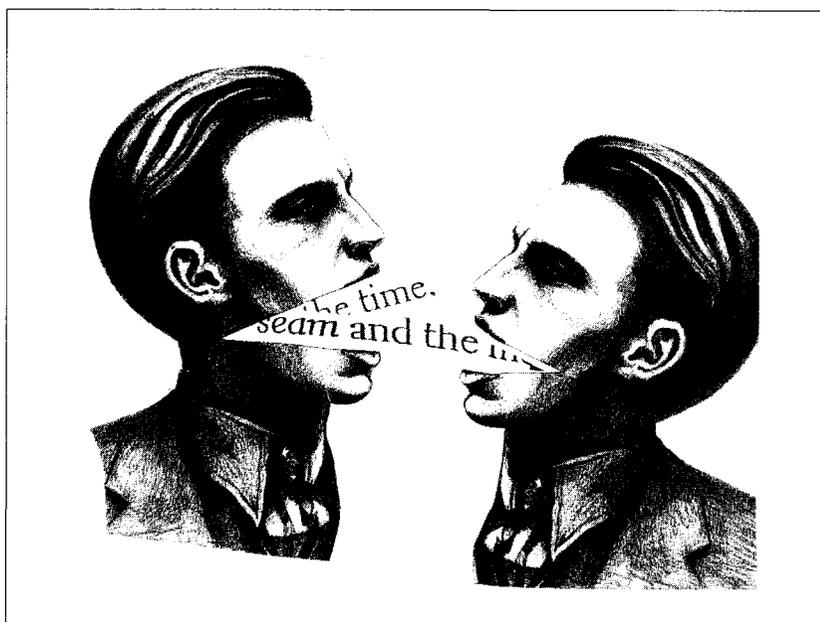


Speaking Truth to Power

by Philip Jenkins



Anna Myreck-Wodecki

Why is there no adversarial press in the United States? Why do the media seem so afraid of news stories that threaten to embarrass or destroy governments? These questions may seem curious in a society that prides itself on freedom of the press and where the media are often criticized for excessively negative criticism of public figures. Did not the newspapers bring down a President in our lifetime? But the Woodward-Bernstein mythos should not give us the illusion that the media act as an effective check on power. It is not that the American press is not free: it is just so timid, so anxious to avoid breaking a rather narrow consensus. Whether the story concerns international terrorism or drug smuggling, intelligence scandals or law enforcement disasters, the media have an overwhelming tendency to believe the official position, even when the contrary evidence mounts dramatically. Even worse, the media in such cases spend more time seeking to discredit government critics (“conspiracy theorists” and “paranoia” are rhetorically useful terms) than they do examining the substantial holes poked in official accounts. In a large and increasing area of matters affecting intelligence, law enforcement, and national security, the American media are no more adversarial or critical than those of a traditional People’s Democracy. If the goal of good journalism is speaking truth to

power, then the press has a serious case of laryngitis.

Let us take one specific example. Between 1985 and 1988, literally hundreds of accounts suggested that the American-backed Contra forces in Nicaragua were involved in drug trafficking, mostly in the form of huge quantities of cocaine imported into the United States. The specific charges were quite well substantiated in the form of criminal trials for narcotics and gun-running, both in the United States and in Central American nations. There were stories that at least part of this trade was being accomplished with the acquiescence or active assistance of American authorities, while related tales described murders, bribery, and political cover-ups involving high levels of the federal government, including the White House and the National Security Council. American intelligence agencies had reportedly mobilized support for the Contras at the state and local levels, and black money was rumored to have passed through various Savings and Loans and reelection committees. Arkansas was one conspicuous example, under its then Governor Clinton. All these allegations were at the time available in print, in relatively obscure left-wing papers like *In These Times* or *Mother Jones* and in books by Jonathan Kwitny, Leslie Cockburn, and others. In the mainstream media, however, the Contra-drug connection was virtually never mentioned except occasionally to be denied as “one of the harebrained rumors making the rounds,” “conspiracy mongering,” and so on. With a handful of exceptions, this was the solid attitude of

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all the major metropolitan papers, including the dual voices of God, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*; of the Siamese twins, *Time* and *Newsweek*; and of each member of the airwave trinity, ABC, CBS, and NBC. There was quite ferocious competition to see who could say the least about Contras and drugs.

Why was the story not covered? It seemed to have everything required for the perfect scandal, including blatant wrongdoing by highly placed officials, the high drama of international intrigue, and endless conspiratorial connections, while the drug element provided instant proof that the conspirators were actually doing something harmful and dangerous, in contrast to burgling a Washington hotel. Had "Contragate" developed, there were surely Pulitzers aplenty to be won, so why the restraint? The optimistic answer is that the editors and television news directors rigorously explored the allegations, found them to be inaccurate (every individual charge), and felt it would be irresponsible to publicize a story not absolutely founded upon factual bedrock. The scholarly rigor of a classicist refusing to publish a text until verifying every last rescension, every mutant reading, would be as nothing compared to the determination of such men and women to prevent even the shadow of a falsehood into their pages or news broadcasts. And how much more amazing to find such standards shared by every responsible news organ, so that no one paper was sufficiently cynical or self-seeking to bolt the pack and publish an unsupported charge.

Obviously this was not the case, just as it does not reflect the media's handling of commonplace social threats and problems. The media clearly do not apply the merest fraction of this journalistic rigor before going ahead with scare stories about alleged new cancer dangers, about new figures on child abuse or domestic violence, about ritual-abuse gangs organized in every kindergarten and play school. They play the story, no matter how obvious the internal contradictions and blatant falsehoods, and let it run until the public shows signs of boredom. How else to explain the rich social mythology of the 1980's, recounted endlessly in every news program and paper, including the most "responsible"? How else to explain the million and a half missing children (which in some accounts is the number of children vanishing each year, which means that every American child is now missing)? How else to account for the 50 or 80 percent of American women who are allegedly raped during their lifetime? The 50,000 victims of satanic human sacrifice each year? The fact that one American homicide out of every four is committed by a sexually motivated serial killer? The continuing dissemination of the ludicrous and disproven figure that one out of every ten men is homosexual? Or, to take one notorious example of recent years, what perversion of critical standards allowed virtually all the media to run unchecked the claims about the discovery of cold fusion? When conspicuously not describing the criminal lifestyles of the rich and powerful, the media seem quite prepared to indulge in the three forms of journalistic wash: eyewash, whitewash, and hogwash.

I tend to accept that there was at least a factual basis to the charges about the Contras and drugs, while I do not believe the literal truth of many other equally explosive stories that have been circulating over the last decade or so, but which were spiked with equal alacrity by the news media. For example, the Washington rumor mill of the late 1980's made great play of the "October Surprise," the allegation that Republican Party

officials made a clandestine deal with the Iranian government in 1980 to delay the release of American hostages until after the inauguration of President Reagan. In some versions, George Bush was personally implicated in such a near-treasonous arrangement. The charges were eventually investigated by Congress, which dug through large mounds of disinformation and fantasy to determine that the story was spurious, and this conclusion seems probable. However, it was widely supported (a hundred times more so than, say, the homicidal devil cults or child-abduction stories) and certainly offered the several unrelated sources of confirmation demanded by traditional journalistic ethics, and yet it remained essentially uncovered by the mainstream media for several years after it first surfaced. Once again, was this not newsworthy?

Perhaps the best recent example concerns the sudden death of Vincent Foster, which to the untrained eye initially looked much like the assassination of an inconvenient public official, in best Banana Republic style. There may indeed have been no foul play, but it certainly seemed to merit the efforts of a decent investigative reporter. If the incident had occurred in Rome or Buenos Aires, there would probably have been amused head-shaking over the rapidly reached public consensus that this was nothing more than a private tragedy and possibly even scandalized comments on the docility of the local free media. And if the mysterious quietus was investigated by an "objective" gumshoe with indirect ties to the very politicians under suspicion, how swiftly American media would have denounced the local cartels that tied politicians, bankers, police, and media magnates. As the Victorian lady commented when watching the hysterical suicide at the end of *Cleopatra*: "How very unlike the home life of our own dear queen!" Or more biblically: "Lord, I thank you that I am not as yonder publican. . . ."

Just from the experience of the last decade, let us look at some of the other roads not taken by the media, some of the potentially major stories that were effectively buried (which is not to say that all or any of them were necessarily factual). We might cite America's role in the war in Afghanistan, where the anti-Soviet rebels largely paid for their military endeavors in opium poppy that was transformed into heroin, thus creating the potential for another drugs/intelligence scandal. There were at least the seeds of scandal lying dormant in the record of American relations with Colonel Qaddafi, who appears to have been systematically armed and equipped over the years by the intelligence services of the United States and other Western nations. For what purpose and with what consequences? What about American reporting of terrorism through the 1980's, when virtually every news story on the international dimension portrayed the misdeeds of those three international stooges: Libya, Iran, and Syria? At the time, virtually every European commentator on Middle Eastern terrorism knew that the key players included at least two equal or larger players in the form of Iraq and Algeria, yet their roles are unmentioned in all the "expert commentary" of these years. Iraq, especially, has almost certainly had a hand in virtually every act of the so-called "Abu Nidal" group since its inception in 1976, and outside the United States there is real skepticism if this organization even exists except as an arm of Iraqi intelligence. In every case, the media acted in concert to conceal or ignore stories that were embarrassing to the United States government or intelligence services. Iraq, for example, was throughout the

1980's a staunch American ally and could not be depicted as a terrorist sponsor state, while the Afghanistan adventure enjoyed bipartisan support as the crucial campaign in destabilizing the Evil Empire.

The virtue of international news is that editors and news managers can claim with some plausibility that nobody either knows or cares. There are still millions of Americans who think that the Gulf War of 1991 was fought against Iran, and who would not sincerely care if it was pointed out that their mistake involved anything more than a spelling error, so why does it matter that Iraq rather than Libya or Iran deserves the prestige of a terrorist mastermind? Of course, the basic problem with lies is that they tend to require buttressing by more falsehoods in the future, and the consequence is a house of lies that grows ever larger and more unstable until it eventually collapses under its own weight. In the case of the Middle Eastern scandals, the delicate structure probably collapsed in February 1993 when a group of American-trained Afghan veterans and (probably) Iraqi secret service agents planted a large and potentially catastrophic bomb at New York's World Trade Center, leaving the American media to discover overnight some of the major intelligence and terrorism stories they had been sitting on for the last decade.

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So why did the media behave as they did, why did the consensus remain undented? Simplistic conspiracy views should be discarded immediately. Contrary to some of the allegations made following Watergate and the assassination investigations of the 1970's, there is no central agency issuing *diktats* as to what can or cannot be uncovered, no Ministry of Truth examining stories for doubleplus ungood statements. Nor does the selective silence indicate any particular party bias, and it is just as easy to claim plausibly that the media are militant supporters of either Republican or Democratic administrations. The consensus arises because in political and intelligence matters especially, the government role in the supply and manipulation of information has in practice created a system of self-censorship, which in some ways is just as effective as any Ministry of Truth. The media are desperately anxious to avoid losing the

regular source of information on the political, diplomatic, or intelligence affairs that make up the bulk of their news coverage, and they are certainly not prepared to risk this bread and butter in order to hare after what may prove to be a speculative fiction.

Journalists and political correspondents are as lazy as the rest of us and tend to rely on a quite narrow band of informed sources, who inevitably tend to recite a narrow party line. In international matters at least, they show little evidence of any independent knowledge that would allow them to verify or contradict what they are told by the usual suspects—the familiar American and Israeli spooks, backed up by the two or three well-known Washington think tanks. The closer an investigation gets to “real” national security interests or intelligence dirt, the more likely it is that the sources will close ranks and state absolutely and positively that there is no truth to the said ludicrous stories about Afghans and Contras, Libyans and Iraqis. And these arguments can be backed up with quite dire warnings. If you follow up this story, you will find that Iraqis bombed New York, which means that the President will have no choice but to launch a new Gulf War. Is that what you want? If you print this, you will endanger unnamed intelligence assets: people could die as a result of this story. The patriotic card can be very powerful, no matter how dubious the evidence that permits it to be played and how little skepticism the journalist demonstrates before accepting it.

These examples concern foreign policy and intelligence, but much the same arguments apply to domestic law enforcement, where the enormous growth of federal policy agencies has tended to concentrate in a few hands the information that matters, the inside stories on which the media depend. This was traditionally a game played to perfection by the FBI, but more recently the antidrug bureaucracies have become the leading players, and their success is indicated by the degree to which alternatives to the ongoing drug war have become virtually unthinkable: keep pouring in the resources. The approach is something like this: We are not going to tell you what to write, but if you do run that hostile story, there will be no more cooperation from us, no more opportunities to be present at the arrest of the spy or the trafficker, no access to notorious Prisoner X, no chances to photograph the secret training of elite antidrug commandos. Go out on a limb, and you will get one magnificent story, but you will pay for years to come. You can continue to report, but it will be much more difficult to find even the basic information and photo opportunities. It is your decision—after all, this is a free press. The media consensus thus results not from censorship but from the interplay of bureaucratic convenience with journalistic laziness.

There never was a golden age of American reporting, in which legions of heroic, hard-bitten journalists regularly demonstrated selfless devotion to digging out the truth about City Hall, regardless of consequences. In 1890 or 1920, just like today, such individuals were outnumbered by the timeservers and foot soldiers of the media corporations. What has changed is that government is bigger, while the corporations have swollen into multi-enterprise conglomerates. The much-vaunted information explosion has thus coincided with the increased power of central government to channel major news about the state and its functions and to define whether a story is “respectable” or merely “paranoid”: in effect, to grant a license for investigation and discussion. The scope for serious reporting is similarly limited by the commercial factors,

which means that a newspaper or television news division is one component of a chain of business ventures that may also include fast food and computers, sports teams and book publishing. These connections cannot fail to constrain the investigative ambitions of editors or journalists, who fall under enormous pressures to exhibit corporate loyalty. Few administrations or city governments would be so stupid as to penalize a paper directly for an offensive investigation, but there are a hundred ways of striking at a parent or related company in the broader corporate family, the *keiretsu* circle.

In the last decade, complaints about the media have often focused on the figure of Rupert Murdoch, "Citizen Cain," who has been blamed for virtually every lapse of taste and editorial judgment in any newspaper or television program. The criticism is often exaggerated, and it is humorous to see Murdoch described as an interloper in what (it sometimes appears) the Constitution presumably intended to be solely a three-ring circle of television networks: two generations of successful greed can give an enterprise staggering pretensions, to say nothing of delusions of invulnerability. But the Murdoch empire has enjoyed staggering growth worldwide. In America alone, this includes a host of newspapers, from the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *San Antonio Express-News* to the *Star*; Fox Broadcasting and a national television network with almost 200 affiliates; major shares in Harper & Row and *TV Guide*; and satellite and cable networks. All this in addition to growing ventures on every continent except Africa.

In terms of news, the Murdoch presence has been blamed for a precipitous decline in journalistic standards and the rise of unashamedly sensationalistic reporting. This tendency could be illustrated by a hundred news headlines, but two nice examples would be "Werewolf Seized in Southend," a

front-page banner from the *Sun*, Britain's best-selling daily; and "Headless Body Found in Topless Bar," a relatively mild contribution from the *New York Post*. Again, this is somewhat unfair in that all the television networks share some blame for the drift to tabloid standards, and Murdoch's enterprises can scarcely be blamed for the talk shows and trash television that provide news and social commentary for so large a majority of the American people. Murdoch is less important as an individual culprit than as a powerful symbol of the thorough transformation of news into entertainment, the necessary corollary of the failure of the media to provide effective or substantial analysis of politics and the state. Nor can *USA Today* be attacked for its valiant efforts to reduce any story to the visual equivalent of a 30-second sound-bite. Like Murdoch, it is reflecting the conditions of a profoundly nonideological age, when most people have come to believe that the doings of the state are so far-removed from anything they can understand, still less control, that it is pointless making the effort.

There are adversarial media in this country, on both the left and the right, and across the spectra of sexual and religious preference, and some of them do a quite heroic job, but their influence is heavily circumscribed. For what we still describe as the mainstream, however, the most likely fate is what we might call a British solution. In the Britain of the 1980's, the Murdoch press led the way toward a thorough exclusion of serious news from the press, on the reasonable grounds that investigative reporting tended to annoy the government and the courts, while huge amounts of money were to be made in page-three nudes and silly headlines: "Werewolf Seized in Southend," "Rape Hell in Satan's Coven." After all, that's entertainment. It may also be our future.

Obituary in the *New York Times*

by William Baer

Today I read the notice of a death
buried deep within the *New York Times*.
Concise and brief, just 87 words,
it read, I knew, *exactly* like my own.
Some unknown man, my age, who'd died of cancer—
and I wondered if his children ever called,
and if his late divorce had left the woman
as bitter and unforgiving as my first wife.

I wondered if his "freedom" was empty and cold,
and if he had more wealth than he could need—
and if he had sometime, just recently,
discovered that most all of what he'd said
and thought, throughout his life, was totally wrong.
And as I feel the cancer surge within,
I wonder if the same kind took him down.