

ONLINE JOURNAL™

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No truth in the news

By Carla Binion

January 25, 2000—A George W. Bush spokesperson told reporters, "We have a message a day and we want to stick to it. We are not going to have one big, fat news conference on our schedule where everyone can come ask questions about what you think is the news of the day."

The Bush campaign could simplify the process in the following way: George W. reads the PR-scripted Message of the Day to a crowd of journalists/stenographers. To avoid any troublesome slip-up, the Bush people simply tape the mouths of all reporters. Then the Message is fed to the public as "news." Simple. No frills. No challenge. Exactly the result the Bush team wants.

The old Soviet Union had two propaganda newspapers, Pravda and Izvestia. Pravda translates as "truth," and Izvestia means "news." The Russian people used to joke, "There is no news in the truth and no truth in the news." If the Bush campaign has its way, U. S. media coverage of the Bush message will contain neither news nor truth. We used to hate commie oppressors. Now commie oppressors are us.

In the 1930s, hard-hitting journalist George Seldes said, "It is possible to fool all of the people all of the time -- when the government and press cooperate." George W. Bush offers the media very little of substance. When he does talk, he often seems to speak in code.

For example, Bush told conservative columnist Cal Thomas he wants to "reform" the military by asking generals to tell him what needs fixing. Say what? Doesn't that kind of "reform" usually translate as "maneuver in favor of powerful vested interests?" He said he plans to ask the generals what needs fixing? Isn't that the same as asking corporate polluters how they want anti-pollution laws "fixed" so they are free from legal restraint?

Bush added he wants to ask the generals "whether imposed civilian social policies are helping or hurting [the military's] primary objectives." The Bush code might well translate as: "George W. plans to greatly bloat the military budget at the expense of social programs and the interests of the people." We can be pretty sure the plainspoken translation will never be a chosen Message of the Day.

Reporter Gary Webb once said regarding the rare journalists who insist on getting the facts, "If these few bits of illumination flares should ever sputter and disappear, out of neglect or frustration or censorship, we will be enveloped by a darkness the likes of which we've never seen." Keeping the public in the dark (via keeping the news media muzzled) has become a Republican tradition. For example, President George H. W. Bush and his administration kept the news media at a distance and in the dark during the Gulf War. The media ended up regurgitating the White House spin as fact.

Former Assistant Secretary of State Hodding Carter said of the media's Gulf War reportage, "If I were the government, I'd be paying the press for the kind of coverage it is getting right now." Reagan's PR man Michael Deaver said, "If you were going to hire a public relations firm to do the media relations for an international event, it couldn't be done any better than this is being done." (Solomon and Lee, "Unreliable Sources," 1992.)

In the "Republicans-keep-the-public-in-the-dark-via-muzzled-media" tradition, Ronald Reagan's administration used to leak scare stories about leftist conspiracies. Journalists would pick up the stories and report them as fact. For example, the Reagan State Department sent out its own White Paper on El Salvador proclaiming a global conspiracy to arm leftist rebels, and the media reported the trumped up story. Months later, the Los Angeles Times, The Nation, and the Wall Street Journal showed the story had been a hoax. The State Department admitted the report was "misleading." (Solomon and Lee, "Unreliable Sources.")

You reporters on the campaign trail could reverse the trend. Remember, you folks are supposed to play an investigative, adversarial role in relation to government officials. When the Bush campaign tries to fit you for a muzzle, you are supposed to bite -- not ask for the next smaller size. When the Bush Traveling Medicine Show tries to spoon feed you the Message of the Day, you are supposed to say, "No thanks," not "Yummy," or "More, please."

Granted, journalists are not always free to do their jobs. Sometimes their bosses who own the newspapers or TV networks censor their reportage. Project Censored is a media studies research group based at Sonoma State University. For the past twenty-three years the group has published a book a year about "the news that didn't make the news."

In "Censored 1999," journalists Steve Wilson and Jane Akre say Fox TV fired them for reporting on the dangers of bovine growth hormone (BGH) in milk. Wilson and Akre are only two examples among many listed by the Project Censored group over the years. Their story is worth exploring, because it symbolizes many other similar incidents. (For example, it symbolizes the Bush team's hiring attorney Ben Ginsburg to use legal tactics to destroy journalists who report certain anti-Bush stories.)

The Monsanto Company produces and sells bovine growth hormone to dairy farmers. Monsanto used legal tactics to pressure Fox into censoring Wilson and Akre's story. In addition, Fox has a personal stake in protecting Monsanto, because the company advertises on Fox network. Monsanto is also a customer of another Rupert Murdoch-owned company that advertises in large supermarkets around the world.

Wilson and Akre were known as hard-hitting investigative reporters for WTVT of the Tampa Bay area. Fox bought the small network and changed the rules. The network brought in David Boylan, a career sales representative, as manager. According to Wilson and Akre, the new manager told them: "We paid \$3 billion for these television stations; we'll tell you what the news is. The news is what we say it is."

Shortly before the BGH piece was to air, Monsanto libel lawyer John J. Walsh sent a letter to Fox attacking Wilson and Akre. Though the reporters supported their story with a three-inch binder full of scientific evidence, Fox attorneys rewrote the story to favor Monsanto. A Fox Vice President for Legal Affairs said, "We don't think this story is worth a half-million dollars to go to court with Monsanto."

The two journalists say that they were told to write things that were "demonstrably false." Fox fired them for no cause during a "window period" in their contract. Shortly before the firing, the network offered to let Wilson and Akre stay as consultants in exchange for their silence.

If Fox network asked Akre and Wilson to lie, how many other news stories are killed or rewritten by network lawyers in order to misrepresent the facts? How can Fox or any other network that censors its reporters be trusted to cover the presidential candidates?

To the extent that candidate George W. Bush gets away with selling reporters his Message of the Day, the public will be forced to gulp the snake oil, too. George W. fed Cal Thomas the following spoonful of goo: "I think the current embarrassment over [Clinton's] behavior undermined in the short run a cultural shift [back to basics]."

Let's get back to a different kind of basics, namely the basics of having the news media act as watchdogs on behalf of the people instead of lapdogs for politicians and corporate sponsors. Dear campaign trail journalist/watchdogs, for the voting public's sake, please take that Bush Message of the Day and rip it to shreds with your teeth. Then bare those teeth and ask some probing questions -- that is, if the owners of your news publications and TV networks will allow it.

This much is at stake: If George W. gets away with his whitewash Messages of the Day now, we might all end up stuck with a President George W. and four-to-eight years of "a darkness the likes of which we've never seen." That is not a good trade-off for any amount of money.

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