lie in the nature and culture of the people.”⁶⁷ By way of explaining why Chileans would support Allende and the Popular Unity government, Barnard Collier wrote in the *New York Times Magazine*, “The Chileans do not believe in facts, numbers or statistics with the earnest faith of an English-speaking people.”⁶⁸

While talking to a correspondent who had just reported on the rebellion and famine in Tigre, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw could only think of asking, “You’re in London now, which is one of the most sophisticated and civilized cities in the world. Do you have much culture shock after being in that part of Africa?”⁶⁹

During the cold war years, the Russians were a prime target of stereotypic pronouncements, described as “unsmiling,” “rude,” and “unable to look you in the eye.”⁷⁰ A former *Washington Post* correspondent, appearing on ABC’s “20/20” program, declared that “the Russians have a great urge for order. It is part of their personality.” To which host Barbara Walters responded that the Russian people lacked “a sense of responsibility because they are told what to do, when to do it.”⁷¹ In 1991, at a time of dramatic transition within the Soviet Union, the *New York Times* noted that the post- communist reformers faced “the mammoth task of civilizing their country.”⁷²

Negative and stereotypic representations of Arabs are in superabundance. A CBS correspondent ended his report on the Middle East by saying, “But, of course, sound argument has not always dictated Arab behavior.”⁷³ *New York Times* columnist Flora Lewis saw “the Islamic mind” as

INVENTING REALITY

unable to employ “step-by-step thinking.”⁷⁴ Had such an assertion been applied to “the Christian mind” or “Hebrew mind,” the *Times* likely would have rejected it as nonsensical and bigoted.

The 1990-91 war waged by the United States against Iraq brought a plethora of anti-Arab stereotypes. (Iraq is an Arab nation but so were at least six of the nations allied with Washington in that war.) Neivsday referred to “the treacherous standards of Arab politics.”⁷⁵ Judith Miller in the *New York Times* claimed that the Gulf Cooperation Council, in “typical Arab style,” made “a veiled reference” to the presence of US forces in the Gulf.⁷⁶ Miller would never describe an Israeli leader as making a veiled reference in “typical Jewish style.”

U.S. News & World Report quoted Middle East specialist Judith Kipper on the devious nature of the “Arab mind”: “We go in a straight line; they zig-zag. They can say one thing in the morning, another thing at night and really mean a third thing.”⁷⁷ *New Republic* editor Martin Peretz warned us, “Nonviolence is foreign to the political culture of Arabs generally and of the Palestinians particularly.”⁷⁸ Performing at his usual level of accuracy, *New York Times* columnist A. M. Rosenthal listed Iranians as Arabs.⁷⁹

One of the media’s favorite Middle East “experts,” Fouad Ajami (praised by *New York Times* columnist William Safire “for the amazing way he reads the Arab mind”⁸⁰), described Iraq as “a brittle land ... with little claim to culture and books and grand ideas.” In fact, Iraq was the cradle of an ancient and fertile civilization. And before it was destroyed by American bombs, Baghdad was a major center of literature, art, and architecture.⁸¹

NPR’s Susan Stanberg, interviewing two Arab intellectuals, asked them to comment on an association in her mind: “Arabs and death.” They patiently explained that like everyone else, Arabs preferred life over death for themselves and their loved ones. Then she gave them another association: “Arabs and violence.” Stanberg was the citizen of a country in which 25,000 homicides occurred each year, along with millions of muggings, rapes, and assaults, a country that spent \$300 billion yearly on the military and supported violent

MICHAEL PARENTI

repression through much of the Third World, and which at that very moment was waging a murderous war against a vastly smaller and weaker Arab nation—and she was asking why Arabs were so violent.⁸²

XII. Methods of Misrepresentation

We have noted the media's tendency to favor personality over issue, event over content, official positions over popular grievances, the atypical over the systemic. Supposedly these biases inhere in the nature of the media themselves, specifically, the imperfect practices of reporters, the visual nature of the camera, the limitations of time and budget, and the need to reduce a complex development into a concise story. Certainly these are real factors. But news production is not a purely autonomous process, responsive only to its own internal imperatives. As we have seen, many distortions are of a more political nature and reveal a pattern of bias that favors the dominant class interests and statist ideology. What we will look at in this chapter is not so much the content of propaganda themes as the methods by which they are packaged and presented.

SELECTIVITY AND DELIBERATE OMISSION

No communication system can report everything that happens in public life. Some selectivity is inevitable, and, by its nature, conducive to a measure of

MICHAEL PARENTI

bias. Still we might aspire to standards of fairness and accuracy in reporting and try to develop a critical analysis of how and why the news is distorted. If the selection factor is determined principally by space limitations and the need to be entertaining, why are so many dreary news items (for example, visiting dignitaries at the White House, and vacuous official announcements) given consistently generous coverage, while many interesting and even sensational things are regularly suppressed? What is the principle of selectivity involved?

Why was the Tylenol poisoning of several people by a deranged individual (or individuals) big news, but the death of many more persons from unsafe drugs marketed by supposedly reputable companies not news? Why is a plane crash killing forty-three passengers headline news, while the far more sensational story of the industrial brown-lung poisoning of thousands of factory workers remains suppressed for years? Why does the press rapturously report the pope's endless trips abroad, while ignoring the involvement of his priests in the struggles against imperialism—until the pope denounces them for their radicalism? Why are the relatively limited repressive measures of leftist governments given saturation coverage while the far more brutal oppressions and mass killings perpetrated by right-wing client states accorded only passing notice or ignored altogether?

Why did the Kurds, who were threatened by Iraq, get saturation coverage for two whole weeks in 1991, while hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, who were put at risk or slaughtered outright by US military forces, received almost no mention? Why did the media repeatedly denounce Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge of Cambodia as mass murderers in the 1970s, only to treat them with benign neglect when they became an indirect instrument of US policy in 1990—91?¹

For over forty years the corporate-owned media slighted or ignored outright the issue of national health insurance because of its aura of "socialized medicine." Only in 1990—91, as large corporations demanded relief from the astronomical costs of employee health insurance, did the media then begin giving the subject of national health insurance serious attention. It became an

INVENTING REALITY

issue in the media when it became ideologically safe (but still controversial at the policy level).

There is nothing in the limitations of time and space that oblige the media to ignore third-party presidential candidates while assigning an army of journalists the agonizing task of having to file a “new” story every day of the campaign about major candidates who seldom say anything new. But there is something about progressive third-party candidates themselves, their attempts at raising questions about the capitalist state that makes them politically unsafe for national media coverage.

As we have seen through much of this book, the single most common form of media misrepresentation is omission. Many omissions involve deliberate decisions. With enough practice and with the influence of the dominant political culture, these decisions become almost automatic.

Lies often hide in the things left unmentioned. And sometimes the unmentioned includes not just particular details of a story but the entire story itself—even ones about major events. For instance, in 1965 the Indonesian army overthrew President Achmed Sukarno and embarked upon a murderous campaign to eradicate the Indonesian Communist Party and others, killing half a million people (some estimates are as high as a million) in what was the greatest genocidal action since the Nazi Holocaust.² Here was a sensational story if ever there was one, but it was three months before it appeared as a brief item in *Time* magazine and yet another month before it was reported in the *New York Times*—and treated as a salutary development.³ A *Times* editorial actually praised the Indonesian military for “rightly playing its part with utmost caution.”⁴

The press had little to say about the role of the CIA and the US military in arming and assisting the Indonesian generals, and nothing to say about the economic interests supporting the military coup, nothing about the abolition of Sukarno’s land reform program, the destruction of Communist Party libraries, clinics, cooperatives, and schools for the poor, the massive dispossession of

MICHAEL PARENTI

peasants, the widening gap between village rich and poor, the post-coup influx of American, Dutch, and Japanese corporations, the growth of Indonesia's national debt to foreign financiers, and the takeover of Indonesia's mineral resources by foreign firms.

In 1976 the Indonesian military did an encore; it invaded East Timor to eradicate a government headed by the Fretilin, a popular leftist movement. The Indonesian army undertook a massive counterinsurgency campaign that brought death to some 100,000 persons. (Since 1980 the army has taken another 100,000 Timorese lives.) Here was another remarkable, sensational story the US media treated as almost nonexistent.⁵

It could be argued that places like Indonesia and East Timor are too remote to win the attention of an American press noted for its generally deficient foreign news coverage. In fact, during Sukarno's reign, when Indonesia was taking an openly anti-imperialistic stance, it was subjected to abundant negative coverage by the US press. As for Timor, the *New York Times* index gave six full columns of citations to that obscure little island in 1975, as the Portuguese colonialists abandoned the island and the Fretilin populist movement was emerging victorious—a situation that concerned the White House and the CIA. In 1977, however, as the Indonesian generals' war of annihilation reached awesome proportions, the *Times* index gave Timor only five lines.⁶ Politics rather than geography seemed to determine the amount of coverage.

When we see that news selectivity is likely to be on the side of those who have power, position, and wealth, we move from a liberal complaint about the press's poor performance to a radical analysis of how the press fulfills its system-supporting function all too well.

LIES AND FACE-VALUE TRANSMISSION

Sometimes omissions are not enough and the press lends itself to the

INVENTING REALITY

dissemination of outright lies. All lies involve some degree of omission but they also contain deliberate embellishment. They not only suppress information, they create disinformation. Untruths that are repeated again and again in the major media soon take on a life of their own, to be passed on with little conscious awareness that a fabrication has been propagated.

But not all lying is second nature for the news media. Along with the transformation of falsehood into unconscious “fact,” there are still plenty of plain old deliberate lies that take conscious effort. Consider this instance: A report from Indonesia by Gerald Stone in the *London Times* (September 2, 1975) found that the Indonesian government-controlled press was spreading false stories about widespread atrocities by Fretilin, the East Timorese popular force, as part of what Stone called “a purposeful campaign to plant lies.” But when *Newsweek* prepared Stone’s story for an American audience, it had him reporting on the “devastation” and “bloodbath” caused by “the Marxist Fretilin party.”⁷ The magazine made it appear as if Stone had found the atrocity stories to be true when in fact he had found them to be false. In twisting Stone’s story around, *Newsweek* was guilty not of mere inaccuracy but of deliberate fabrication.

The major media not only go along with official disinformation, they readily launch their own energetic disinformation campaigns to buttress the policies of the national security state. During the 1980s and early 1990s, there were the mythical stories that the Soviets were bankrolling and directing a global network of terrorists, that they were engaging in chemical and bacteriological warfare in Laos and Cambodia, that they were behind a plot to shoot the pope, and that they knowingly shot down a Korean passenger plane that had supposedly strayed innocently into highly sensitive Soviet air space. There were also stories that the Sandinista and Cuban governments were involved in the drug trade and that a Libyan hit team had infiltrated the United States to kill the president. These and other scare stories were floated by US officialdom and given enthusiastic play by the corporate-owned news media.⁸

MICHAEL PARENTI

The press will go out of its way to promote an official disinformation story with embellishments all its own—as, for instance, did Marvin Kalb who argued, in two NBC television specials filled with imaginary assertions and improbable fabrications, that the Bulgarian communists and Soviet KGB were behind the attempt by Turkish fascists to kill Pope John Paul II.⁹ In 1991, during Senate confirmation hearings for a new CIA director, it came to light that the CIA had suppressed evidence suggesting that the Soviets were not linked to the assassination attempt. The media gave these startling revelations minimal play, being little inclined to remind the public of how they had hyped the false story about a “KGB-Bulgarian connection.”¹⁰

One way to lie is to accept at face value what are known to be lies, passing them on to the public without adequate confirmation or countervailing response. Face-value transmission has characterized the press’s performance in almost every area of domestic and foreign policy—as we have seen through much of this book. Without saying a particular story is true or not, but treating it at face value, the press engages in the propagation of misinformation—while maintaining it is being merely noncommittal and objective. When challenged on this, some reporters will argue that they cannot inject their own personal judgments into their reports. But no one is asking them to. In any case, they already do. My criticism is that the media seldom give us a range of information and views that might allow us to form opinions contrary to the official ones that permeate the news. No one is asking for more “advocacy journalism.” We already have quite a bit of that—and it is almost entirely mainstream and mostly conservative. What is needed is more content and broader context, the inclusion of facts that do not fit the prevailing ideology.

Consider how some simple facts would have changed this report: In 1985, at the time of the Geneva arms talks, President Reagan described himself as optimistic because “this is the first time [the Soviets] have ever publicly stated a desire to reduce the number of their weapons.”¹¹ CBS news treated this incredible statement at face value, not bothering to point out that the Soviets

INVENTING REALITY

had made repeated overtures to reduce nuclear and conventional weapons, including the previous year's unilateral offer to decrease their intermediate-range missiles in Europe from 800 to 162. In this CBS report, the appearance of objectivity, as achieved through face-value transmission, prevailed over accuracy.

Operating in the dominant ideological mode, the media have no reason to disbelieve the lies handed out by the government. Why should NBC believe Russians or Libyans rather than American officials? The lie comes in the press's automatic readiness to do face-value transmission, to act as an uncritical stenographer for the national security state, neglecting to question the sparsity or nonexistence of evidence and the implausibility of the claim, failing to seek confirming sources, overlooking contradictions in the story, asking few penetrating or debunking questions, and ignoring opposing testimony, facts, and interpretations.

It becomes evident that the media have been lying when, by force of circumstances, they suddenly are forced to tell the truth. Thus, for twenty-five years the US media portrayed the shah of Iran just as the State Department and the big oil companies wanted: a benevolent ruler and modernizer of his nation, a likable public personage—with nary a word about the thousands of people his SAVAK security police had tortured and murdered. When the Iranian students occupied the US embassy in 1979 and took American hostages, one of their demands was that the US media publicize the shah's atrocities. For a short time, the American public was treated to a slice of truth, to testimony by persons who had suffered unspeakable outrages at the hands of one of the White House's favorite client-state autocrats. We heard of parents and children tortured in front of each other, including one youngster displayed before the cameras, who had had his arms chopped off in the presence of his father. It left many Americans shocked, including members of Congress who, like the rest of us, had been taught by the media to think of the shah as an upright person worthy of US aid.

MICHAEL PARENTI

A dramatic example of media flip-flop is the treatment accorded President Ferdinand Marcos, the late dictator of the Philippines. For almost twenty years Marcos was portrayed in the press just as the US government wanted, as America's staunch ally and defender of democracy. Nothing was said about the repressive, unpopular nature of his rule. By 1985, however, popular feeling against the political and economic oppression of Marcos's twenty-year rule was running high in the Philippines. Even the Filipino military and business community had become fed up with Marcos's corruption and family favoritism. US officials began to realize that the dictator might prove to be a liability, another Batista, Somoza, Duvalier, or shah of Iran, that is, a dictator who, instead of "stabilizing" his country and making it safe for corporate investors, was so unpopular as to become himself a catalyst for instability and popular rebellion. US officials decided it was time for Marcos to exit the public stage before things got too far out of hand.

During this time, specifically between early January and late February 1986, a remarkable awakening occurred in the US media. The *New York Times* suddenly discovered that the Marcos monopolies on cocoa, sugar, and other commodities were "instruments of exploitation and economic suppression."¹² Now for the first time in twenty years, the *Times* no longer described Marcos as a defender of democracy but as a "tyrant."¹³ Suddenly, the media ascertained that Marcos was not a World War II hero, that he had fabricated his war record, and rather than fighting the Japanese, he had been a Japanese collaborator.¹⁴ Suddenly the media also discovered that Marcos and his wife had been stashing vast sums of public funds into personal holdings, including investments in the United States.¹⁵ Reporting on Marcos's 1986 election campaign against Corazon Aquino, NBC concluded that the election was marred by acts of fraud and violence "as all elections have been under President Marcos."¹⁶ But why had not NBC, or any other major news organization, ever told us this about previous elections held under the Marcos regime? If the fraud and violence was known, why had it been kept a secret for twenty years? Only when Marcos had fallen

INVENTING REALITY

from grace in Washington did the news media suddenly say things about him they never had thought of saying in the years before. By admitting to being privy to a truth long unspoken, the media demonstrated that they had kept it from us.

FALSE BALANCING

In accordance with the canons of good journalism, reporters are supposed to balance their stories, tapping competing sources to get both sides of an issue. However, as we have seen, even when statements from both sides are presented, they often are not accorded equal space, position, and frequency.

There are several types of news exposure. First, there is one-shot coverage: A story is reported once, usually without prominent play, passing almost unnoticed before large publics, caught only by those who are specially attuned to the item—if even by them. Then there is sporadic coverage: An item gets intermittent mention, appearing once or twice, disappearing, then reappearing weeks or months later for another passing mention. Finally there is saturation coverage: Something appears as a lead story on the evening news and the front page for days on end and is given the kind of emphasis and repetition that makes it a visible part of the political agenda. Information and opinions that are troublesome to the powers-that-be are most likely to get one-shot coverage—if any at all.

The rule that says journalists must present both sides of a story overlooks the fact that both sides may not be all sides. Important but less visible factors, extending beyond the immediate pros and cons of the issue, are habitually shut out. As we have seen throughout this book, these unexamined assumptions prefigure the limits of discussion about most domestic and foreign policy issues.

Even the insufficient rule of getting “both sides” often falls by the wayside. As noted in earlier pages, on almost any issue, official sources are

MICHAEL PARENTI

heavily favored over sources that are critical of the official view. A study of National Public Radio's evening news show "All Things Considered" found that administration sources outnumbered responses from non-administration sources by nearly two-to-one.¹⁷ The same is true of right versus left sources. Looking at NPR news programs, one critic concludes that right-wing spokespeople are often interviewed alone, while leftists—on the infrequent occasions they appear—are almost always offset by conservatives.¹⁸

Those who have position and wealth are less likely to be slighted in news reports than their critics, and they are more likely to be accorded adequate space to respond on the infrequent occasions they are attacked. The media are less energetic in their search for a competing viewpoint if it must be elicited from labor leaders, environmentalists, feminists, peace and disarmament advocates, communists, civil right supporters, Black or Latino protestors, Third World insurgents, American supporters of Third World insurgents, the poor, and the oppressed. Regarding media coverage of Africa, one critic remarks: "Even when American newsmen take the trouble to visit black Africa, they seem incapable of talking to ordinary people about what is happening to their country."¹⁹ For instance, *Time* and *Newsweek* articles on the independence struggle in Namibia concentrated on the concerns of South African military commanders and officials in Pretoria, Geneva, and Washington, offering no statements from the Namibian revolutionaries or any other independence-minded Namibians.²⁰

What the press lacks in balance, it sometimes makes up for in false balancing, as when it tries to create an impression of evenhandedness by placing equal blame on parties that are not equally culpable. Thus, for years the news media ascribed the killings in Guatemala and El Salvador to "extremists of both the left and right" when in fact almost all the killings were done by rightist death squads linked to the military and the military itself.²¹ The false balancing created a false impression: A massive state terrorism against popular organizations was reduced to a gang war between leftist and rightist outlaws.

INVENTING REALITY

False balancing also allows journalists to adopt a condemnatory view of all sides, both those who are fighting for and those fighting against social justice. In this way the press manages to keep an equal distance from both falsehood and the truth.

Another way to stack the deck with false balancing is to employ a double standard in interviews. For instance, ABC's "Nightline" host Ted Koppel, friend and admirer of conservatives like George Will and Henry Kissinger, has gained a reputation for asking probing inquiries. But he challenges viewpoints that veer somewhat leftward far more vigorously than those that stay snugly mainstream. Hostile probes can sometimes give a respondent the opportunity to offer clarifying arguments, assuming the person is up to the task and is allowed enough time. But the overall impression left by an antagonistic interview is that there is something highly questionable about the interviewee. Conversely, the effect of a friendly interview is to send a cue to the audience that the respondent is to be trusted and believed. Koppel is especially nonconfrontational—almost deferential—when interviewing his friend "Dr. Kissinger" and other notables from the national security establishment.

The media claim to give us balanced opinion by offering a diversity of sources, but such diversity is usually bogus. False diversity creates a misleading impression of open debate and pluralistic choice in the media. Thus on one ABC "Nightline" show, host Koppel introduced Richard Perle, as "the Pentagon hardliner," against whom was pitted Richard Burt, "the State Department moderate." Burt, the hardline cold warrior and cruise missile advocate, was considered a "moderate" by Koppel. And for even more diversity and balance, there was a third guest, former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, a Nixon hardliner and cold war stalwart. This "balance" through "diversity" allowed for no critical questioning of the White House's foreign policy.²² In the major media, "both sides" of an issue sometimes are nothing more than two variations of what is essentially one side.

FRAMING AND LABELING

The most effective propaganda is that which relies on framing rather than on falsehood. By bending the truth rather than breaking it, using emphasis, nuance, innuendo, and peripheral embellishments, communicators can create a desired impression without resorting to explicit advocacy and without departing too far from the appearance of objectivity. Framing is achieved in the way the news is packaged, the amount of exposure, the placement (front page or back, lead story or last), the tone of presentation (sympathetic or slighting), the accompanying headlines and visual effects, and the labeling and vocabulary. Just short of lying, the media can mislead us in a variety of ways, telling us what to think about a story before we have had a chance to think about it for ourselves.

One common framing method is to select labels and other vocabulary designed to convey politically loaded images. These labels and phrases, like the masks in a Greek drama, convey positive or negative cues regarding events and persona, often without benefit of—and usually as a substitute for—supportive information. Thus, on CBS television news Dan Rather referred retrospectively to the Black civil rights movement and student antiwar movement as “the civil disturbances of the sixties.” How different an impression would have been created had he labeled them “movements for peace and justice,” or “movements against military intervention and for racial equality.”²³

As with commodities, so with news, labels are unavoidable. But one should be alerted to false labeling or labeling that distorts and editorializes more than it informs. Other examples of such labeling:

- A news story in the *Los Angeles Times* described Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega’s denunciation of US policy as being “as strident as ever,” implying that Ortega was given to excessive and unjustified attacks.²⁴ The report said nothing about US policy itself or about the content of Ortega’s criticism—which readers might not have found “strident.”

INVENTING REALITY

- A report in the *Washington Post* described a province in El Salvador as “guerrilla-infested,” rather than “guerrilla-controlled” or “prorevolutionary,” thereby reducing the insurgent populace to a kind of lice.²⁵
- Throughout the 1984 press coverage of the Lebanon crisis, the press incessantly referred to the “Soviet-made” antiaircraft missiles and other arms possessed by the Syrians and Lebanese. But at no time were the Israeli arms described as “US-made”—which they were. The impression left was that the Soviets were somehow the instigators in what was actually an Israeli invasion of Lebanon.
- Moscow’s arms reduction overtures during the 1980s were repeatedly labeled unsympathetically as “the Soviet peace offensive,” “the Kremlin’s smile campaign,” and “Gorbachev’s disarmament thrusts.” ABC’s Barry Dunsmore opined that Moscow had adopted a friendly approach only because previous Soviet “strong arm methods” (unspecified) had failed to persuade the Western allies. The Kremlin’s peace overtures were just an attempt to “enhance [the Soviet] image in Western Europe,” warned Dan Rather of CBS, who noted that the US rejected as “not negotiable” a Soviet proposal for the mutual nonuse of military force in Europe. No lie was uttered here. The Soviets indeed did make the proposal, and the United States did reject it. But by labeling the Soviet move as “another peace propaganda pitch,” Rather let us know that the US rejection was the only sensible move—with no explanation as to why that was so.²⁶
- Before his country crumbled from under him, Mikhail Gorbachev was described by WPAT radio in New York (October 22, 1986) as “Soviet boss Gorbachev.” WPAT would never refer to “US boss Bush.”
- Israeli authorities rounded up hundreds of Palestinian political leaders, administrators, teachers, journalists, intellectuals, and anyone else who might provide leadership to the Palestinian community, holding them in “administrative detention” for years on end, without charges. In effect,

MICHAEL PARENTI

they were hostages to Israeli rule. But throughout 1991, the US news media invariably referred to them as “prisoners,” not hostages. Arab resistance groups, however, had no prisoners; they held only “hostages.” As of 1992, Israel held fifty- three UN personnel as hostages; almost all were Arab employees for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. The US media never labeled them as hostages.²⁷

- Who is and is not a “terrorist” in the media is a matter of politics. Leftist guerrillas with a wide popular base are often referred to as “terrorists.” Right-wing mercenaries, financed by the CIA, who attack unarmed villagers, farm cooperatives, clinics, and schools in countries like Nicaragua, Angola, and Mozambique are “rebels.” “State terrorism” is what leftist governments do to defend themselves against these rebels, never what the United States does to suppress popular movements in a score of countries.

- The South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), struggling to liberate Namibia from White South African occupation, was described as “a hardline Marxist movement” by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.²⁸ No “hardline” labeling was applied in the story to SWAPO's opponent, the often murderous Pretoria government that colonized and plundered Namibia for thirty years.

THE GREYING OF REALITY

Much news media framing is designed not to excite or incite but to neutralize. While we think of the press as geared to crisis and sensationalism, often its task is just the opposite, dedicated to the greying of reality, blurring popular grievances and social inequities. In this muted media reality, those who raise their voices too strongly against the bland tide can be made to sound quite shrill.

INVENTING REALITY

Instead of neutralizing themselves as observers, reporters and editors are more likely to neutralize their subject matter, giving it an innocence it may not deserve. One way to do this is by applying gloss-over euphemisms and passive phrases. We have already noted how the *New York Times* reported that President Salvador Allende of Chile “died” in the Moneda Palace when actually he had been murdered there by the military.²⁹ The *Times* turned the 1973 Chilean coup—in which tens of thousands were victimized—into a neutral event by using bland phrases like “the armed forces took power,”³⁰ and telling us the “chaos” caused by the communists “brought in the military.”³¹

When men, women, and children in the villages of Morazan province were massacred by the Salvadoran army, the *Times* described it as “a military operation in which some 500 civilians reportedly died in El Mozote.”³² The *Washington Post* treated the Morazan massacre with sentences like “[A survivor] broke down only when speaking of what she said were the deaths of her children” and “Like so much else in the civil war that is wracking this tiny country, these conflicting accounts are impossible to verify.”³³

The destruction of trade unions and other popular organizations and the many other acts of repression, murder, and torture by a fascist military regime in Turkey were described in the *Washington Post* as “controversial measures,” and as a “drive to restrict political dissent.” We learn that General Kenan Evren, the despot of Turkey, has a “down-to-earth approach” and involves himself in “the rough and tumble of everyday politics,” and that his “current crackdown” had “all but stamped out terrorism” as if his democratic opponents were terrorists and the Evren regime itself was not engaging in terrorism.³⁴

Faced with a genocide in East Timor perpetrated by the Indonesian military, complete with widespread burning of crops and intensive aerial bombings of the countryside to starve out and destroy the population that supported the guerrillas, the *Washington Post* could neutralize as follows: “More than 100,000 islanders—one sixth of the population— died in the famine and disease brought on by the hostilities.”³⁵ And “the warfare between the

MICHAEL PARENTI

Indonesians and Fretilin forces further disrupted the fragile agrarian economy and caused heavy casualties.”³⁶ The Indonesians did not starve out and massacre multitudes; the warfare impersonally “caused heavy casualties.”

Sixteen years after a democratically elected president was murdered in Chile, the *New York Times*'s Shirley Christian was still glossing over the event with phrases like: President Allende “died in the course of the coup.”³⁷ In 1991 the *Washington Post* reported that in El Salvador “deep hatreds” and the “killing of civilians ... has left some 75,000 dead”—a use of the passive voice that conveniently avoids telling us who did the killing. As for South Africa, we are told by the *Times* that a protest by Black squatters “led to clashes with the police in which eighteen people died.”³⁸ What does “led to a clash” mean? Didn't the police open fire on the demonstrators? How is it the “people died”? Was it from heat stroke? heart attack? Or were they not killed by the police? The article does not tell us.

In another article the *Times* noted that “the Mozambican countryside has been devastated.” By whom? Was it not by the South Africanbacked mercenary RENAMO forces that for years deliberately wreaked death and terror upon the civilian population of Mozambique? According to the neutralizing *Times*, the devastation was “a result of the conflict” that pitted the “anti-communist” RENAMO against “the Marxist government.”³⁹ On Angola, the *Washington Post* reported: “Scores of government health centers have been burned down in the countryside, apparently by the rebels.”⁴⁰ If the word “apparently” had not been inserted, the report would have sounded less measured, less “objective,” but would have been more truthful. (The rebels were the right-wing UNITA forces that received \$50 million a year in covert military aid from the United States.)⁴¹

Another way to neutralize the news is by scanting its content. We noted how the media are able to reduce political campaigns to a string of issueless, trivial pseudo-events, and feed us stories about labor management conflicts, political protests, and revolutionary and socialist countries without ever telling us much about their substance, about the interests and goals motivating the

INVENTING REALITY

event makers. When political struggles are deprived of their content, as when positions taken in opposition to US policy are never explained in their substance, we are left with the presumption that the conflict is caused by an innately hostile adversary. By slighting content and dwelling on surface details, the media are able to neutralize the truth while giving an appearance of having thoroughly treated the subject.

AUXILIARY EMBELLISHMENTS

Through the use of various peripheral framing devices, a story can be packaged so as to influence our perception of its content. The most common accouterments in the print media is, of course, the headline. Not only can headlines mislead anyone who skims a page without reading the story, they can create the dominant slant on a story, establishing a mind-set that influences how we do read the story's text.

Thus it takes a careful reading of a *New York Times* story headlined "American Flier Shot Down in Iraq Recounts Horrors after Capture" to realize that the pilot is not talking about how he suffered at the hands of his captors, but is voicing his regrets at having delivered death and destruction upon the Iraqi people.⁴²

When the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control investigated drug-trafficking in Central America, the *Washington Post* ran this headline, "Hill Panel Finds No Evidence Linking Contras to Drug Smuggling."⁴³ It was false, according to the House committee's chair, Charles Rangel (D.-NY). In a letter the *Post* refused to publish, Rangel wrote: "Your headline says we drew one conclusion, while in fact we reached quite a different one." Rather than finding there was no evidence on contra involvement in drug smuggling, the committee actually determined there was a "strong need for further congressional investigation into contra drug allegations."⁴⁴

Another *Post* story, reporting that the income gap separating the rich

MICHAEL PARENTI

from the middle class and the poor was wider than it had been in forty years, carried this upbeat headline: “Number of Poor Americans at Lowest Level Since 1980.”⁴⁵

Political cartoons and caricatures also are common embellishments, time-honored forms of editorial comment and readily recognized as such. Less easily detected are the news photographs that often send us a cue about what to think of a story before we get a chance to read it. Acts of violence during labor disputes or antiwar protests are more likely to appear as news photos than less damning shots showing large disciplined crowds making their point. Individual demonstrators who convey a kooky appearance will more likely catch the camera’s eye than those of conventional deportment, the purpose being not to highlight the unusual but to delegitimize the protestors.⁴⁶

Throughout 1989 and 1990, whenever demonstrations against communist governments in Eastern Europe were photographed, it was always with long-range shots from an elevated position, giving sympathetic visual emphasis to the size of the crowd. Demonstrations against US government policy in the United States, however, are more likely to be tight cuts of relatively few of the protestors, thereby giving no indication of the immensity of the crowd.

Photographs of political leaders can be very political. The president of the United States enjoys almost daily favorable pictorial treatment in the major print and electronic media and is only rarely pictured unsympathetically. However, favorable photoplay is less likely to be accorded heads of state who have been defined as adversaries.

A *New York Times Magazine* article about communist Russia by David Shipler, entitled “Russia, A People Without Heroes,” was accompanied by no less than ten photographs, all of which were unusually muted, grainy, and grey, with thick ragged black borders and captions like “Russians have become so amorphous, so dispersed, because there are no roots, foundations . . . (accompanying a picture of Russians going down an escalator). The photographs accompanying this article conveyed an impression of glumness, oppression, and

INVENTING REALITY

joylessness, and were clearly meant to do so.⁴⁷

A “60 Minutes” report on US intelligence work during World War II turned into a cold war message and a plug for government secrecy. As Harry Reasoner announced, “Today as we rush to disclose everything ... we must remember that some secrets are worth keeping secret. ...” The screen showed Nazi troops marching past Hitler, then a quick cut to Soviet troops marching in Red Square. Thus the camera invited us to equate the Soviet Union with Hitlerian world conquest. Whether one agreed with the equation or not, the point is, it was made quite evocatively through a visual effect that evaded rather than encouraged the viewer’s critical judgment.

Another blatant example of cold war photo manipulation was provided by NBC’s Tom Brokaw, who talked of how the Soviet people had suffered from the crimes of Stalin. As Brokaw spoke, old and familiar newsreel cuts from World War II were shown of a Soviet peasant woman weeping over her son’s body (he had been killed by the German invaders), and another shot of five Soviet partisans hanged by the Nazis.⁴⁸ These were passed off as visuals of Stalin’s crimes. It is said that cameras don’t lie. But we must remember that liars use cameras.

As anyone who has sat through a Hollywood romance or adventure film might know, music is another evocative media embellishment that can play on our feelings. During the cold war, television news reports on the Soviet Union were often accompanied with tunes that were either mournful or menacing. In the spring of 1984, National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” did a report on the kinds of music it used as background to its news. An especially dirge-like theme was identified by Noah Adams as used for “sad stories, especially from Eastern Europe.” That Adams saw nothing politically manipulative about using music in this way testifies to the unexamined nature of the political orthodoxy so fostered. Such use of thematic background music is designed to “set the mood,” eliciting receptive feelings and deterring resistant thoughts.

Newscasters use themselves as auxiliary embellishments. They cultivate

MICHAEL PARENTI

a smooth delivery, have trained voices and restrained demeanors, and try to convey an impression of objective detachment that places them above the rough and tumble of their subject matter. Newscasters and, in a different way, newspaper editorialists and columnists affect a knowing, authoritative style and tone designed to foster credibility and an aura of certitude. One recalls A. J. Liebling's caustic observation, "The reluctance to admit ignorance ... is with most of the press as strong as the refusal to accept reality." So what we sometimes end up with is authoritative ignorance as emphatically expressed in remarks like, "How will this situation end? No one can say for sure." Or, "Only time will tell." Or, "That remains to be seen." (Better translated as, "I don't know and if I don't, then no one else does.") Sometimes the aura of credibility is preserved by palming off trite truisms as penetrating truths. So newspeople learn to fashion sentences like "Unless the strike is settled soon, the two sides will be in for a long and bitter struggle." And "The space launching will take place as scheduled if no unexpected problems arise." And "Because of heightened voter interest, election day turnout is expected to be heavy." And "Unless Congress acts soon, this bill is not likely to go anywhere."

PLACEMENT

Probably the most common method of framing is placement. Is a report telecast as the lead story of the evening or given just a passing superficial reference? Is it unfurled across the top of the front page or buried as a minor item on an inside page? Troublesome stories that are not suppressed, ignored, or completely truth-twisted still can be buried in obscure places. Placement is often used for the greying of reality.

We already noted how, during the 1990-91 Gulf war, the press gave uncritical, top play to the sensationalistic tale about Iraqi troops wrenching over 300 Kuwaiti babies from incubators that were then sent back to Iraq. Only months later did the *Washington Post* passingly quote a Kuwaiti physician who

INVENTING REALITY

said no incubators were stolen. Such as it was, the retraction was buried on page A25 in a very long story about postwar conditions in Kuwait.⁴⁹ In this instance, the truth received only this muffled one-shot coverage, reaching few of the people who read or heard the original horror tale.

Also after the war, Kuwait detained, tortured, and summarily executed undisclosed numbers of Palestinians. The *New York Times* reported this news in a tiny item on page A8.⁵⁰ Here was another sensational and horrific story that received muted treatment because the White House's allies were committing the atrocities.

What if it turned out that one of the CIA's most brutal client-state dictators were dealing in drugs, should that not get prominent play? Certainly, if it were someone like General Noriega who had fallen from White House favor, but not if it were General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan. The *New York Times*, in a minuscule paragraph on an inside page, reported that "the drug trade rose sharply after General Zia seized power" and "senior figures in the Zia government were said to have ties to drug traffickers."⁵¹ Here was yet another sensational revelation that, because of its foreign policy ramifications, earned about as much attention as a weather report.

Likewise with the Amnesty International report that Turkish authorities routinely tortured political prisoners and that, of 250,000 political detainees in the 1980s, almost all were tortured. Since Turkey has long been treated by the State Department and the US media as one of the citadels of the Free World, the *New York Times* saw torture in Turkey as nothing to get excited about, giving it a two-inch mention on the bottom of page A6.⁵² One can only imagine the saturation coverage such a story would have received if 250,000 prisoners had been tortured by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

It is often said that lies spread like wildfire, while the truth supposedly plods along, never catching up because it is not as sensational, nor as timely, hence, not as newsworthy. This view has been elevated to some kind of unavoidable law of human communication. But actually there is no objective

MICHAEL PARENTI

reason the refutation cannot be given equal exposure and treated with the same urgency and importance as the original falsehood. The truth is often much more sensational and revealing than the propaganda lie—as the above examples might indicate. Truth wins a smaller audience not because it is less interesting, but because it is treated in a less interesting and less important way. If the truth never catches up with the lie, it is not because of some natural law of communication but because of the way truth and lies are communicated. Conscious decision and deliberate effort determine that the lie shall be prominently displayed because it serves the dominant interests, and the truth shall be ignored outright or, at best, poorly accommodated because it is too damaging to those same interests.

In sum, as highly skilled specialists, news manufacturers are more than merely conduits for official and moneyed interests. They help create, embellish, and give life to the news, with an array of stereotyped, often misleading, but well-executed images, tones, evasions, nuances, suppressions, and fabrications that lend confirmation to the ruling ideological viewpoint in a process that is not immediately recognized as being the propaganda it is. Their authoritative voices on radio and television, their decisive wrap-ups and reassuring appearances before the camera, and their endless columns of system-sustaining stones and commentaries help make us believe “that’s the way it is.” At the same time, this media message preempts the public agenda and muffles out genuine public discourse on what the world might really be like and how we might want to change it.

XIII. Culture, Control, and Resistance

Most media studies treat the press as a self-contained institution, divorced from the capitalist system in which it operates. But the media are something more—and less—than that. Like so many institutions in our society, news organizations are privately owned, profit-making corporations. But while their immediate function is to make money for their owners, they play a broader ideological role for the capitalist system itself. The news media never talk about this. But it is time we did.

CAPITALISM AND CULTURE

Most of the land, labor, natural resources, and technology of this and other nations are controlled by a few giant corporations and banks for the purpose of making profits for their owners. This process of capital accumulation, the essence of the capitalist system, exerts a strong influence over our political and social institutions. The capitalist class, that tiny portion of the population that lives securely and affluently principally off the labor of others, has a commanding say in how and for whom the wealth of the nation is

MICHAEL PARENTI

produced. The imperatives of the private market determine the kinds of jobs that are (or are not) available; the wages we earn; the prices, rents, and mortgages we pay; the quality of the goods and services we get; and even the quality of the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink.¹

Today corporate leaders and their well-paid deputies dominate the top posts of society's educational, communicational, artistic, entertainment, legal, and scientific institutions. These institutions are ruled very much like business firms themselves, by boards of directors (or trustees or regents, as they might be called) drawn mostly from the business class or those in the pay of that class. Numbering between ten and twenty-five persons, these boards have final say over the institution's system of rewards and punishments, its budget and personnel, its investments, and its purposes. They exercise power either by occupying the top executive positions or by hiring and firing those who do. Their power to change the institution's management if it does not perform as they desire is what gives them control over policy.

The boards exercise power not by popular demand or consensus but by state charter. Incorporated by the state, they can call upon the courts and the police to enforce their decisions against the competing claims of staff, clients, or other constituents. These boards are non-elected, self-selected, self-perpetuating, ruling coteries of affluent persons who are answerable to no one but themselves. They are checked by no internal electoral system, no opposition parties, no obligation to report to the rank and file or win support from any of the people whose lives they affect with their decisions. Yet institutions so ruled—including the nation's news organizations—are said to be the mainstay of "democratic pluralism."

In a word, the cultural order is not independent of the business system. Nor are cultural institutions independent of each other, being owned outright or directly controlled by the more active members of the business class in what amounts to a system of interlocking and often interchanging directorates. We know of more than one business leader who not only presides over a bank or

INVENTING REALITY

corporation but has served as a cabinet member in Washington, is a regent of a large university, a trustee of a civic art center, and a board member of a church or foundation or major newspaper or television network—or all of the above.

Those persons who believe the United States is a pluralistic society resist the notion of a business-dominated culture. They see cultural institutions as standing outside the political arena, distinctly separate from business and politics. They make much about keeping the media, arts, sciences, foundations, schools, colleges, professions, and churches free of the taint of political ideologies so that these institutions might not be deprived of their neutrality and autonomy. Since the pluralists believe that big business is just one of many interests in the political arena and one that does not dominate the state, they cannot imagine that it dominates civil society and cultural life.

But if history teaches us anything it is that the power of the propertied class never stands alone. It wraps itself in the flag and claims a devotion to God, country, and the public good. Behind the state is a whole supporting network of doctrines, values, myths, and institutions that are not normally thought of as political but which serve a political purpose. The state, as Gramsci noted, is “only the outer ditch behind which there [stands] a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks.”² These supportive institutions help create the ideology that transforms a ruling class interest into a “general interest,” justifying existing class relations as the only natural and workable ones, the preferred and optimal, although not perfect, societal arrangements. So the capitalist class is the ruling class, controlling society’s cultural institutions and ideational production as well as its labor, land, and natural resources.

Not entirely, however. The corporate-financial class of America is very powerful but not omnipotent. It makes mistakes, suffers internal divisions over tactics and policies, and must constantly deal with the resistance of workers, consumers, taxpayers, voters, students, and other protesters. The ruling class rules, but not always in the way it might want. It sometimes must make concessions to resistant publics or at least maintain an appearance of so doing.

MICHAEL PARENTI

To best secure and legitimate its rule, it must minimize the appearance and use of its undemocratic, coercive power.

This hypocrisy is not merely “the tribute that vice pays to virtue.” In fact, vice pays tribute not to virtue, but to power—to the democratic power of the people, who with demonstrations, protests, boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, civil disobedience, and even civil disorders have struggled against regressive laws, oppressive work conditions, excessive taxes, and for an expansion of democratic rights and material benefits. The power of these democratic forces limits the ability of the moneyed interests to reduce all persons and things to grist for the profit mill.

THE LIMITS OF ORTHODOXY

If the mass media are owned by capitalists who can translate their financial dominance into control over media content, injecting that content with a bias against organized labor, antiwar protestors, socialists, communists, and sundry progressive causes, then why do businesspeople and conservatives repeatedly complain that the media suffer from a liberal bias? If economic and political elites control the press, why are they often distrustful of, and irritated by, what appears in it? And why do they find it necessary to exert suppressive measures against their own media? There are a number of contradictory tendencies that make the press less than absolutely compliant, introducing an element of indeterminacy and resistance that rouses conservative ire.

First, one reason deviancy occasionally peeks through an otherwise orthodox mainstream press is that ideological control is not formal and overt, but informal and implicit. Therefore it will work with imperfect effect. Dissenting information will sometimes slip through. For example, one evening in January 1985, on the NBC evening news, Tom Brokaw noted quickly, almost furtively, that corporations are today paying a substantially smaller portion of the nation’s income tax than five years ago. No elaboration, no pie charts, just a

INVENTING REALITY

two-line news item that seemed to have been slipped in—a one-shot coverage never to be discussed further. Similarly the print media sometimes carry revealing items, buried in otherwise standard stories, exceptional things that are likely to go unnoticed—except to the closely critical reader—because of their poor placement and lack of projective framing. The presence of such nuggets scattered here and there in the mountains of dross is what enables critics of capitalism occasionally to draw damaging information from the capitalist media itself. When detected as deviancies, these items are usually suppressed. A staff member of a local early morning radio news program in Washington, D.C., pointed out to me, “Sometimes the seven o’clock morning edition will carry an item or two that has some real zip. These run because the station manager hasn’t arrived yet. They’re cut out of the eight o’clock edition because by then he’s at his post... I wouldn’t say it’s a regular occurrence, but it happens once in awhile.”

Second, sometimes editors run stories because they are unable to foresee their troublesome implications and unintended spin-offs. While the “blame-the-journalist” critics argue that distortions are caused by inadequate information and hasty preparation, I am suggesting there are times when haste and low information levels lead to greater revelations than would normally be allowed were reporters and editors better apprised of a story’s potentially discordant ideological effects. Even the best-informed newspeople cannot always anticipate the effects of their stories. A report on how a particular corporation is taking care of a toxic spill may be intended to show the firm’s socially responsible behavior and reassure the public, whereas it actually has the unintended but more accurate effect of revealing how big companies are poisoning the environment. Early news reports (1980-81) planted by the US government, about the growing effectiveness of guerrilla forces in El Salvador, while intending to alert the public to the emergence of a new communist menace, had the unintended effect of activating an anti-interventionist peace movement in the United States, causing officials in the Reagan administration

MICHAEL PARENTI

to request that the press not give so much attention to the war in El Salvador.

Third, serious differences sometimes arise among politico-economic elites on how best to advance their common class interests. These differences will be reflected in the news media. Thus while remaining supportive of the president's jingoist approach to the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991, the press gave space and time to such elite critics as former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who called for a reliance on sanctions. To the extent such differences among elites are played out in the media, they add to the appearance—and substance—of diversity, if not on fundamental questions then on tactical ones.

Fourth, when the press has an enduring interest in an issue, it is likely to be less compliant than usual—as with the question of protecting the confidentiality of its sources. If reporters are unable to guarantee confidentiality, they run the risk of having their sources dry up. Another area of conflict between state and press arises when reporters are victimized by state violence. Reports of widespread brutality by police, army, and federal marshals against antiwar participants in the 1960s were so thoroughly suppressed by the major news organizations that on one occasion protesters had to buy a page in the *New York Times*, which they filled with eyewitness accounts of violent mistreatment by authorities.³ But the police riot against antiwar demonstrators in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention did make the news in a big way—mostly because of the deliberate acts of police violence against members of the press.

Likewise, the mass execution of young Nicaraguan males by Somoza's national guard during the last days of his rule received little, if any, notice in the US media until ABC's Bill Stewart was executed by guardsmen while covering the Nicaragua uprising. In the days that followed, the film of Stewart's execution (taken by an American cameraperson standing a distance away) was played repeatedly on network news, and for the first time the American press also began mentioning that young Nicaraguans were being systematically

INVENTING REALITY

murdered by the guard. The killing of foreign newspeople, as opposed to American journalists, is less likely to be accorded elaborate treatment. During the 1980s scores of foreign journalists were murdered or “disappeared” in Central America, but there was no discernible outcry in the American press. Had they been killed by leftist insurgents, they might have got more coverage.

Fifth, journalists who believe they are autonomous professionals expect to be able to report things as they see them. If the appearance of journalistic independence is violated too often and too blatantly by superiors, this can have a demystifying effect, reminding the staff that they are not working in a democratic institution but one controlled from the top with no regard for professional standards as they understand them. To avoid being criticized as censors and intrusive autocrats, publishers and network bosses sometimes grant their news organizations some modicum of independence, relying on hiring, firing, and promotional policies and more indirect controls. They might show themselves willing to make an occasional concession so as to minimize the amount of overt intrusion.

The idea of a free press is more a myth than a reality, but myths can have an effect on things and can serve as a resource of power. The power of a legitimating myth rests on its ability to be believed and not exposed as a sham. So at times superiors can be prevailed upon to make concessions.

To offer an instance: After a year of unremittingly hostile reports about the leftist armed forces movement in Portugal, the *New York Times* agreed to run a guest opinion column by me that offered a more sympathetic view of the struggle in that country. The day before the column was to appear, top editor Abe Rosenthal intervened to suppress it. My inquiries brought only evasive responses from the opinion-page editors who had accepted the piece. Only after three months of telephone calls from me, reminding the *Times* editors that they were under an obligation to give their readers a glimpse of the other side, and after two updated rewrites by me, did the *Times* print it—the only 800 words the newspaper ever ran that contradicted the thousands of column inches that

MICHAEL PARENTI

echoed the White House line. Somehow I had prevailed upon the opinion-page editor who had prevailed upon Rosenthal. Even then, the piece appeared only after Portugal had dropped from the news and was once more safely in the Western capitalist camp. And lest *Times* readers be unduly swayed, my guest column was accompanied by a hostile editorial denouncing the left in Portugal and calling for support of conservative ‘pluralistic’ forces. So, on infrequent occasions, in limited, lopsided ways, the legitimating myth of “allowing both sides a hearing” can be used by dissenters to drive a wedge into a monopoly press that finds it difficult to practice within its own ranks the pluralism it so vigorously preaches to the world.

The press is not totally immune to the pressures of those who struggle for a more egalitarian and peaceable world. It must make some adjustment to democratic forces as when the emergence of independent nations in Africa and Asia induces it to discard some of its more blatant colonialist, racist stereotypes. The emergence of the civil rights movement in the United States, which won the sympathy and support of large sectors of the public, brought dramatic shifts in media coverage of the struggle for racial equality and of African-American people in general—although it hardly ended racist reporting and stereotyping. Similarly, as opinion turned with increasing militancy against the Vietnam War, the press began to entertain criticisms about the feasibility (but not the morality) of the war. “As the ruling media brass and their advertisers began to realize that no amount of lying or propaganda could turn defeat into victory,” and as they witnessed how the Vietnam conflict was causing a crisis within the United States, “media coverage began to shift, giving more prominence to those who called for a saner outlook.”⁴

The greater the opposition is believed to be toward a leader or a policy, observe Paletz and Entman, “the more emboldened network correspondents are in their analysis.”⁵ The enthusiastic reception Soviet leader Khrushchev won from the American public when he visited the United States in 1959, favorably influenced the kind of media coverage accorded him.⁶ Likewise, as opinion

INVENTING REALITY

turned against President Nixon during the Watergate scandal, the press delivered negative judgments upon him, “but only then—with his prestige and power in dramatic decline and his attempts at media manipulation more transparent than ever”; for it was then safe to do so.⁷

Aware that active segments of the public are mobilized around an issue, the media must take account of that agitation, even if only to devalue and minimize it—as with most protest movements. Yet even in the course of doing this, the press ends up acknowledging in some limited way the existence of popular sentiments and mass movements.

To add to the appearance of free and diverse discourse, the press allots a small portion of its time and space to the public itself. Radio call-in shows enable us to hear directly from listeners and provide opportunities for the brief airing of dissident viewpoints. Many of these talk shows, when running at prime time, are dominated by right-wing hosts or mainstream centrists who show only a limited tolerance toward leftist call-ins. Some shows quote from the letters of listeners and viewers, little of which deviates markedly from the standard opinion range. There are also guest opinion pieces by readers and of course the letter-to-the-editor column found in many publications. Such meager accommodations are designed to create the impression of an open untrammelled communication between media and public where one does not exist. Furthermore, the letters columns and call-in shows provide as much opportunity for conventional, conservative, and ill-informed views as for any other. Yet they offer openings that progressive persons have sometimes utilized with effect. Even the letters that are not printed do get read and play a small part in pressuring the press.

CREDIBILITY AND THE “LIBERAL BIAS”

The press’s general class function is to help make the world safe for those who own and control most of the world, including the press itself. But the

MICHAEL PARENTI

media also have a specialized institutional function, which is to present the public with something called “the news.” The news must be packaged so as to be (1) pleasing to press moguls and other politicoeconomic elites; and (2) informative and believable to the public. But these two functions are not always automatically reconcilable. The goal of the owning class, as Marx and Engels put it, is to present “a particular interest as general or the ‘general interest’ as ruling.”⁸ This indeed is what the press does, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this book, treating a wide range of subjects from a ruling-class perspective but presenting this perspective as the objective, general one, as representative of things as they really are. But the press also must give the appearance of performing a public information service. To create such an appearance, it must make substantive concessions now and then to real public concerns, risking the legitimacy of the larger system in order to better secure its own.

Mainstream press reports that challenge the official view are relatively few in number, lacking the kind of repetition and follow-up needed to create a persuasive and enduring climate of opinion around them. They are particularistic offerings linked to no generalizable critique, floating past us in the great tide of establishment news and commentary. While iconoclastic views may on rare occasions make their way into the news, the general thrust is never out of step for too long with the pro-capitalist, anti-revolutionary New World Order perspective propagated by the government.

Political leaders, however, seldom appreciate the supportive function the media perform on their behalf. They see the press as merely doing its job when it pushes the official line, and as falling down on the job on those infrequent occasions it does anything less. Instances of relatively unfiltered information and critical commentary in an otherwise controlled (or self-controlled) information field are disturbing to policy-makers, who treat anything short of unanimous support for their undertakings as evidence of irresponsible and harmful media behavior. Expecting the press corps to be a press chorus, the

INVENTING REALITY

political leader, like any imperious maestro, reacts sharply to the occasionally discordant note.

There is also the question of “responsibility.” To be sure, the media know how to be “responsible,” how to be as deaf, mute, and blind as the government wants. Journalistic responsibility should mean the unearthing of true and significant information. But the “responsibility” demanded by government officials and often agreed to by the press means the opposite—the burying of information precisely because it is troublesomely true and significant.

Despite its best efforts, however, there are limits as to how much the press can finesse reality. These are the limits of propaganda itself, as Dr. Goebbels discovered when trying to explain to the German public how invincible Nazi armies could win victory after victory while retreating on both fronts in 1944 and 1945. To maintain credibility and audience interest, the press must do more than issue supportive reports about official policy—even if that remains its main activity. While seeing the world pretty much through the same ideological lens as government elites, the media also find it necessary to say something about some of the inescapable realities that corporate-political elites would prefer to leave unnoticed.

Coverage of troublesome realities, even if essentially sympathetic to the policy-maker—as it almost always is—can itself prove troublesome. For years the press transmitted the official view of the Vietnam War, but the persistence of a costly conflict outweighed the upbeat predictions and anticommunist rationales manufactured by both the government and the media. The press could omit and distort what happened in Indochina but it could not totally ignore the awful actuality of the event itself.

This effort by the media to make some minimal response to reality, even while attempting to invent another reality, sometimes educates the public in ways unintended by the communicators and unwelcomed by the policymakers. Rather than responding only to the manifest content, filled with images and arguments about how the United States is fighting tyranny and saving

MICHAEL PARENTI

democracy, the public eventually picks up on the latent message: war, US involvement, death, destruction, more taxes, and the draft. Thus despite the best efforts of the Reagan administration at news- managing the Salvador story, and despite the active collaboration of the press, a majority of the public, according to most polls, still feared that El Salvador would become another Vietnam, opposed sending US troops and US aid, and said they would support young men who refused to be drafted to fight in Central America.⁹

Now if the public does not support a policy, the administration concludes it cannot be because of anything wanting in the policy but in the way the media packaged it. Leaders are often tempted to blame the press when things go wrong with their plans or when policies fall into public disfavor. The press, as shown in the preceding pages, faithfully serves the official viewpoint, but it cannot always do so in just the Alice-in-Wonderland way policy-makers might want while still retaining its own credibility as an information conduit and its effectiveness as an opinion manager. By the very act of going after the news—however superficially and narrowly—the press sometimes encounters the limits of actuality and therefore introduces elements of reality that may activate public resistance. Thus every administration has complained, in effect, that the press does not do its job. So President Reagan argued that the media should exercise “self-censorship” and should “trust us and put themselves in our hands,” consulting with officials and holding back stories “that will result in harm to our nation.”¹⁰

The press insists that it already does that very thing and that government officials do not appreciate how cooperative it wants to be and can be. Leading journalists like James Reston of the *New York Times* have complained that the government has refused to take newspeople into its confidence on important matters even though they have demonstrated their trustworthiness by holding back on stories.¹¹ While quick to proclaim its independence, the press is equally quick to remind leaders that it shares the same basic view of the world as do they and the same commitment to (and definition of) the national interest.

INVENTING REALITY

In relation to the state, the press remains like the adolescent who wants both more input into family decisions and more independence from them. As usual, the press sees no contradiction between its professed dedication to “objectivity” (telling it like it is) and its professed dedication to “cooperation” and “responsibility” (suppressing troublesome stories). Political leaders, however, do see a contradiction and refuse to trust the press completely, even though they are willing to use it as much as possible. So the press remains the restive adolescent of a seemingly ungrateful parent—never totally independent nor totally trusted and denied both complete autonomy and full partnership.

One critic observes that the *Washington Post* had “special arrangements” with the government officials who fed it information that gave it an advantage in reporting to the public. In exchange, the Post gave favorable treatment to the government’s position.¹² To some extent all news organizations enter into this kind of exchange, trading some of their integrity for access to sources that help them carry out their newsgathering tasks. However, as just noted, there are occasions when the trade-off comes at too high a price, when government or business asks the press to swallow more than it can if it is to avoid appearing ridiculous—as when it was expected to report that we were about to win in Vietnam while the war continued endlessly, or that the 1991 economic recession was over when in fact it clearly was not. Were it to follow the government or corporate line on all such matters, the press would cast doubt on its own credibility as a neutral, objective social institution. So the media go along on most stories, but not all the time and sometimes not all the way.

This “relative autonomy” is what irritates and sometimes infuriates the more conservative elements of the ruling class, who complain of “liberal bias” whenever the media hint at realities that do not fit the conservative picture of the world. The press’s systemic class function is to purge popular consciousness of any awareness of the disturbingly exploitative, repressive, and violent consequences of capitalist rule at home and abroad. While it cannot perform that task thoroughly enough to satisfy all government and business elites all the

MICHAEL PARENTI

time and maintain its own credibility as an autonomous institution, it does—as I have tried to show in this book—a far better, more skillful job than many elites appreciate.

In the kinds of issues covered by the news, the centrist mainstream national media do sometimes seem almost liberal when compared to the narrow conservatism of most regional and local media owners, “persons of hard right-wing bias...”¹³ These owners often see the national media as dominated by Eastern, liberal elites who are allegedly indifferent to, or even subversive of free enterprise and the patriotic virtues.

While the news media never challenge the capitalist system, they do occasionally report things that seem to put business in a bad light. Media coverage of poisonous waste dumpings by industrial firms, nuclear plant accidents, price gouging by defense contractors, the bribery by corporations of public officials at home and abroad, and the marketing of unsafe consumer products usually just scratches the surface of these problems; but even these limited exposures are more than business elites care to hear and are perceived by them as an antibusiness vendetta.

By treating business wrongdoings as isolated deviations from the socially beneficial system of “responsible capitalism,” the media overlook the systemic features that produce such abuses and the regularity with which they occur. The press is quite capable of seeing the systemic dimension to social problems when they emerge in noncapitalist systems. For example, the media treated the Chernobyl accident, occurring in the Ukraine in 1986, not as a major nuclear disaster that revealed the unsafe nature of nuclear plants but as the inevitable product of an evil, secretive Soviet system that put no value on human life (complete with false stories about thousands of deaths).¹⁴ This theme was reiterated over and over in a saturation coverage that lasted for weeks. In contrast, the media gave the near- meltdown accident at Three Mile Island in 1979 extensive coverage for only a few days, with never a hint that it might be representative of a capitalist system that puts private profits ahead of public

INVENTING REALITY

safety.

The worst industrial accident in history was nonnuclear, the Union Carbide explosion in Bhopal, India, in December 1984, killing over 3,000 persons and seriously and permanently disabling many thousands of others. At no time was it treated as a reflection of how multinational corporations disregard safety regulations for profit's sake. Nothing was said about the capitalist system that produced the accident—or produced the corporation that produced the accident. Three Mile Island and Bhopal were treated purely as isolated incidents—attached to nothing larger than the safety conditions of the particular sites that produced them. The aftereffects of Three Mile Island, the increased incidents of cancer and the contamination of farmlands, went largely unreported—unlike Chernobyl, stories about which continued to appear in the US media years after the event.

When it comes to social problems in the United States or problems caused by the United States elsewhere, the press might criticize but it does not generalize. It will not extrapolate to larger systemic causes. The expose that treats a socially unjust condition as an isolated and atypical incident implicitly affirms the legitimacy of the system, just as the expose of the massacre of the Vietnamese village of My Lai by American troops established the false notion that such atrocities were rare deviations from higher standards by which the war was supposedly being conducted. Nevertheless, there were persons in the US Army command who saw the press's exposure of My Lai as an attempt to undermine the war effort. Similarly with the business community: Any particular expose is seen as an attack on the integrity of the corporate system in general. What business wants is for these matters to be left entirely alone.

But, as already noted, the press can ignore or distort social reality just so much before losing its credibility. People expect the news to say something about the major events that affect their daily life. Why are people out of work? Why do things cost so much? Why are we building so many nuclear missiles? Why is there so much pollution? Why must our sons register for the draft? That

MICHAEL PARENTI

the media cannot ignore these questions does not mean they come up with revealing, truthful explanations. But there are limits to how reality can be brushed aside. As Peter Dreier puts it:

As the nation faces the system's contradictions at home and abroad, the media bring the "bad news." ... Big Business gets part of the blame, but (as polls show—and the media reports), they share the blame with labor unions, big government, the President, the Congress, and the media itself. Still, the nation's business and political leaders blame the messenger, rather than the system, for the nation's crisis of legitimacy.¹⁵

Because business cannot expect to take a fundamental look at its own assumptions, and cannot see the systemic causes of inflation, unemployment, foreign policy setbacks, and so on, it blames the news media for distorting and simplifying these problems ... and attacks the media for its "emotional" and "sensational" reporting.¹⁶

If reporters go too far too often in a muckraking direction, they are reined in, as we noted earlier. Yet limited leeway is allowed on some issues, mostly for the reason just mentioned: The press cannot completely ignore the realities that affect the daily lives of millions of people and hope to retain the public's trust. A press that does nothing more than propagate a narrow, right-wing ideology, ignoring economic problems to give only sunny reports on the health of the economy and sing hosannahs to the blessings of private enterprise, a press that did not bother to explain away systemic injustices as the incidental flaws of a basically good system, would earn less criticism from conservatives but would not have much credibility in the public eye and would do a poor job of legitimating the existing system.

In their hearts, many media owners would like to put an end to all critical information about business and other such issues, but they do not think they can go that far. It is not a matter of being unable to control their liberal

INVENTING REALITY

reporters, which they can do well enough when they put their minds to it; rather, it is a matter of not superimposing a viewpoint that is so blatantly at odds with popular experience as to be rejected for being the propaganda it is. A press governed solely by the desire to avoid all critical news that might reflect negatively upon dominant class interests reveals itself as an obvious instrument of class domination, loses popular support, and generates disbelief and disaffection.

In addition, it is not certain that corporate, congressional, and other political elites (other than the ultra-right) would be satisfied with an ultra-conservative propagandistic press, devoid of all accurate information and commentary (within a limited framework) on domestic affairs and world events. A press that was even more lacking in hard news and critical analysis than it is, presumably would be as unsatisfactory to the captains of industry and state as to any informed person who wished to “stay abreast with the events of the day.” An entire press presenting only ax-grinding stories and reactionary opinions in the manner of the extreme-right dailies would satisfy few.

BETWEEN CONSPIRACY AND CULTURE

The social institutions of capitalist society are the purveyors of its cultural myths, values, and legitimating viewpoints. To the extent that news producers—from publishers to reporters—are immersed in that culture, they may not be fully aware of how they misrepresent, evade, and suppress the news. Political orthodoxy, like custom itself, is a mental sedative, while political deviancy, like cultural deviancy, is an irritant. Devoid of the supportive background assumptions of the dominant belief system, the deviant view sounds just too improbable and too controversial to be treated as news, while the orthodox view appears as an objective representation of reality itself.

From this it might be concluded that what we have in the news media is not a consciously propagated establishment viewpoint but a socially shared

MICHAEL PARENTI

established viewpoint, and that when radical critics complain of elite manipulation they, in effect, really are bemoaning the unpopularity of their own views. Reporters and editors are products of the same political socialization as are media owners and political leaders; and therefore they are just reporting things as they see them—and as almost everyone else sees them (including their audiences)—without knowingly misrepresenting anything. To argue otherwise, it has been maintained, is to lapse into some kind of conspiracy theory about a consciously manipulative, diabolic elite.

Several responses are in order. First, it should be noted that there are conspiracies among ruling groups, things done in secrecy with the intent to sustain or extend power—as Watergate, the Pentagon Papers, the FBI’s COINTELPRO campaign against the left, the Iran- contra conspiracy, and the CIA’s daily doings have demonstrated. Just because some people have fantasies about conspiracies does not mean every conspiracy is a fantasy. Like most other cultural institutions, the media exercise their influence through overt means. Given the nature of the institution, it would be hard to imagine secret mass media. But there may often also be something secret, deliberately slanted, and politically motivated, about news production. Examples may be found in the unpublicized owner and advertiser dominance over news personnel and editorial content, the planted and fabricated information and suppressed stories, and the instances of government interference and manipulation.

The existence of a common pool of culturally determined (systemic, nonconspiratorial) political values cannot be denied, but where did this common pool come from? Who or what determines the determining element in the culture itself? And can we reduce an entire culture, including its actively struggling political components, to a set of accumulated habituations and practices that simply build up over time?

A closer look reveals that the unconsciously shared “established” view (as opposed to a consciously propagated elite “establishment” view) is not shared by everyone and is not in fact all that established. Major portions of the public,

INVENTING REALITY

often majorities, do not support present levels of taxation, military spending, military interventionism, the cold war, the arms race, nuclear power, and various policies harmful to the environment, the poor, and to working people. In other words, it may be true that most media elites and political elites share common views on these subjects, but much—and sometimes most— of the public does not. What we have then is an “established establishment view” which is given the highest media visibility, usually to the exclusion of views held by dissident sectors of the populace. The “dominant shared values and beliefs,” which are supposedly the natural accretions and expressions of our common political culture, are not shared by all or most—certainly not at the policy level—although they surely are dominant in that they tend to preempt the field of opinion visibility.

Furthermore, there is evidence, some of it introduced in this book, that members of the working press itself do not automatically share the “universal” viewpoints of the dominant political culture but often have their stories suppressed, cut, and rewritten. Along with a harmonious blending of bias among reporter, editor, publisher, and sometimes audience, we have the deliberately coercive controls by owners, advertisers, political leaders, and the anticipatory self-censorship of their journalistic employees.

In sum, media owners—like other social groups—consciously pursue their self-interest and try to influence others in ways that are advantageous to themselves. They treat information and culture as vital instruments of class power. Even if they never put it in those words, they try to keep control of the command posts of social institutions and the flow of symbols, values, opinions, and information. In a professedly democratic society, they may seek to minimize their use of coercion, preferring a willing compliance to a forcibly extracted one. Yet when necessary they are not hesitant to occupy the visible positions of power. Regardless of what their academic and journalistic apologists say on their behalf, they have no intention of leaving public discourse and mass communication openly accessible to an unrestricted popular

MICHAEL PARENTI

development. Why recognition of these unexceptional facts should brand one a “conspiracy theorist” is not clear.

Can it really be argued that elites have no power over the news organizations they own or finance? Or that if they do have power, they never use it? Or that they use it only in the belief they are fostering the common interest? Certainly all modern ruling classes justify their rule in universalist terms—and have a way of believing their own propaganda. But whether they think of themselves as patriots or plotters is not the point. No doubt, they like to see themselves as the defenders of American democracy even as they bolster their class privileges. Like everyone else, they believe in the virtue of their cause and equate the pursuit of their class interests with the pursuit of the national interest. Indeed, much of their propaganda is designed to treat these two things as coterminous.

The question is not how they see themselves but how we see them. That a particular class has achieved cultural hegemony over the entire society does not mean it has created a democratic culture. Nor need we struggle with the question of whether the causal factor is “class” or “culture,” as if these terms were mutually exclusive; for class dominance both helps to create and is fortified by cultural hegemony.

News distortion is both a product of shared cultural values and deliberate acts of disinformation. Political beliefs do not automatically reproduce and sustain themselves. They must be (at least partly) consciously propagated. And with time, yesterday’s propaganda becomes today’s “shared cultural values and beliefs.” Through unchallenged and ubiquitous repetition it becomes part of the conventional wisdom. Whether or not reporters and editors are deliberately lying when they talk of the noble intent behind US foreign policy is less significant than that they feel free to make such statements without checking the facts. It is bad enough that they circulate baldfaced lies; but it is even worse that they themselves usually believe them, partly because such beliefs are not a personal invention but are shared by almost all the opinion-makers of the

INVENTING REALITY

mainstream press and partly because there are rewards for orthodox belief and penalties for skepticism.

Misinformation is sometimes so widespread that the line between intentional and unintentional distortion is not always easy to discern, neither for those who transmit the untruths nor for those of us who try to detect them. Like everyone else, reporters and editors either sincerely share in the political ideology that makes it so easy for them to believe the news they produce, or they go along with things because they know on which side their bread is buttered. It is difficult to know at what exact psychological point an individual's self-serving rationalization turns into sincere belief; but we do know there are variations among members of the working press, at least some of whom are consciously aware of the coercive controls exercised over them in the news hierarchy—even if proponents of pluralism deny the existence of such things.

THE CONFLICT WITHIN

If the dominant culture were a mystically self-sustaining perpetual motion machine, there would be nothing left for us to do but throw up our hands and wait for the natural, gradual process of change to unfold across the centuries. But neither history nor society works that way. In fact, there is an element of struggle and indeterminacy in all our social institutions and political culture. Along with institutional stability we have popular ferment; along with elite manipulation we have widespread skepticism; along with ruling-class coercion we have mass resistance.

What has been said of the media is true of the law, the university, the church, political parties, science, and the state itself. Marx noted that the state has to involve itself “both in the performance of common activities arising from the nature of all communities” and the “specific functions” that ensure ruling-class domination.¹⁷ Likewise, all social institutions of capitalist society have this dichotomous tension within them. They must sustain the few while

MICHAEL PARENTI

appearing to serve the many, but to bolster that appearance, they must perform some popular functions or they will have no popular following.

This brings us to Antonio Gramsci's insight about how hegemony works to induce people to consent in their own oppression. Gramsci noted that the capitalist class achieves hegemony not only by propagating manipulative values and beliefs but by actually performing vital social functions that have diffuse benefits. Railroads and highways may enrich the magnates, but they also provide transportation for much of the public. Private hospitals are for profits not for people, but people who can afford them do get treated. The law is an instrument of class control, but it must also to some degree be concerned with public safety. The media try to invent reality but they must also sometimes admit realities. So with just about every cultural and social function: The ruling interests must act affirmatively on behalf of public interests some of the time. If the ruling class fails to do so, Gramsci notes, its legitimacy will decline, its cultural and national hegemony will falter, and its power will shrink back to its police and military capacity, leaving it with a more overtly repressive but more isolated and less secure rule.¹⁸

So the ruling class rules but not quite in the way it wants. Its socializing agencies do not work with perfect effect, free of contradictions—or else this book could not have been written or published or understood.

To best secure their legitimacy and popular acceptance, ruling interests must maintain democratic appearances and to do that they must not only lie, distort, and try to hide their oppressions and unjust privileges, but must occasionally give in to popular demands, giving a little to keep a lot, and presenting themselves as champions of democracy in the doing. In time, the legitimating ideology becomes a two-edged sword. Bourgeois hypocrisies about “fair play” and “democracy” are more than just a ruse. Such standards sometimes put limitations on ruling-class oppression once the public takes them seriously and fights for them.

In sum, the capitalist monopoly culture, like its monopoly economy,

INVENTING REALITY

suffers—shall we say—from internal contradictions. It can invent and control just so much of reality. Its socialization is an imperfect one and sometimes self-defeating. Like any monopoly it cannot rest perfectly secure because it usually does not serve the people and is dedicated to the ultimately impossible task of trying to prevent history from happening. The life of a people creates a reality that can only be partly explained away by the dominant cultural and communicational institutions. The struggle for social justice in this and other countries ebbs and flows but is never permanently stilled by police clubs nor forever smothered by the outpouring of propaganda machines. The longing for peace and betterment, for security and equality, found in the growing consciousness of people everywhere, bursts forth at unexpected times, as multitudes struggle to claim back their land, environment, and productive capacity, their politics and culture, their images and their reality. The democratic forces of this and other societies have won victories in the past against tremendous odds and will win more in the future. Indeed, the future itself depends on it.

Appendix

A Guide to Alternative Media

There are millions of people, fed up with the propaganda of the corporate-owned media, who are looking for alternative sources of information. The following should be of assistance.

MEDIA-WATCH PUBLICATIONS

There are some excellent watchdog publications whose function is to expose the distortions and omissions of the mainstream media:

- Alliance Report, National Alliance of Third World Journalists, P.O. Box 43208, Washington DC 20010
- Alternative Media, Alternative Press Syndicate, P.O. Box 775, Madison Square Station, New York, NY 10010
- Alternative Press Index, Alternative Press Center, P.O. Box 33109, Baltimore, MD 21218
- Extra! Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), 130 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001
- Lies of Our Times, Institute for Media Analysis (Ellen Ray and William Schaap, directors), 145 W. 4th St., New York, N.Y. 10012

INVENTING REALITY

- Propaganda Review, Bldg. D, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, CA 94123
- 10 Best Censored Stories, Project Censored, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA 94928 (issued only once a year)

ALTERNATIVE PERIODICALS AND NEWSPAPERS

Despite repeated claims that ours is a pluralistic, democratic society, alternative media are not readily accessible in the United States.

There has been a long history of suppression of ideologically unacceptable newspapers and magazines. See Geoffrey Raps, *The Campaign against the Underground Press*, San Francisco: City Lights, 1981; Angus Mackenzie, "Sabotaging the Dissident Press," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1981.

For a history of media activism, see David Armstrong, *Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America*, Boston: South End Press, 1981. A good how-to-do-it book is Charlotte Ryan, *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing* (Boston: South End Press, 1991.)

Progressive newspapers and periodicals are not commonly found at neighborhood newsstands or bookstores. Here is a partial listing of publications that offer information and analysis usually unavailable in mainstream media:

- CovertAction Information Bulletin, 1500 Massachusetts Avenue NW #732, Washington, DC 20005
- The Guardian, 24 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010
- Monthly Review, 155 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10011
- The Nation, 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011
- People's Weekly World, 235 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10011
- Political Affairs, 235 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10011
- The Progressive, 409 East Main Street, Madison, WI 53703
- Z Magazine, 150 West Canton, Boston, MA 02118

MICHAEL PARENTI

For a more complete listing of progressive publications that deal with culture, environment, human rights, Third World struggles, peace, armaments, public interest, consumer issues, and media, see *Progressive Periodicals Directory*, edited by Craig Canan, Progressive Education, P.O. Box 120574, Nashville TN 37212.

ALTERNATIVE BROADCAST MEDIA AND VIDEOS

Along with print media there are alternative broadcast media. Here is a partial listing:

- Deep Dish Satellite Network distributes programming to public access cable channels across the nation: 339 Lafayette Street New York, NY 10012.
- Pacifica Radio, 3729 Cahuenga Boulevard West, North Hollywood, CA 91604, has community-supported radio stations in Los Angeles (KPFK), San Francisco (KPFA), New York (WBA1), Washington, DC (WPFW), and Houston (KPFT).
- Paper Tiger Television, a public access television program with video tapes available: 165 West 91st Street, New York, NY 10024.

Scores of other listener-sponsored “community radio” stations like KBOO in Portland, Oregon; WORT in Madison, Wisconsin; KGNU in Boulder, Colorado; and WMNF in Tampa, Florida, provide alternative news and commentary. These are not to be confused with “public radio” stations affiliated with NPR that are partially “listener sponsored” but heavily dependent on corporate “underwriters” (advertisers) and government funding.

For alternative audio and video material, consider the following:

- Alternative Radio, 1814 Spruce Street, Boulder, CO 80302, David

INVENTING REALITY

Barsamian's syndicated program, offers interviews and lectures for noncommercial community stations in the US and Canada.

- California Newsreel, 630 Natoma Street, San Francisco, CA 94103: films and videos of social issues, including the excellent video "Controlling Interests."
- Third World Newsreel, 335 West 38th Street, New York, NY 10018: films and videos of social issues with special focus on the Third World and imperialism.
- Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, Suite 802, New York, NY 10019: films and videos of social issues.
- Direct Effect, P.O. Box 423, Athens, GA 30603: public service announcements that go beyond the pap of the corporate-dominated Advertising Council.
- Media Network, 39 West 14th Street, Room 403, New York, NY 10011: a clearinghouse for information on social issue media.
- People's Video, P.O. Box 99514, Seattle, WA 98199: modestly priced audio and video tapes of this author's lectures. Listing available upon request; nonprofit, all labor is donated, including mine.
- Prevailing Winds Research, P.O. Box 23511, Santa Barbara CA 93121: catalog.

Public access cable is increasingly being used as a resource by progressive groups to show documentaries and other videos in their communities.

BOOKS

Dissident books are not usually published by mainstream publishers. (This volume is one of the exceptions.) They are not usually reviewed in the national media and when they are, they are likely to be savaged—unlike conservative tracts. Dissident books are usually published by small book companies dedicated to an alternative viewpoint. Unfortunately, as with

MICHAEL PARENTI

everything else in the American industry, bookstores are monopolized by giant chains like Crown, B. Dalton, and Waldenbooks, which rarely carry titles issued by the small presses. The following are some publishing houses that offer progressive titles. You can write to them directly for their catalogs.

- Common Courage, P.O. Box 702, Monroe, ME 04951
 - International Publishers, 381 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016
 - Lawrence Hill, 230 Park Place, Suite 6A, Brooklyn, NY 11238
 - Monthly Review Press, 122 West 27th Street, New York, NY 10001
 - Sheridan Square Press, 145 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012 •
- South End Press, P.O. Box 68, Astor Station, Boston, MA 02123
- Verso, 15 Greek Street, London W1, United Kingdom
 - Zed Books, 171 First Avenue, Atlantic Highlands, NJ 07716

INVENTING REALITY

Notes

Chapter 1, From Cronkite's Complaint to Orwell's Oversight

1. Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

2. Marguerite Michaels, "Walter Wants the News to Say a Lot More," *Parade*, March 23, 1980, p. 4. Cronkite had his show canceled

after he made a liberal public speech that criticized an aspect of US foreign policy: Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 36.

3. One of the significant right-wing salvos against the press was by Vice President Spiro Agnew: *New York Times*, November 14, 1969 and November 21, 1969.

4. Walter Laqueur, "Foreign News Coverage: From Bad to Worse," *Washington Journalism Review*, June 1983, p. 34. Laqueur's article is a typical example of blaming the reporters, as is Barry Commoner's "Talking to a Mule," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1981.

5. Jeff Cohen, "U.S. Media Aren't Flostile to the Right," *Oakland Tribune*, June 27, 1985.

MICHAEL PARENTI

6. Garner Ted Armstrong, Channel 9 News, Ithaca, NY, February 11, 1976.
7. Robert Elias, *The Politics of Victimization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
8. Ibid, and the studies cited therein.
9. Consider how the press treats racism in sports: Richard Lapchick, *Broken Promises: Racism in American Sports* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).
10. *Time*, December 12, 1983, p. 84.
11. Ibid.
12. Studies cited in Ismael Reed's op-ed article, *New York Times*, April 9, 1991.
13. *Time*, December 12, 1983, p. 84.
14. See attacks in *New York Times*, October 10, 1990; *Washington Post*, September 23, 1990; *Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 1990. For a critique of these attacks see Sandra Rattley, "White Bread Ffistory," *Lies of Our Times*, January 1991, pp. 4-5.
15. Herb Boyd, "Black Conservatives," *Lies of Our Times*, January 1991, p. 10.
16. *New York Times*, August 21, 1989, and April 4, 1990. 17. *New York Times*, April 11, 1989.
18. *Extra!* January/February 1989.
19. *New York Times*, April 11, 1989.
20. Tiffany Devitt, "Abortion Coverage Leaves Women out of the Picture," *Extra!* March/April 1991, p. 5.
21. Susan Douglas, "The Representation of Women in the News Media," *Extra!* March/April 1991, p. 3; Laura Fraser, "All the Women Fit to Print," *Extra!* March/April 1991, pp. 8-9.
22. Herbert Gans, "The Message behind the News," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1979, p. 45.

INVENTING REALITY

23. Michael Grossman and Martha Kumar, *Portraying the President* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

24. Howard Rosenberg, "Welcome to the Media-Reagan Show," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1986; Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988).

25. See the poll in *Newsweek*, March 9, 1987.

26. See the survey in *Editor & Publisher*, November 3, 1984.

27. Ben Bagdikian, *The Effete Conspiracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 146, 148.

28. Mark Dowie, "How ABC Spikes the News," *Mother Jones*, November/December 1985, p. 38.

29. John Kenneth Galbraith quoted in a speech by Ed Asner, president of the Screen Actors Guild, San Francisco, June 21, 1984.

30. Public Opinion, June/July 1980. For similar, more recent findings, see *Report of the Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate* (New York: The Markle Foundation, 1990).

31. Doris Garber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980), pp. 169-180.

32. W. Lance Bennett, *News, The Politics of Illusion* (New York: Longman, 1983), pp. 9—10.

33. Jimmie Rex McClellan, *The Two-Party Monopoly* (Ph.D. dissertation, Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 108.

34. Simon Gerson, correspondence in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1981.

35. Frank Smallwood, *The Other Candidates: Third Parties in Presidential Elections* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 9—10.

36. Commoner, "Talking to a Mule," p. 31.

37. McClellan, *Two-Party Monopoly*, p. 188.

38. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 184—185; see also, Smallwood, *The Other*

MICHAEL PARENTI

Candidates.

39. McClellan, *Two-Party Monopoly*, pp. 188—189.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

41. Ronald Van Doren, *Charting the Candidates '72* (New York: Pinnacle, 1972), p. 206. Spock had five brief appearances on national television, each a few minutes or so, only one of which was in prime time: McClellan, *Two-Party Monopoly*, pp. 209-210.

42. David Lindorff, “Marginalizing the Left,” *Lies of Our Times*, March 1991, p. 17; *New York Times*, November 7, 1991.

43. P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, and H. Gaudet, *The People’s Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); C. I. Hovel et al., *Experiments on Mass Communication* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).

44. *New York Times*, January 16, 1986.

45. S. Iyengar, M. Peters, and D. Kinder, “Experimental Demonstrations of the ‘NotSo-Minimal’ Consequences of Television News Programs,” *American Political Science Review*, 76, December 1982, p. 852.

46. G. R. Funkhouser, “The Issues of the Sixties,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37, pp. 62-75; Michael MacKuen and Steven Coombs, *More than News* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1981).

47. Sut Jhally, Justin Lewis, and Michael Morgan, *The Gulf War: A Study of the Media, Public Opinion and Public Knowledge* (Amherst, MA: Center for Studies in Communication, 1991).

48. The point was first made by Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

49. Herbert Schiller, *The Mind Managers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 11.

Chapter 2, “Freedom of the Press Belongs to the Man Who Owns One”

1. Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), pp. 21-24; Benjamin Compaine, ed., *Who Owns the Media?* (New York:

INVENTING REALITY

Harmony Books, 1979; Michael Parenti, *Make- Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 181-184; Alex Jones, "Newspaper Sale; A Trend Continues," *New York Times*, February 2, 1985.

2. *Washington Post*, October 11, 1987.

3. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Ch. 1.

4. *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 1985.

5. William Barrett, "Citizens Rich," *Forbes*, December 14, 1987, pp. 141 — 148.

6. Doug Henwood, "Times Mirror: Up from 'Manliness,' " *Extra!* January/February 1991, p. 8; *New York Times*, January 10, 1986; *USA Today*, January 5, 1988.

7. Alex Jones, "Will Profits Still Grow?" *New York Times*, August 27, 1989.

8. *Washington Post*, January 8, 1991; *New York Times*, August 8, 1988.

9. Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), p. 69; *Washington Post*, July 15, 1991.

10. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, pp. 5—8.

11. Peter Dreier and Steve Weinberg, "Interlocking Directorates," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1979, pp. 51— 68; Compaine, *Who Owns the Media?*

12. Dreier and Weinberg, "Interlocking Directorates," pp. 51—68. 13. *Extra!* October/November 1989, p. 9.

14. *Extra!* January /February 1990, p. 11.

15. Dreier and Weinberg, "Interlocking Directorates," p. 51.

16. Hal Himmelstein and Allen Lichtenstein, "Who's Running the Show? Profiles of the Board of Directors of Six of America's Most Powerful Electronic Media Conglomerates," unpublished monograph, February 1986.

17. James Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 19.

18. Ron Powers, *The Newscasters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977).

MICHAEL PARENTI

19. Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, p. 66.
20. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, pp. 83-84.
21. Stephen Hess, *The Washington Reporters* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1981), pp. 136—166.
22. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, pp. 128-129.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132. Life and the Saturday Evening Post were revived years later under different formats.
24. A Gallup poll found 79 percent approval for serious investigative reporting, with 66 percent wanting to see more of it: Ted Smith, “Journalism and the Socrates Syndrome,” *Quill*, April 1988, p. 16.

Chapter 3, Who Controls the News?

1. Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 6.
2. Les Brown, *Television, The Business behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 219-220.
3. William Barrett, “Citizen Rich,” *Forbes*, December 14, 1987, p. 142.
4. Interview in *Cosmopolitan*, July 1986, quoted in *Extra!* July 1987.
5. Diana Tillinghast, “Inside the Los Angeles Times,” unpublished monograph, 1980, quoted in David Paletz and Robert Entman, *Media Power Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1981), p. 15.
6. Ben Bagdikian, *The Effete Conspiracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 76.
7. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, p. 42.
8. Jorgensen memorandum published in *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/ February 1985, p. 18.
9. Herbert Gans, *Deciding 'What's News* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 101.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 342n.
11. Edwin Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (New York: Pantheon,

INVENTING REALITY

1981), pp. 139-141.

12. Brown, *Television, The Business behind the Box*, p. 214.

13. Todd Gitlin, "When the Right Talks, TV Listens," *Nation*, October 15, 1983, p.

335.

14. Quoted in Eric Barnouw, *The Sponsor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 57.

15. Norman Bauman, "Newspapers: More or Less Put Together by the Advertisers?" unpublished monograph, 1977, p. 24.

16. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, p. 60.

17. Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), p. 5.

18. Lauren Kessler, "Women's Magazines Coverage of Smoking Related to Health Hazards," *Journalism Quarterly*, 66, Summer 1989, pp. 316—322. The publications were *Cosmopolitan*, *Mademoiselle*, *McCall's*, *Woman's Day*, and the older version of *Ms.* Kessler also looked at *Good Housekeeping*, which did not carry cigarette ads but which ran nothing on the link between smoking and cancer.

19. Brown, *Television, The Business behind the Box*, p. 196.

20. "Boycotted News," *Extra!* May/June 1991, January/February 1991.

21. Art Shields, *My Shaping Years* (New York: International Publishers, 1982), p.

22. Author's interview with Laurie Wimmer, November 9, 1982.

23. John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

24. Calvin Trillin, "U.S. Journal: Kentucky," *New Yorker*, December 27, 1969, p. 33.

25. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p. 254.

26. Author's interview, February 4, 1986, with George De Stefano, the former *New Haven Advocate* staff writer who wrote the article in question.

MICHAEL PARENTI

27. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, pp. 161—162. 28. Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, p. 23. 29. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

30. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, p. 57.

31. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p. 94.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. It was the publisher of News-Herald Newspapers Inc.; see *Workers World*, April 9, 1982.

35. For instances of editors resigning or being fired see Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, p. 84; and Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, pp. 196—197.

36. James Kilpatrick's column, *Washington Post*, February 14, 1987; also his column of February 18, 1983.

37. Turner Catledge, *My Life and Times*, quoted in Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 39.

38. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p. 251.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

40. Quoted in Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, p. 98.

41. Greenfield quoted in Roger Wilkins, *A Man's Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), p. 329.

42. The author's conversation with a former AP correspondent, March 1, 1985, Washington, D.C.

43. Quoted in Howard Rosenberg's column, *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1986.

44. *Washington Post*, January 3, 1982; *Parade*, March 20, 1983; and Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p. 209.

45. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p. 107.

46. Deborah Davis, *Katharine the Great: Katharine Graham and the Washington Post* (Bethesda, MD: National Press, 1987), pp. 141- 143.

47. Susan Douglas, "Blond Ambition," *In These Times*, October 28—November 3, 1987, p. 12.

INVENTING REALITY

48. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p. 208.

49. Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, pp. 142-143. Citing Robert Entman, Lee and Solomon note that researchers like Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, who have “a strong conservative agenda,” have exaggerated the leftist bent of reporters. Lichter and Rothman relied on a nonrandom sample that greatly overrepresented the most liberal segment of journalism—employees of public TV stations in Boston, New York, and Washington—while giving less attention to the political attitudes of more mainstream journalists.

50. Peter Dreier, “Business and the Media,” unpublished monograph, 1983; also Dreier’s “Anti-Business Bias in Media,” *Quill*, November 1984.

51. Dreier, “Business and the Media”; also “Contests Help to Improve Business/ Finance Writing,” *Editor & Publisher*, December 29, 1979.

52. See *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1985, p. 13.

53. Dreier, “Business and the Media.”

54. *Ibid.*

55. Quoted in *New York Times Book Review*, July 6, 1986, p. 25.

56. James Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 3-4.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 3 and 6.

58. Conversation with author, August 17, 1981.

59. Dorothy Sterling, letter to *New York Times*, March 11, 1984. Not only Time but the entire U.S. mainstream press followed the U.S. State Department line by giving favorable portrayals to Chiang’s autocracy in China and never saying a positive word about Soviet Russia. On China, see Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London: Quartet Books, 1975), p. 261.

60. Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War*, p. 56.

61. Malcolm Browne writing in *Variety*, November 2, 1966.

62. *Washington Post*, March 9, 1985. The report was eventually published in the *Village Voice*.

63. Reported in the *Village Voice*, December 26, 1977. 64. Lee and

MICHAEL PARENTI

Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, p. 25.

65. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, pp. 62-65.

66. Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, p. 24.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

68. Pete Hamill, "Fear and Favor at the 'New York Times,'" *Village Voice*, October 1, 1985, pp. 17-18, 20-24.

69. John L. Hess, "Bankrupt New York City Journalism," *Lies of Our Times*, May 1991, pp. 21-22.

70. Letter from Bill Collins to author, August 25, 1987.

71. Charles MacMartin, "Of Strikes and Scabs and Workers," *Lies of Our Times*, June 1991, p. 7.

72. Tiffany Devitt and Steve Rhodes, "Media and Rape," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 26, 1991.

73. Ackland quoted in Dreier and Weinberg, "Interlocking Directorates," p. 68.

74. Quoted in *ibid.*

75. Quoted in *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 1983, p. 56. 76. Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, p. 142.

77. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p. 85.

Chapter 4, Objectivity and Government Manipulation

1. For a fuller discussion of this, see my *Power and the Powerless* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

2. Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), p. 140.

3. Conversation with the author, October 4, 1979.

4. Leon Sigal, *Reporters and Officials* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973).

5. Robert Entman and David Paletz, "The War in Southeast Asia: Tunnel Vision on Television," in William C. Adams, ed. *Television Coverage of International Affairs* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1982); and the other studies in that

INVENTING REALITY

same volume; also Anita Mallinckrodt, "The Real Evening News," unpublished monograph, Washington, D.C., 1983.

6. For a treatment of some of these questions see my *The Sword and the Dollar: Imperialism, Revolution and the Arms Race* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

7. Jack Newfield, "Honest Men, Good Writers," *Village Voice*, May 18, 1972. For a study of the corporate influence in the American political system, see my *Democracy for the Few*, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

8. See the *Washington Post's* report on David Brinkley's birthday party, November 16, 1981.

9. Peter Dreier and Steve Weinberg, "Interlocking Directorates," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1979, p. 51.

10. Quoted in Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus: Riding with the Campaign Press Corps* (New York: Random House, 1973).

11. David Halberstam, quoted by Kevin Donovan in *Ithaca New Times*, February 29, 1976, p. 6.

12. Adam Hochschild, "A Tale of Two Exposés," *Mother Jones*, September/October 1981, p. 10.

13. Moe Stavnezer, "The Killing Drug They Don't Like to Discuss," *Guardian*, December 22, 1982, p. 7. When Orflex was finally banned in August 1982, the event received only passing notice in the press.

14. Quoted in Tristram Coffin's *The Washington Spectator*, September 1, 1980.

15. Herbert Matthews, *A World in Revolution* (New York: Scribners, 1971), p. 338; also Matthews's *The Cuban Story* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), pp. 281ff.

16. Joel Millman, "How the Press Distorts the News from Central America," *Progressive*, October 1984, p. 20.

17. Norman Bauman, "Newspapers: More or Less Put Together by the Advertisers?" unpublished monograph, 1977, p. 24.

MICHAEL PARENTI

18. Ben Bagdikian, *The Effete Conspiracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 77.

19. Roger Wilkins, *A Man's Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), p. 350. For an example of how the late publisher of the Post, Philip Graham, made much of his close association with the White House while being used by the president, see Deborah Davis, *Katharine the Great: Katharine Graham and the Washington Post* (Bethesda, MD: National Press, 1987), pp. 156—157.

20. *Washington Post*, November 14, 1984.

21. Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), p. 103.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 110—112; and Peggy Noonan's comments in *New York Times Magazine*, October 15, 1989.

24. Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, pp. 113—114.

25. Mike Zagarell, "White House Control of the Media—and the Fightback," *Daily World*, November 15, 1984.

26. Michael Deaver, speech at Pacific University, Oregon, March 29, 1990. I participated in this event as a panelist.

27. Quoted in David Paletz and Robert Entman, *Media Power Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1981), p. 57.

28. Mark Hertsgaard, "How Reagan Seduced Us," *Village Voice*, September 18, 1984.

29. *New York Times*, November 14, 1983; and Simon Gerson, "What Freedom of the Press?" *Daily World*, December 8, 1983.

30. Les Brown, *Television, the Business behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 214.

31. Paletz and Entman, *Media Power Politics*, p. 62.

32. Jim Sibbison, "AP: The Price of Purity," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/ December 1987, p. 56.

33. David Wise, *The Politics of Lying* (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp.

INVENTING REALITY

319-322.

34. Wilkins, *A Man's Life*, p. 340.

35. See Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 272.

36. *United States v. Caldwell* (1972); see also *New York Times*, September 4, 1976, and November 19, 1978.

37. *New York Times*, January 17, 1976.

38. Geoffrey Rips, *The Campaign against the Underground Press* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1981).

39. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 261.

40. Fidel Castro, *Fidel and Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 291.

41. Rips, *The Campaign against the Underground Press*, pp. 68-71.

42. Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, pp. 122-123.

43. Mark Yudof, *When Government Speaks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); J. William Fulbright, *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* (New York: Vintage, 1971).

44. Kai Bird and Max Holland, "The Philippines: Official News," *Nation*, June 30, 1984.

45. Ralph McGehee, *Deadly Deceits: My 25 Years in the CIA* (New York: Sheridan Square Publications, 1983).

46. Carl Bernstein, "The CIA and the Media," *Rolling Stone*, October 20, 1977; Stuart Loory, "The CIA's Use of the Press: A Mighty Wurlitzer," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 1974, pp. 9-18; Davis, *Katharine the Great*, pp. 176-189.

47. *New York Times*, December 25, 26, 27, 1977.

48. *Ibid.*

49. John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 195.

MICHAEL PARENTI

50. New York Times, December 25, 26, 27, 1977.
51. Vitaly Petrusenko, *A Dangerous Game, CIA and the Mass Media* (Prague. Interpress, n.d.), p. 92.
52. Bernstein, "The CIA and the Media"; Loory, "The CIA's Use of the Press"; Davis, *Katharine the Great*, pp. 176—189.
53. New York Times, December 25, 26, 27, 1977.
54. David Wise and Thomas Ross, *The Invisible Government* (New York: Bantam, 1965), pp. 134-135, 267; *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1976, pp. 37-38.
55. Louis Wolf, "Accuracy in Media Rewrites the News and History," *CovertAction Information Bulletin*, Spring 1984, p. 33; New York Times, May 12, 1984.
56. See the author's *The Sword and the Dollar*.

Chapter 5, The Big Sell

1. Charles Clark quoted in *City Paper* (Washington, D.C.), June 24, 1983.
2. Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 123.
3. Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), p. 63.
4. Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw- Hill, 1976).
5. *Ibid.*
6. J. S. Henry, "From Soap to Soapbox: The Corporate Merchandising of Ideas," *Working Papers*, May/June 1980, p. 55.
7. *Washington Post*, October 25, 1981.
8. *Christian Science Monitor*, August 29, 1988.
9. See the McDonnell Douglas ad in *Washington Post*, May 6, 1991. Similar ads by McDonnell and other defense contractors have appeared in the *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Business Week*, and other such

INVENTING REALITY

publications.

10. For one example among many, see the Textron Inc. ad in the Washington Post, April 17, 1991.

11. Robert Friedman, "How America Gets up in Arms," Nuclear Times, March 1983, p. 19.

12. New York Times, May 4, 1982.

13. Robert Cirino, *Don't Blame the People* (New York: Vintage, 1972), pp. 90, 302; also Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 187-188.

14. On the Advertising Council, see David Paletz, Roberta Pearson, and Donald Willis, *Politics in Public Service Advertising on Television* (New York: Praeger, 1977); Bruce Howard, "The Advertising Council: Selling Lies," *Ramparts*, December 1974/ January 1975, pp. 26-32; also, "The State and Corporations: Public Service Ads," *Guardian*, May 26, 1976.

15. Paletz et al., *Politics in Public Service Advertising*, p. 1.

16. Keenen Peck, "Ad Nauseam," *Progressive*, May 1983, p. 44.

17. Representative Benjamin Rosenthal (D-NY) quoted in Howard, "The Advertising Council," p. 32.

18. See my *Make-Believe Media*. (1992), pp. 53-57.

19. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 28, 1991.

20. *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 1991; *Washington Post*, March 2, 1991.

21. See *Global Warming: The Greenpeace Report* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Chapter 6, Giving Labor the Business

1. See, for instance, Marshall Ingwerson, "Bush Successes Baffle Opposition," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 6, 1989.

2. For a fuller exposition see my *Democracy for the Few* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), Chapters 5 and 6.

MICHAEL PARENTI

3. Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), p. 188.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.
5. "Network News and Documentary Report," International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers, July 30, 1980.
6. Janet Coffman in *TV Monitor*, August 1, 1980.
7. Roberta Lynch, "The Media Distort the Value of Labor Unions," In *These Times*, July 15-28, 1981, p. 17.
8. The study by William Hoynes and David Croteau was prepared for *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR)*, February 1989; summarized in Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, pp. 26—27.
9. The quoted terms are respectively from *Wall Street Journal*, March 16, 1978, and *Time*, March 20, 1978. Most of the information on this strike is from Curtis Seltzer, "How the Press Covered the Coal Strike," unpublished study, August 1979, and Seltzer's "The Pits: Press Coverage of the Coal Strike," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1981.
10. *New York Times*, December 4, 1977, and March 5, 1978. 11. *Newsweek*, March 20, 1978.
12. *Time*, March 6, 1978.
13. *New York Times*, November 28, 1982.
14. David Bensman, "The Press Joins the Steel War on Labor," In *These Times*, January 12—18, 1983.
15. This account is entirely from Irfan Erdogan, "Television News Coverage of the 1985 New York Hotel Strike," unpublished manuscript, 1986.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Jonathan Tasini, "Labor and the Media," *Extra!* Summer 1990, p. 2.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
19. See Gabrielle Gemma, "Greyhound and the Media," *Lies of our Times*, April 1990, p. 7; Charles MacMartin, "Of Strikes and Scabs and Workers," *Lies of our Times*, June 1991, p. 7.

INVENTING REALITY

20. Quoted in Doug Henwood, "The Washington Post: The Establishment's Paper," *Extra!* January/February 1990, p. 10. See also, Norman Solomon and Martin Lee, "Media Owners as Union Busters," *Extra!* Summer 1990, p. 12.

21. See Tasini, "Labor and the Media," p. 3, for a summary of the major findings of the study.

Chapter 7, "Liberal" Media, Conservative Bias

1. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

2. *Washington Post*, July 20, 1975; *New York Times*, December 4, 1977.

3. William Watts, "Americans' Hopes and Fears," *Psychology Today*, September 1981; Gallup poll, *Washington Post*, December 22, 1981; Peter Hart poll, *Ithaca (NY) Journal*, September 5, 1975; polls cited in *New York Times*, January 22, 1978, January 13, 1982, February 3, 1981; *Washington Post*, September 23, 1981.

4. David Paletz and Robert Entman, *Media Power Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1981), p. 196.

5. *New York Times*, November 13, 1982.

6. *Organizing Notes* (Washington, D.C.), January/February 1983. 7. *New York Times*, July 18, 1983.

8. *New York Times*, July 26, 1983.

9. William Preston, Jr., and Ellen Ray, "Disinformation and Mass Deception," *Convert Action Information Bulletin*, Spring-Summer 1983, p. 8. For an end product of this process see Arnaud de Borchgrave, "The KGB's Bead on the Media," *Washington Post*, April 14, 1981.

10. See the excellent article by Laura Fraser, "The Tyranny of the Media Correct," *Extra!* May/June 1991, pp. 6—8.

11. *Economic Notes*, July/August 1991, p. 9.

12. Jeff Cohen, "Television's Political Spectrum," *Extra!* July/August 1990,

MICHAEL PARENTI

pp. 1, 6-10.

13. Ibid., p. 10.

14. Tom Jenn, "Dogging the Press from Right and Left," *Utne Reader*, March/April 1987, pp. 19-20.

15. Tom Kamins, "Talk Radio Dial Twists to the Right," *Extra!* May/June 1991, p.

16. Karen Rothmyer, "The Mystery Angel of the New Right," *Washington Post*, July 12, 1981; George De Stefano, "AIM: Coercing the Media Rightward," *L.A. Weekly*, August 17-23, 1984, pp. 8, 10, 34.

17. Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* (Boston: South End Press, 1989); Bob Brewin, "God and Mammon in Washington," *Village Voice*, February 14, 1984, p. 33.

18. *Washington Post*, May 4, 1981.

19. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching*, pp. 80—81.

20. *Washington Post*, September 20, 1981; *New York Times*, September 20, 1981.

21. "Nightline" ABC-TV, January 15, 1991.

22. *New York Times*, January 31, 1982; *Washington Post*, January 31, 1982.

23. *Washington Post*, September 8, 1981. 24. *Washington Post*, June 9, 1991.

25. *New York Times*, June 11, 1991.

26. Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), pp. 251-252.

27. Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching*, p. 27 and passim.

Chapter 8, The Media Fight the Red Menace

1. See William Preston, Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Sidney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General-Welfare State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964).

INVENTING REALITY

2. Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1938), p. 284.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 570, 577.

4. Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, "A Test of the News," *New Republic*, August 4, 1920, p. 39. Lippmann and Merz studied *New York Times* dispatches on Russia from 1917 to 1920. They found that the paper's reporters and editors accepted most of the propaganda they were fed by the State Department and Russian emigre organizations. From November 1917 to November 1919, the *Times* stated ninety-one times that the Soviet government was near its end or had actually reached its end. Actual collapse was announced fourteen times. The authors conclude, "From the point of view of professional journalism the reporting of the Russian Revolution is nothing short of a disaster."

5. Robert Murray, *Red Scare* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), pp. 95—98.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

7. James Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 29.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 29—30; also Murray Levin, *Political Hysteria in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

9. Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War*, p. 30.

10. John Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

11. M. R. Montgomery, "The Press and Adolph Hitler," *Boston Globe Magazine*, January 30, 1983, pp. 11 — 13.

12. Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais, *Labor's Untold Story*, 3d ed. (New York: United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, 1972), pp. 320—321.

13. *Time*, January 2, 1939, p. 13.

14. Boyer and Morais, *Labor's Untold Story*, pp. 283—284. 15. *Ibid.*, p. 317.

MICHAEL PARENTI

16. Ibid., p. 324.
17. Ibid., p. 321.
18. Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War*, p. 35.
19. Ibid., p. 36.
20. The above quotations from *Business Week*, *New York World-Telegram*, *Chicago Daily News*, and *New York Herald Tribune* are all taken from Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War*, pp. 35-37.
21. Boyer and Morais, *Labor's Untold Story*, p. 349.
22. The discussion on Taft-Hartley is drawn from Boyer and Morais, *Labor's Untold Story*, p. 348, *passim*.
23. Ibid., pp. 350—370.
24. Edwin Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 6.
25. Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War*, p. 71.
26. Ibid., pp. 77, 133-152; David Cate, *The Great Fear* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), pp. 521—535.
27. Bayley, *McCarthy and the Press*, p. 163.
28. Ibid., pp. 173—175.
29. See the remarks by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, *New York Times*, October 13, 1967.
30. See the reportage and cartoons in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times* "News of the Week in Review" throughout 1963- 1965.
31. *Newsweek*, August 29, 1977; also *Time*, January 15, 1979; James Sterba, "The Sense of Beauty Shriveled in China, Buds Again," *New York Times*, March 18, 1981.
32. *New York Times*, December 31, 1978. 33. *Washington Post*, January 31, 1981. 34. *Time*, November 22, 1982.
35. *Time*, November 22, 1982; also the citations and discussion in William Dorman, "The Image of the Soviet Union in the American News Media," paper given at a New York University conference on news media, March 19, 1983.

INVENTING REALITY

36. See the regular and guest columnists that appeared through 1981 and into 1982 in the New York Times and Washington Post.

37. See the Associated Press release, December 24, 1982.

38. For instance, Dan Rather's CBS Evening News reports of April 18, April 21, and June 30, 1986.

39. Normon Solomon, "Media Leaves No Room for Progressive Critique of Summit," *Guardian*, June 15, 1988.

40. *Washington Post*, May 31, 1988.

41. Solomon, "Media Leaves No Room."

42. Philip Bonosky, "Lithuania: Where Did It Come From, Where is It Going?" *Political Affairs*, June 1990, pp. 3-11; and Philip Bonosky, "Nurturing Baltic Reaction," *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, Fall 1990, pp. 17—20; Christopher Simpson, *Blowback* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), p. 25.

43. *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 9, 1991.

44. *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 7, 1991.

45. "East German Women Face Loss of Rights in Democracy," *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, August 12, 1991; "Foreign Godfathers of the Polish Press," *Democratic Journalist*, July 1991, p. 8.

46. Conn Hallinan, "Hungary for News," *Lies of Our Times*, January 1991, pp. 19—20; Peter Annear, "'Swedish-Lifestyle' Pans Out for Few Hungarians," *Guardian*, May 22, 1991, p. 14. In East Germany the unemployment rate was as high as 30 percent: *Washington Post*, September 29, 1991.

47. *New York Times*, August 29 and October 23, 1990. Only after the Hungarian premier made a public statement on the grave condition of Hungary's economy did the Times acknowledge that there was trouble in the newly installed capitalist paradise; see *New York Times*, December 5, 1990.

48. Hallinan, "Hungary for News," p. 19.

49. On the newly emerging corruption, see, for instance, Mary Battiata, "Top Polish Bankers Hit by Scandal," *Washington Post*,

MICHAEL PARENTI

August 14, 1991.

50. Washington Post, September 26, 1991.

51. NBC Evening News, July 29, 1991.

52. New York Times, June 11, 1990.

53. Beth Sims, "Is Eastern Europe Our Backyard Too?" *Lies of Our Times*, May 1991, pp. 18-20.

54. New York Times, June 11, 1990.

55. New York Times, June 12, 1990; also Ellen Ray, "If They Win, It's Not Free," *Lies of Our Times*, July 1990, p. 20.

56. A telephone conversation with me, July 1991; see also Ray, "If They Win, It's Not Free."

57. New York Times, October 16, 1990.

58. Washington Post, September 18, 1990.

59. Washington Post, September 26, 1991.

60. *Ibid.*

61. San Francisco Chronicle, September 6, 1991. 62. San Francisco Examiner, September 8, 1991.

Chapter 9, Doing the Third World

1. See the author's *The Sword and the Dollar* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) and the various citations therein.

2. Julia Preston, "Killing off the News in Guatemala," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1982, p. 35.

3. Robert Cirino, *Power to Persuade* (New York: Bantam, 1984), p. 63.

4. Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London: Quartet Books, 1975), pp 357-358.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 358.

7. Dorothy Slater, letter to the author, March 23, 1986.

8. Cirino, *Power to Persuade*, pp. 61—62.

INVENTING REALITY

9. Knightley, *The First Casualty*, pp. 367—368.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
11. Norman Moskowitz, “Covering Vietnam’s Tenth Anniversary,” *Daily World*, May 21, 1985.
12. James Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Andrew Kopkind, “The Press at War,” *Ramparts*, August/September 1975, p. 37.
13. Oscar Patterson III, “An Analysis of Television Coverage of the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Broadcasting* 28 (Fall 1984): 397-404.
14. William Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1988).
15. TRB column, *New Republic*, April 25, 1975.
16. James Reston column, *New York Times*, April 4, 1975.
17. *New York Times*, April 21, 1975; also Anthony Lewis’s columns in the *Times*, April 24 and May 1, 1975; and Noam Chomsky, “The Remaking of History,” *Ramparts*, August/September 1975, pp. 30— 35, 49-53.
18. All the quotes in the above paragraph are from Roger Morris, Shelly Mueller, and William Jelin, “Through the Looking Glass in Chile: Coverage of Allende’s Regime,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1974, pp. 16-17. Some of the citations that follow are from the systematic and excellent study by John Leggett et al., *Allende, His Exit and Our “Times”* (New Brunswick, NJ: New Brunswick Cooperative Press, 1978).
19. Morris et al., “Through the Looking Glass” p. 18.
20. James Petras and Morris Morely, *The United States and Chile: Imperialism and the Overthrow of the Allende Government* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); also statistics provided by John Pollock and cited in Morris et al., “Through the Looking Glass.”
21. *New York Times*, August 31, 1973; also Leggett et al., *Allende, His Exit and Our “Times.”* ”

MICHAEL PARENTI

22. Petras and Morely, *The United States and Chile*.
23. *New York Times*, September 15, 1973.
24. *New York Times*, September 12, 1973.
25. Legget et al., *Allende, His Exit and Our "Times,"* p. 65. 26. *New York Times*, September 12, 1973.
27. *New York Times*, September 16, 1973.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Jose Yglesias, *Chile's Days of Terror: Eye-Witness Accounts of the Military Coup* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974).
30. *New York Times*, February 24, 1980.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Miami Herald*, February 21, 1979, and November 16, 1980; also Richard Rivers, "Shirley Yes, Christian No," *Lies of Our Times*, May 1991, pp. 10-11. A few years later Christian was hired by the *New York Times's* neo-conservative executive editor A. M. Rosenthal to write the same kind of Pinochet promotionals for his paper. See her reports in the *Times* from 1987 through 1991; also Jo-Ann Wypijewski, "Shirley Christian and the *Times* on Chile," *Lies of Our Times*, January 1990, pp. 14-15.
33. *New York Times*, August 8, 1984.
34. *New York Times*, August 10, 1984.
35. James Petras, "Chile and Latin America," *Monthly Review*, February 1977, pp. 13-24; Cynthia Brown, "The High Cost of Monetarism in Chile," *Nation*, September 27, 1980, pp. 271-275; Leslie Crawford, "Racketeering Allegations Leave Chile's Army under Siege," *Financial Times*, November 14, 1990, p. 8.
36. *New York Times*, September 1, 1988.
37. *Washington Post*, November 9, 1983.
38. *New York Times*, November 6, 1983.
39. ABC and CBS evening news reports, both October 26, 1983. 40. *Time*, November 7, 1983.

INVENTING REALITY

41. New York Times, November 6, 1983; also Village Voice, November 8, 1983.
42. Newsweek, November 7, 1983.
43. Time, November 7, 1983.
44. Network television reports, October 27, 1983.
45. New York Times, November 6, 1983; see the speech by Fidel Castro printed in full as a paid advertisement in the New York Times, November 20, 1983.
46. ABC evening news, October 2.1, 1983.
47. John Judis, “Grenadian Documents Do Not Show What Reagan Claims” and Daniel Lazare, “Reagan’s Seven Big Lies About Grenada,” both in In These Times, November 16, 1983.
48. New York Times, November 6, 1983.
49. Quoted in Village Voice, November 8, 1983.
50. Christopher Hitchens, “The Case in Village Voice of the Menacing Runway,” Nation, May 29, 1982, pp, 649-651.
51. “A Tottering Structure of Lies,” Sojourner, December 1983, pp. 4-5; also Michael Massing, “Grenada Before and After,” Atlantic Monthly, February 1984, pp. 79—80.
52. Washington Post, December 4, 1984. 53. New York Times, December 11, 1984

Chapter 10, For the New World Order

1. Joseph Collins, What Difference Could a Revolution Make? (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1982).
2. Alexander Sukhostat, “Nicaragua—Defending the Revolution,” Political Affairs, December 1981, pp. 28-35.
3. Ibid.; also Morris Morely and James Petras, The Reagan Administration and Nicaragua (New York: Institute for Media Analysis, 1987); Alvin Levie, Nicaragua, the People Speak (So. Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey,

MICHAEL PARENTI

1987); Collins, *What Difference Could a Revolution Make?*; Peter Rosset and John Van Dermeer, eds., *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution under Fire* (New York: Grove Press, 1983). Laura Enriquez, *Harvesting Change: Labor and Agrarian Reform in Nicaragua, 1979-1990* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Thomas W. Walker ed., *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1991).

4. ABC evening news, November 9, 1984; *Washington Post*, November 11, 1984. For an inside account of how the contra war was sanitized for the US public, see Edgar Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras: A Case of CIA Disinformation* (New York: Institute for Media Analysis, 1987).

5. Editorial comment, *Extra!* October/November 1987, p. 1.

6. For instance, Charles Krauthammer described Nicaragua as “totalitarian”: *Washington Post*, January 11, 1985; and John Chancellor called that country a “client state of the Soviet Union”: NBC evening news, August 5, 1987.

7. A rich source of information regarding the 1984 Nicaraguan national election is from *Their Vote Decided*, Report by the Committee of US Citizens Living in Nicaragua, Managua, c. 1985; see

also Michael Parenti, “Is Nicaragua More Democratic Than the United States?” *CovertAction Information Bulletin*, Summer 1986, pp. 48-50, 52.

8. *New York Times*, August 12 and November 4, 1984. 9. *Washington Post*, November 4, 1984.

10. *New York Times*, February 13, 1985.

11. See *Extra!* October/November 1987.

12. *New York Times*, February 20, 1990.

13. *New York Times*, February 18, 1990.

14. *New York Times*, February 26, 1990.

15. See the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and *New York Times*, February 27 and 28, 1990.

16. For example, *Washington Post*, February 2, 1990, and *Los Angeles*

INVENTING REALITY

Times, March 4, 1990.

17. Washington Post, February 2, 1990.

18. These conclusions are based on an unpublished survey by Peggy Noton of ninetytwo articles in the New York Times, Washington Post, and Los Angeles Times from February 18 to March 4, 1990.

19. See New York Times, February 27, 1990.

20. Midge Quandt, "Funding the Counterrevolution," *Nicaragua Monitor* 13 (October 1991): 1, 10.

21. Independent Commission of Inquiry on the U.S. Invasion of Panama, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama: The Truth behind Operation*

"Just Cause," (Boston: South End Press, 1990); John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama* (New York: Random House, 1990); Chuck Idelson "Long-term Hanky-Panky in Panama," *People's Daily World*, May 16, 1989; "Panama, A Climate of Terror," *Labor Action*, July/August 1990, p. 8; Andrew Zimbalist and John Weeks, *Panama at the Crossroads* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

22. Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall, *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 65—73; Tim Wheeler, *Bushgate, The Inside Story of a Sordid Career*, booklet published by *People's Daily World* (New York: 1988); Seymour Hersh, "Our Man in Panama," *Life*, March 1990.

23. See, for instance, NBC evening news, May 10, 1989; "Nightline," May 8, 1989. For a critical statement, see Jeff Cohen, "Panama Elections: Objectivity Takes a Beating," *Extra!* May/June 1989, p. 3.

24. Reuters dispatch quoted in an obscure paragraph in a New York Times story, December 17, 1989.

25. See Eric Boehlert's op-ed article in *New York Times*, January 17, 1990.

26. Francis appeared on ABC's "Nightline," December 20, 1989.

27. This criticism was made by Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, "How Television Sold the Panama Invasion," *Extra!* January/February 1990, p. 3.

MICHAEL PARENTI

28. The Rather, Jennings, and Koppel comments were all on December 20, 1989.

29. Independent Commission of Inquiry, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama*. It was not until a month after the events that the

Washington Post (January 23, 1990) noted back on page A22 that the “cocaine” was tortilla flour.

30. Oakland Tribune, January 5 and January 22, 1990.

31. The New York Times (January 28, 1990) took notice only to give a Panamanian publisher and associate of Ford’s the opportunity to deny allegations linking Ford to money-laundering. Allegations linking Endara to drug-trafficking and money-laundering continued into the next year and were under investigation by the US Drug Enforcement Agency. The charges received little press attention; for an exception, see San Francisco Examiner, April 9, 1991.

32. See the “Special Report” of Labor Action, July/August 1990 (publication of the Labor Coalition on Central America, Washington D.C.); Clarence Lusane, “Aftermath of the U.S. Invasion: Racism and Resistance in Panama,” *CovertAction Information Bulletin*, Spring 1991, pp. 61—63.

33. An occasional guest column like the one by Representative John Conyers, Washington Post, July 29, 1991, brought out some of the facts that the regular media commentators and journalists seemed to overlook.

34. New York Times, June 10, 1990.

35. Washington Post, June 18, 1991.

36. Assurances were given by State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutweiler to the press and by John Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State, to a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee that the United States would not take sides. Walid Khalidi, “The Gulf Crisis: Origins and Consequences,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20 (Winter 1991): 5—28; Christopher Hitchens, “Why We Are Stuck in the Sand,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 1991, pp. 70—75, 78; Linda Diebel, “Was Saddam Set Up for the Kill?” *Toronto Star*, March 10, 1991.

INVENTING REALITY

37. Public statement, August 15, 1990, quoted in Extra! May 1991, p. 9.

38. One major daily, Newsday, January 21, 1991, in a story by Knut Royce, debunked the “unconfirmed, weak, or contradictory intelligence” that Hussein was on the verge of acquiring an atomic weapon. But most news organizations were amplifiers for the White House line.

39. New York Times, September 24, 1990.

40. Norman Finkelstein, “Double Standards in the Gulf,” Z Magazine, November 1990, pp. 28-29.

41. Bush’s statement of October 16, 1990, quoted in Extra! May 1991, p. 9.

42. Americans were “emotionally involved in getting rid of the beast,” reported the Washington Post, August 7, 1990. When the US aerial attack against Iraq on the night of January 17, 1990, one TV news announcer commented: “We must stop that madman.” See Abbas Malek, “American Press Coverage of the Persian Gulf Crisis,” unpublished monograph, Washington, D.C., 1991.

43. New York Times, February 1, 1991.

44. New York Times, February 17, 1991.

45. New York Times, November 25, 1990.

46. Newsweek, March 4, 1991.

47. Arthur Rowse, “Flacking for the Emir,” Progressive, May 1991, p. 20.

48. NBC special report, January 17, 1991.

49. Cokie Roberts on “This Week with David Brinkley,” January 20, 1991.

50. CBS special report, January 17, 1991.

51. The NBC and CNN reports were on January 17, 1991.

52. CBS special report, January 17, 1991.

53. For instance, George Will’s comments on a televised ABC panel, January 19, 1991.

54. For these and many other examples, see the network nightly news reports and their Gulf war TV specials, from January 17 through all of February 1991.

MICHAEL PARENTI

55. Evening television report, January 21, 1990.
56. "MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour," January 23, 1990.
57. James Ledbetter, "Deadlines in the Sand, How the Pentagon Ambushed the Press," Village Voice, February 5, 1991.
58. NBC late night report, January 17, 1991.
59. Peter Rothberg, "Pentagon Flacks," Lies of Our Times, July- August 1991, p. 12.
60. When Nation Magazine et al. vs. US Department of Defense had its day in court, the New York Times and most other major media failed to take note of this struggle for press freedom: Steve Rhodes, "Gulf Press Restrictions Suit Shackled," Guardian, May 8, 1991. In a long article on press restrictions imposed by the military, the Washington Post (January 26, 1991) lavished all of one line on the suit. The case was dismissed by the federal judge because the war had ended.
61. On how the media discredited and downplayed the antiwar protests, see Chapter
62. "Casualties at Home: Muzzled Journalists," Extra! May 1991, p. 15.
63. Newsweek, February 18, 1991.
64. "The Missing Bodies," Lies of Our Times, June 1991, p. 17.
65. NBC evening news, February 25, 1991.
66. London Sunday Times, March 3, 1991.
67. NBC evening news, February 16, 1991.
68. CBS evening news, February 14, 1991.
69. Washington Post, September 9, 11, 20, 25, 27, 29, 1990; October 29, 1990; December 12 and 19, 1990; February 2, 1991.
70. New York Times, February 28, 1991; Washington Post, March 1, 1991.
71. ABC report, March 15, 1991.
72. Newsweek, February 4, 1991, p. 50.
73. Washington Post, January 29, 1991.
74. New York Times, March 31, 1991, and NBC-TV evening news, March

INVENTING REALITY

20, 1991.

75. United Nations, *The Impact of War on Iraq, Report to the Secretary-General on Humanitarian Needs in Iraq in the Immediate Post-Crisis Environment by a Mission to the Area Led by Mr. Martti Ahsaari, Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management*, 20 March 1991.

76. Quoted in Jack Colhoun, "Report: U.S. War Was 'Bomb Now, Die Later,'" *Guardian*, June 12, 1991, p. 3; see also Dennis Bernstein and Larry Everest, "Health Catastrophe in Iraq," *Z Magazine*, June 1991, pp. 27-32.

77. ABC report, May 20, 1991; *Washington Post*, May 21, 1991.

78. A few notable exceptions that dealt with the human costs of the war for Iraq were PBS's "The Bill Moyers Report," June 18, 1991; the even-better PBS "Frontline" documentary by Andrew and Leslie Cockburn, entitled "The War We Left Behind," November 4, 1991, and "Aftermath: A Look Back at Iraq" PBS, January 16, 1992.

79. Haas quoted in *New York Times*, November 5, 1991.

80. For a fuller discussion of these points see my "Bush's Splendid Little War," *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, Spring 1991, pp. 64- 65.

81. Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London: Quartet Books, 1978), p. 81.

Chapter 11, Propaganda Themes

1. For a fuller exposition, see the author's *The Sword and the Dollar: Imperialism, Revolution, and the Arms Race* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

2. *Time*, April 16, 1984.

3. Manuel de Varona, quoted in the *New York Daily News*, January 8, 1961.

4. Victor Bernstein and Jesse Gordon, "The Press and the Bay of Pigs," *Columbia University Forum* reprint. Fall 1967.

5. *New York Times*, January 8, 1961; *Time*, January 13, 1961; for a fuller

MICHAEL PARENTI

discussion, see Bernstein and Gordon, “The Press and the Bay of Pigs.

6. New York Times, January 8, 1961.

7. Neal Houghton, “The Cuban Invasion of 1961 and the U.S. Press, in Retrospect,” *Journalism Quarterly* 42 (Summer 1965): 423—424.

8. For instance, Hanson Baldwin’s column, *New York Times*, August 1, 1961, and Tad Szulc’s article in *Look*, July 18, 1961.

9. ABC evening news, November 21, 1979. The interview was with Professor J. C. Hurewitz.

10. For these and other examples, see Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

11. *New York Times*, August 22, 1984.

12. *New York Times*, August 28, 1984.

13. *Washington Post*, September 13, 1984.

14. Times editor John Vinocur claimed that the Germans were anti-American because they suffer from a “malaise” and an “angst” that come in part from a lack of sufficient authority: *New York Times Magazine*, November 15, 1981.

15. For background on El Salvador, see Marvin Gettleman et al., *El Salvador: Central America and the New Cold War* (New York: Grove Press, 1981); Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit* (New York: Times Books, 1984).

16. For a striking exception, see the excellent series of articles by A. Kent MacDougall in the *Los Angeles Times*, November 2—15, 1984. While MacDougall does not indict capitalism as a system, he does show how “industrialization” and propertied classes in the Third World have done little for the mass of people and have actually increased poverty and the concentration of wealth. Upon retiring, MacDougall came out as a Marxist.

17. Joyce Chediak, “Turkey: The Secret El Salvador,” *Workers World*, February 19, 1982; and Mehmet Demir, “Turkey: Repression Tightens Grip as Rightwing Gathers Strength,” *Guardian*, September 12, 1984; Deidre Griswold, *Indonesia, The Second Greatest Crime of the Century* (New York: World View,

INVENTING REALITY

1970). Even when the press offered a rare criticism of repression in US client states, as when the Washington Post ran an editorial (July 19, 1991) criticizing the Turkish government's autocratic ways, it greatly understated the extent of human rights abuses in Turkey. Violent political repression and horrifying practices of torture continued to be routinely practiced by Turkish military and police, according to a letter to the Post (August 4, 1991) by the deputy director of Helsinki Watch.

18. Washington Post, September 16, 1984; New York Times, August 26, 1984. Times correspondent Max Frankel, who later became editor-in-chief, described Indonesian General Suharto, leader of the massacre that took an estimated 250,000 to one million

lives, as "an efficient and effective military commander": New York Times, March 13, 1966.

19. Associated Press report in Philadelphia Inquirer, October 29, 1981.

20. Amnesty International report, August 1982; and Amnesty International newsletter, January 1981; also Fried et al, Guatemala in Rebellion.

21. NBC evening news, February 19, 1980. 22. Christian Science Monitor, July 9, 1980. 23. New York Times, July 8, 1981.

24. *Condoning the Killing: Ten Years of Massacres in El Salvador*. Based on a report of the Commission for the Defense of Human Rights in Central America and investigations by the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador (Washington, D.C.: Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean, 1990).

25. Washington Post, August 18 and September 16, 1990; New York Times, August 16, 1990; Los Angeles Times, August 16, 1990.

26. Washington Post, August 18, 1990; also August 16, 1990.

27. Dorothee Benz, "Buthelezi: Apartheid Opponent or Client?" *Extra!* July/August 1991, p. 11.

28. New York Times, April 18, 1990.

29. For instance, Lally Weymouth, "Washington's New Favorite South

MICHAEL PARENTI

African,” Washington Post, June 26, 1991.

30. “Pretoria’s Hand Lurking Behind Violence,” Guardian, October 23, 1991, p. 13: compiled from reports by Africa News and Southscan.

31. Benz, “Buthelezi: Apartheid Opponent or Client?” p. 11.

32. A study by the highly respected South African research institute, the Community Agency for Social Enquiry, found that in the nine-month period ending April 30, 1990, Inkatha was responsible for initiating violence in 66 percent of the incidents, the police and military in nearly 20 percent, and the ANC in 6 percent: see the letter by a lawyer and a professor in the Washington Post, June 29, 1991. The journalists who write for the US media seem unable to come up with information of this sort about Buthelezi.

33. Survey in Johannesburg Star, July 25, 1990. The Black population of Durban is mostly Zulu, yet only 3 percent support Inkatha, according to the Johannesburg Weekly Mail, April 10, 1990.

34. Roger Morris et al., “Through the Looking Glass in Chile,” Columbia Journalism Review, November/December 1974.

35. New York Times, July 26, 1983, see also Guardian editorial, August 10, 1983.

36. New York Times Magazine, November 15, 1981, pp. 40-45, 116- 125.

37. John Wicklein, “The Gospel According to ‘60 Minutes,’” Progressive, April 1983, p. 49; see also Alexander Cockburn and James Ridgeway, “CBS Sees Red,” Village Voice, February 22, 1983.

38. Kevin Klose in Washington Post, January 5, 1991.

39. New York Times, August 5, 1984.

40. Amy Wilentz, *The Rainy Season: Haiti Since Duvalier* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); also I. B. Troupe, “Handling Haiti,” *Lies of Our Times*, February 1991, pp. 15-16.

41. New York Times, December 13, 1991; Troupe, “Handling Haiti.”

42. See, for instance, the New York Times editorial, October 2, 1991.

43. Thomas Friedman in New York Times, October 4, 1991.

INVENTING REALITY

44. “The United States has so far stalled in fully cutting off supplies to Haiti, citing humanitarian concerns”: Kim Ives, “Haitian Military Puts Civilian Fig Leaf on Coup,” *Guardian*, October 23, 1991, p. 17.

45. Howard French reporting, *New York Times*, October 7, 1991. 46. Howard French in *New York Times*, October 22, 1991.

47. *Washington Post*, October 7, 1991.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *New York Times*, November 4, 1991.

50. See Kim Ives, “Exiled Aristide to Haitians: ‘Hold on, don’t let go,’ ” *Guardian*, October 9, 1991, p. 15; Ives, “Haitian Military Puts Civilian Fig Leaf on Coup,” p. 17.

51. David Peterson, “What Price Democracy?” *Lies of Our Times*, November 1991, p. 7.

52. Op-ed, *New York Times*, October 27, 1991.

53. See Washington Office on Haiti, Report of October 1991; also “A Report to LOOT from Haiti,” *Lies of Our Times*, November 1991, p. 7.

54. *New York Times*, April 2, 1964.

55. *New York Times*, March 17, 1975.

56. “A Tottering Structure of Lies,” *Sojourner*, December 1983.

57. *Washington Post*, December 7, 1983.

58. *New York Times*, April 21, 1987.

59. Morris et al., “Through the Looking Glass in Chile, p. 25.

60. William Leogrando and Carla Anne Robbins, “Oligarchs and Officers,” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1980, pp. 1084-1103; Cynthia Arnson, “White Paper,” *Nation*, May 9, 1981; Report by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, Washington, D.C., August 1984.

61. *New York Times* editorial, October 7, 1984. 62. *New York Times* editorial, March 30, 1984. 63. ABC evening news, March 28, 1984.

64. Standing alone and unnoticed by other media in the coverage of El Salvador is the fine documentary “Our Forgotten War that appeared on PBS s

MICHAEL PARENTI

Frontline series in 1988.

65. Elizabeth Kirkendall, "Election Day in El Salvador," San Francisco Chronicle, April 7, 1991.

66. Manuel Torres, "Fraud in Salvador Vote Count Imperils Country's Future," People's Weekly World, March 23, 1991.

67. CBS evening news, September 13, 1973. 68. New York Times Magazine, May 7, 1972. 69. NBC evening news, November 29, 1984.

70. Stephen Radchenko's report on a trip to the USSR in City Paper, Washington, D.C., July 13, 1984.

71. Robert Kaiser and Barbara Walters on ABC's "20/20" program, November 22, 1984.

72. New York Times, August 22, 1991.

73. Robert Cirino, *The Power to Persuade* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974), p. 53.

74. New York Times, December 30, 1979. For an extended discussion of anti-Arab bigotry and imagery, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), and his *Covering Islam*.

75. Newsday, January 10, 1991.

76. New York Times, December 30, 1990.

77. U.S. News & World Report, December 24, 1990. 78. New Republic, March 10, 1986.

79. New York Times, October 26, 1990.

80. New York Times, February 28, 1991.

81. Eqbal Ahmad quotes Ajami and makes the counterpoint in his "The Gulf in the American Media," *Lies of Our Times*, July/August 1991, p. 9.

82. NPR, January 19, 1991.

Chapter 12, Methods of Misrepresentation

1. Ben Kiernan, "War and Forgetting: Obstructing Peace in Cambodia," *Lies of Our Times*, June 1991, p. 14; the Times actually published a guest

INVENTING REALITY

column by Richard Dudman entitled, “Pol Pot: Brutal, Yes, but No Mass Murderer,” *New York Times*, August 17, 1990.

2. Deidre Griswold, *Indonesia, The Second Greatest Crime of the Century* (New York: World View, 1970); Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), pp. 205—217.

3. *Time*, December 17, 1965; *New York Times*, January 16, 1966. Also the columns in the *Times* by C. L. Sulzberger, April 8, 1966, and by James Reston, June 19, 1966.

4. *New York Times*, April 5, 1966.

5. For information on East Timor, see Pat Flanagan, “East Timor: The Final Solution,” *Monthly Review*, May 1980, pp. 41-46; also Chomsky and Herman, *The Washington Connection*, pp. 132—204; Colman McCarthy, “Maintaining Standards of Tyranny,” *Washington Post*, November 26, 1991.

6. Noam Chomsky, “East Timor: The Press Cover-Up,” *Inquiry*, February 19,

1979.

7. *Newsweek*, September 15, 1975. Notes 253

8. For refutations of these various disinformation campaigns, see the first edition of this book; also: Lee Ullian, “Haig Poisons Facts in

New Anti-Soviet Blast,” *Daily World*, September 18, 1981; the critique of the yellow rain thesis in *Progressive*, March 1984; Grant Evans, *The Yellow Rain Makers* (London: Verso, 1983); articles in *Science*, October 2, 1981, November 27, 1981, April 9, 1982, May 30, 1980, October 23, 1981; “The Pope Plot,” *Counterspy*, June/August 1983; David Eisenhower and John Murray, *Warwords: U.S. Militarism, the Catholic Right and the “Bulgarian Connection”* (New York: International Publishers, 1986); David Pearson, “KAL 007: What the U.S. Knew and When We Knew It,” *Nation*, August 18, 1984, pp. 18—25; R. W. Johnson, *Shootdown: Flight 007 and the American Connection* (New York: Viking, 1986); Michael Parenti, “1981: The Disappearing Libyan Hit Team,” *Lies of Our Times*,

MICHAEL PARENTI

March 1992, pp. 14-15.

9. NBC specials, January 25, 1983 and, September 21, 1983.

10. New York Times, October 2, 1991; for details see *Lies of Our Times*, November 1991, pp. 14-15.

11. CBS evening news, January 23, 1985. 12. New York Times, February 26, 1986. 13. New York Times, March 13, 1986. 14. New York Times, January 24, 1986.

15. New York Times, March 12, 1986. For accounts of Marcos's corruption and abuses, see the major network evening news reports and the New York Times and Washington Post from January 20 to February 15, 1986.

16. NBC evening news, January 24, 1986.

17. Study by WAMM Media Committee, Minneapolis, MN, issued January 12, 1989; cited in Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), p. 17.

18. See R. B. DuBoff in *In These Times*, March 27, 1985.

19. David Spurr, "Writing off Third World Issues," *In These Times*, April 14-20, 1982.

20. *Ibid.*

21. For example, see New York Times, August 26, 1986. On the same kind of false balancing that equated the contra murders with the Sandinistas, see New York Times, February 26, 1990.

22. ABC "Nightline," January 8, 1985; and comments in Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, pp. 43—44.

23. Todd Gitlin, "Spotlights and Shadow: Television and the Culture of Politics," *College English* 38 (April 1977): 792.

24. Los Angeles Times, October 6, 1984.

25. Washington Post, October 25, 1984.

26. CBS evening news, January 29, 1985; for Dunsmore's comments: ABC evening news, July 16, 1986; for another example of labeling, see New York Times, June 12, 1986.

INVENTING REALITY

27. Nation, December 23, 1991, p. 802.

28. San Francisco Chronicle, September 7, 1991.

29. New York Times, August 8, 1984, and the discussion in chapter 10.

30. New York Times, February 28, 1980. 31. New York Times, August 12, 1984. 32. New York Times, August 26, 1984.

33. These Post examples are provided by John Dinges in “El Salvador’s New Year,” City Paper (Washington D.C.), February 3, 1984.

34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43.

Washington Post, April 23, 1983. Washington Post, January 16, 1983. Washington Post, November 25, 1982. New York Times, August 28, 1989.

New York Times, February 24, 1985. New York Times, July 18, 1988. Washington Post, August 23, 1987.

San Francisco Chronicle, June 1, 1991. New York Times, June 11, 1991. Washington Post, July 22, 1987.

44. Drugs, Extra! October/November 1987. When asked why Rangel’s correction was not published, a spokesperson for the Post remarked, “I don’t feel any obligation to explain why we didn’t run the letter.”

45. Washington Post, July 31, 1987.

46. For a discussion of how the media treat protestors see Chapter 7.

47. New York Times Magazine, October 16, 1983. 48. NBC evening news, June 1, 1988.

Rangel’s letter is quoted in “Media Blindspot: Contra & C

49. Washington Post, March 2, 1991. 50. New York Times, March 22, 1991. 51. New York Times, August 18, 1988. 52. New York Times, January 4, 1988.

Chapter 13, Culture, Control, and Resistance

1. Documentation and further discussion of these points may be found in my Democracy for the Few, 5th ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1988).

2. Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, Quinton

MICHAEL PARENTI

Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 226.

3. New York Times, December 3, 1967.

4. Mike Zagarell, "White House Control of the Media—and the Fightback," Daily World, November 15, 1984.

5. David Paletz and Robert Entman, Media Power Politics (New York: Free Press, 1981), p. 69.

6. For an account of the media's treatment of Khrushchev's visit, see James Aronson, Packaging the News (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

7. Paletz and Entman, Media Power Politics, p. 69.

8. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 41.

9. CBS/Washington Post opinion polls in 1982; Dan Hallen, "For Media, It's Not Another Vietnam," In These Times, April 14, 1982.

10. Hallen, "For Media," quoting from an interview with Reagan in TV Guide.

11. For Reston's—and the New York Times's—role in censoring the Bay of Pigs story, see Gay Talese, The Kingdom and the Power (New York: World Publishing, 1969).

12. Deborah Davis, Katharine the Great: Katharine Graham and the Washington Post (Bethesda, Md.: National Press, 1987), pp. 176- 177.

13. Les Brown, Television, The Business behind the Box (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 214. Brown is referring to broadcasting but the same can be said of print media.

14. "The Birth of the Insane Rumour about the 2,000 Deaths at Chernobyl," Democratic Journalist, June 1988, p. 20; Serge Schmemmann, "The Russian Syndrome, A Reticent Response to a Nuclear Calamity," New York Times, May 4, 1986.

15. Peter Dreier, "Business and the Media," unpublished monograph, 1983.

INVENTING REALITY

16. Ibid.
17. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (Moscow Progress Publications, 1966), p. 384.
18. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 171.