



Introduction

Bias, Slander, and BS

ONLY A LIBERAL would be dumb enough to title a book, *What Liberal Media?* Listen to just about anyone and the answer is obvious: “What, are you stupid? Just pick up a newspaper or turn on your TV.” Should that fail to convince, bemusement can turn to anger, or at best, pity, as in “There are none so blind as those who will not see.” America’s argument about media bias features just two points of view. The right argues that the media is biased toward leftists. The other side responds, to quote David Broder, “dean” of the Washington press corps, “There just isn’t enough ideology in the average reporter to fill a thimble.”¹ The idea that the media might, for reasons of ownership, economics, class, or outside pressure, actually be more sympathetic to conservative causes than to liberal ones is widely considered to be simply beyond the pale.

Social scientists talk about “useful myths,” stories we all know are not necessarily true, but that we choose to believe anyway because they seem to offer confirmation of what we already know (which raises the question, if we already know it, why the story?). Think of the wholly fictitious but illustrative story about little George Washington and his inability to lie about that cherry tree. For conservatives, and even more many journalists, the “liberal media” is just that: a myth, to be certain, but a useful one. If only it were true, we might have a more humane, open-minded, and ultimately effective public debate on the issues facing the nation. Alas, if pigs could fly. . . .

Republicans of all stripes have done quite well for themselves during the last five decades fulminating about the liberal cabal/progressive thought-police who spin, supplant, and sometimes suppress the news we all consume. Indeed, it’s not only conservatives who find this whipping boy to be an irresistible target. Dwight David Eisenhower received one of the biggest ovations of his life when, at the 1964 Republican convention, he derided the “sensation-seeking columnists and commentators” who sought to undermine the Republican Party’s efforts to improve the

nation.² The most colorful example of this art form, however, is probably a toss-up between two quips penned by William Safire when he was a White House speechwriter for Vice President Spiro Agnew, who denounced both the “nattering nabobs of negativism” and the “effete corps of impudent snobs” seeking to sink the nation’s morale.³ His boss, Richard Nixon (who had been Ike’s VP), usually held his tongue in public, but complained obsessively in private to the evangelist Billy Graham of “a terrible liberal Jewish clique” that “totally dominates the media” and “erodes our confidence, our strength.”⁴ Just about everyone wants to get in on the fun. Even Bill Clinton whined to *Rolling Stone* that he did not get “one damn bit of credit from the knee-jerk liberal press.”⁵ The presidency’s current occupant, George W. Bush, continues this tradition, complaining that the media “are biased against conservative thought.”⁶ On a trip to Maine in January 2002, he quite conspicuously carried a copy of the best-selling book, *Bias*, by Bernard Goldberg, as if to give the so-called “liberal media”—hereafter, SCLM—a presidential thumb in the eye.⁷

But while some conservatives actually believe their own grumbles, the smart ones don’t. They know mau-mauing the other side is just a good way to get their ideas across—or perhaps to prevent the other side from getting a fair hearing for theirs. On occasion, honest conservatives admit this. Rich Bond, then the chair of the Republican Party, complained during the 1992 election, “I think we know who the media want to win this election—and I don’t think it’s George Bush.”⁸ The very same Rich Bond also noted during the very same election, however, “There is some strategy to it [bashing the ‘liberal’ media] If you watch any great coach, what they try to do is ‘work the refs.’ Maybe the ref will cut you a little slack on the next one.”⁹ Bond is hardly alone. That the SCLM were biased against the administration of Ronald Reagan is an article of faith among Republicans. Yet James Baker, perhaps the most media-savvy of them, owned up to the fact that any such complaint was decidedly misplaced. “There were days and times and events we might have had some complaints [but] on balance I don’t think we had anything to complain about,” he explained to one writer.¹⁰ Patrick Buchanan, among the most conservative pundits and presidential candidates in the republic’s history, found that he could not identify any allegedly liberal bias against him during his presidential candidacies. “I’ve gotten balanced coverage, and broad coverage—all we could have asked. For heaven’s sake, we kid about the ‘liberal media,’ but every Republican on earth does that,”¹¹ the aspiring American ayatollah cheerfully confessed during the 1996 campaign. And even William Kristol, without a doubt the most influential Republican/neoconservative publicist in America, has come clean on this issue. “I admit it,” he told a reporter. “The liberal media were never that powerful, and the whole thing was often used as an excuse by conservatives for conservative failures.”¹² Nevertheless Kristol apparently feels no compunction about exploiting and reinforcing ignorant prejudices of his own constituency. In a 2001 subscription pitch to conservative potential subscribers of his

Rupert Murdoch–funded magazine, the *Weekly Standard*, Kristol complained, “The trouble with politics and political coverage today is that there’s too much liberal bias. . . . There’s too much tilt toward the left-wing agenda. Too much apology for liberal policy failures. Too much pandering to liberal candidates and causes.”¹³ (It’s a wonder he left out “Too much hypocrisy.”)

In recent times, the right has ginned up its “liberal media” propaganda machine. Books by both Ann Coulter, a blond bombshell pundette, and Bernard Goldberg, former CBS News producer, have topped the best-seller lists, stringing together such a series of charges that, well, it’s amazing neither one thought to accuse “liberals” of using the blood of conservative children for extra flavor in their soy-milk decaf lattes. While extremely popular with the media they attack, both books are so shoddily written and “researched” that they pretty much refute themselves. Their danger derives less from the authors’ respective allegations than the “where there’s smoke, there’s fire” impression they inspire. In fact, barely any of the major allegations in either book stands up to more than a moment’s scrutiny. The entire case is a lie, and, yes, in many instances, a slander. Although I abhor the methods of both authors, I do not feel they can go unanswered. Ideas, particularly bad ones, have consequences. The myth of the “liberal media” empowers conservatives to control debate in the United States to the point where liberals cannot even hope for a fair shake anymore. However immodest my goal, I aim to change that.

I first met Ann Coulter in 1996 when we were both hired to be pundits on the new cable news station, MSNBC. Still just a right-wing congressional aide, she had been hired without even a hint of journalistic experience but with a mouth so vicious she made her fellow leggy blond pundit, Laura Ingraham, look and sound like Mary Tyler Moore in comparison. Coulter was eventually fired when she attacked a disabled Vietnam veteran on the air, screaming, “People like you caused us to lose that war.”¹⁴ But this was just one of many incidents where she had leaped over the bounds of good taste into the kind of talk that is usually reserved for bleachers or bar fights. In her columns, published in one of the most extreme of all conservative publications, *Human Events*, she regularly referred to the president of the United States, Bill Clinton, as a “pervert, liar, and a felon” and “a flim-flam artist.” She termed the first lady to be “pond scum” and “white trash”¹⁵ and the late Pamela Harriman a “whore.” Coulter said these things all the while appearing on air in dresses so revealing they put one in mind of Sharon Stone in the film *Basic Instinct*.

The greater Coulter’s fame, the more malevolent grew her hysteria. In her 1998 book, *High Crimes and Misdemeanors: The Case Against Bill Clinton*, she wrote, “In this recurring nightmare of a presidency, we have a national debate about whether he ‘did it,’ even though all sentient people know he did. Otherwise there would be

debates only about whether to impeach or assassinate.”¹⁶ Such was the wisdom of the alleged “constitutional scholar” whose work George Will quoted on ABC’s *This Week*. (Will is not very particular about his sources. I counted exactly one work of history in Coulter’s copious footnotes. Coulter has also been accused of plagiarism by a former colleague, but denies the charge.)¹⁷

Shortly after 9/11, Coulter became famous again when she suggested, in a column published by National Review Online, after seeing anti-American demonstrators in Arab nations, that we “invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity.”¹⁸ Coulter’s column was dropped by the magazine, but not because the editors objected to its content. Editor Jonah Goldberg explained, “We ended the relationship because she behaved with a total lack of professionalism, friendship, and loyalty.” (Coulter had called the editors “girly boys.”)¹⁹ Coulter remained unbowed. At a meeting of the National Political Action Conference, speaking of the young American who converted to militant Islam and fought for the Taliban, Coulter advised, “We need to execute people like John Walker in order to physically intimidate liberals, by making them realize that they can be killed too. Otherwise they will turn out to be outright traitors.”²⁰ She also joked about the proposed murder of the U.S. secretary of transportation, Norm Mineta.²¹

In her second book-length primal scream, published in the summer of 2002, Coulter compared Katie Couric of the *Today* show to Eva Braun. (She would later add Joseph Goebbels after Couric challenged her in an interview.) She termed Christie Todd Whitman, the former governor of New Jersey and then head of the Environmental Protection Agency, a “dimwit” and a “birdbrain.” Sen. Jim Jeffords is a “half-wit.” Gloria Steinem is a “termagent” and “deeply ridiculous figure,” who “had to sleep” with a rich liberal to fund *Ms.* magazine.²² But the errors are even more egregious than the insults, and her footnotes are, in many significant cases, a sham.²³ The good folks at the *American Prospect*’s Web log “Tapped” went to the trouble of compiling Coulter’s errors chapter by chapter. The sheer weight of these, coupled with their audacity, demonstrates the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of a journalistic culture that allows her near a microphone, much less a printing press.²⁴ (If you doubt this, put down this book and log on right now to www.whatliberalmedia.com, and follow the clicks to Appendix One.)²⁵

Coulter’s view of the U.S. media can be summed up as follows: “American journalists commit mass murder without facing the ultimate penalty, I think they are retarded.” In the *New York Observer*, published in one of the two cities attacked on 9/11, Coulter joked about how wonderful it would have been if Timothy McVeigh had blown up the *New York Times* building and murdered all of its inhabitants. Apparently nothing—not even the evocation, serious or not, of the mass murder of journalists—could turn Coulter’s love affair with the SCLM sour.

For such comments, she is celebrated and rewarded. While promoting *Slander*, Coulter was booked on *Today*, *Crossfire* (as both a guest and guest host), *Hardball*, *The Big Story with John Gibson*, and countless other cable and radio programs. She was lovingly profiled in *Newsday*, the *New York Observer*, and the *New York Times* Sunday Styles page, while also enjoying a seat at the White House Correspondents Association Dinner as a guest of the *Boston Globe*. She was even invited on ABC's *Good Morning America* as an election analyst in November 2002. In the *Wall Street Journal*—a newspaper that had actually been destroyed by terrorists, and whose reporter, Daniel Pearl, had been murdered by them—Melik Kaylan defended her comments in Coulter-like fashion. He argued, “We have been programmed to think that such impassioned outrage, and outrageousness, are permissible only on the left from counter-culture comedians or exponents of identity politics.” He also compared Coulter's alleged “humor” to that of Lenny Bruce, Angela Davis, and the Black Panthers. Too bad, therefore, as Charles Pierce pointed out, the conservative media darling has yet to be “arrested and jailed for what she said (Lenny Bruce), prosecuted in federal court (Angela Davis), or shot to ribbons in her bed (the Black Panthers).”²⁶

Bernard Goldberg's book *Bias* suffers from many of the same weaknesses as Coulter's, though he lacks her colorful flair for murderous invective. Still *Bias* proved a smashing success. The *New York Times*'s publishing columnist, Martin Arnold, termed its sales to be “the most astonishing publishing event in the last 12 months.”²⁷ Indeed, with its publisher claiming more than 440,000 copies in print, the book's sales figures alone are taken by many to be evidence of the truth of its argument.²⁸ In many ways, the conservative side was hardly better served in its arguments by Goldberg than by Coulter. To those who do not already share Goldberg's biases, his many undocumented, exaggerated assertions have the flavor of self-parody rather than reasoned argument. Among these are such statements as: “Everybody to the right of Lenin is a ‘right-winger’ as far as media elites are concerned.” Opposition to the flat tax, he claims, comes from the same “dark region that produces envy and the seemingly unquenchable liberal need to wage class warfare.”²⁹ Roughly 72 of the 232 pages of *Bias* are devoted to attacks or score-settling with Dan Rather, whom Goldberg believes to have ruined his career. “If CBS News were a prison instead of a journalistic enterprise, three-quarters of the producers and 100 percent of the vice-presidents would be Dan's bitches,” Goldberg says.³⁰ Much of the rest of *Bias* consists of blasts at unnamed liberals who are accused of exaggerating data and manipulating the truth for their own purposes. How strange, therefore, that Goldberg seeks to make his case with statements about: “America's ten-trillion-page tax code,” tuition fees that are

“about the same as the cost of the space shuttle,” and Laurence Tribe’s “ten million”³¹ appearances on CBS News during the 1980s.³²

Taking the conservative ideology of wealthy white male victimization to hitherto-unimagined heights, Goldberg employs an extended Mafia metaphor to describe his departure from CBS. He speaks of having broken his pledge of “omerta”³³ by writing an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* attacking his colleagues. “So what happened?” he writes. “Well, as Tony Soprano might put it to his old pal Pussy Bompensiero in the Bada Bing! Lounge: Bernie G. opened his big mouth to the wrong people—and he got whacked.”³⁴ You believe this heartbreaking tale until you discover that CBS had every right to fire him for violating the terms of his contract by attacking the network news program in a public forum. Instead, his superiors found him a comfortable job where he was allowed to quietly qualify for a higher pension. (On *The Sopranos*, and indeed, in most Mafia lore, the term “to whack” carries rather different connotations, as evidenced by Big Pussy’s undisturbed slumber with “the fishes.”)

During the course of over 220 pages of complaining, Goldberg never bothers to systematically prove the existence of liberal bias in the news, or even define what he means by the term. About as close as we get is: “I said out loud what millions of TV news viewers all over America know and have been complaining about for years: that too often, Dan and Peter and Tom and a lot of their foot soldiers don’t deliver the news straight, that they have a liberal bias, and that no matter how often the network stars deny it, it is true.”³⁵ A few of his examples, such as those involving corporate self-censorship in the event that a certain segment might offend the audience or advertisers, or the preference for interviewees with blond hair and blue eyes over people of color, actually serve to make the opposite case. With a keen eye to his likely audience of conservative talk-show hosts and book-buyers, the author simply assumes the existence of a liberal bias in the media to be an undisputable fact.

This same undocumented assumption characterized the conservative celebration of the book. The editors of the *Wall Street Journal* thundered: “There are certain facts of life so long obvious they would seem beyond dispute. One of these—that there is a liberal tilt in the media. . . .”³⁶ *U.S. News and World Report* columnist John Leo added, in praise of *Bias*, that “the reluctance of the news business to hold seminars and conduct investigations of news bias is almost legendary.”³⁷ Glenn Garvin, television critic of the *Miami Herald*, added, “That newsrooms are mostly staffed by political liberals is pretty much beyond dispute, although a few keep trying to argue the point.” That newspaper’s executive editor, Tom Fielder, was said to be so impressed by *Bias* that he invited Goldberg to lunch, with top members of his staff. He told Garvin, “I hate to say there’s a political correctness that guides us, but I think there is. We tend to give more credibility to groups on the liberal side of the spectrum than on the conservative side.”³⁸

If, in an alternative universe, all of Goldberg’s claims somehow turned out to be justified, the crux of his argument would nevertheless constitute a remarkably narrow indictment. Goldberg did not set out to prove a liberal bias across the entire media,

nor even across all television news. He concerned himself only with the evening news broadcasts, and not even with politics, but with social issues. Moreover, he appears to have done little research beyond recounting his own experiences and parroting the complaints of a conservative newsletter published by Brent Bozell's Media Research Center.³⁹ It is hard to see what so excited conservative readers about the book. The broadcasts in question represent a declining share of viewers' attention, and, increasingly, an old and, at least from advertisers' standpoint, undesirable audience. It is possible that these particular news programs—if not their very format—will not survive the retirement ages of the current generation of anchors.⁴⁰

Goldberg appears to consider this fact. However, he attributes the relative decline in viewership of the network nightly news to viewer unhappiness with the widespread liberal bias he claims to have uncovered. "It's as if the Berlin Wall had come down," he explains. "But instead of voting with their feet, Americans began voting with their remote control devices. They haven't abandoned the news. Just the news people they no longer trust." "How else can we account for Bill O'Reilly and *The O'Reilly Factor* on The Fox News Channel? . . . As far as I'm concerned, the three people Bill owes so much of his success to are Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and Dan Rather."⁴¹

The logic of the above argument is genuinely difficult to fathom. Goldberg is correct to note that all three networks have seen a significant decline in their ratings for their news programs. But so has just about everything on network programming, due, quite obviously, to the enormous rise in viewer choice—the result of the replacement of a three-network television universe with one that features hundreds of choices on cable and satellite TV and the Internet. Viewership for all four networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox—during the ratings period September 24, 2001, to March 3, 2002, for instance, made up only 43 percent of TV watchers, compared with more than twice that percentage for just three networks two decades earlier.⁴² Still the network news programs' numbers remained impressive. The combined audience of the three network news programs is well over thirty million Americans, and better than fifteen times the number tuning into Mr. O'Reilly. It is also more than ten times the combined total prime-time audience for Fox News Channel, CNN, and MSNBC.⁴³ These ratios render Goldberg's logic entirely nonsensical. Had he, or anyone related to the book, had enough respect for his readers to bother with even ten minutes of research, this claim would have never made it into print.

Not all of Goldberg's arguments are quite as easy to disprove, but most are no less false or misleading. One of the claims that many critics and television interviewers have considered the strongest in the book was the one the author credited with having inspired his initial interest in the topic:

not because of my conservative views but because what I saw happening violated my liberal sense of fair play. Why, I kept wondering, do we so often identify conservatives in our stories, yet rarely identify liberals? Over the years, I began to real-

ize that this need to identify one side but not the other is a central component of liberal bias. There are right-wing Republicans and right-wing Christians and right-wing radio talk show hosts. The only time we journalists use the term “left-wing” is if we’re talking about a part on an airplane.

Goldberg illustrates his point with an example taken from the Clinton impeachment proceedings, during which, he claims, Peter Jennings identified senators as they came to sign their names in the oath book. According to Goldberg, Jennings described Mitch McConnell of Kentucky as a “very determined conservative,” Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania as “one of the younger members of the Senate, Republican, very determined conservative,” and Bob Smith of New Hampshire as “another very, very conservative Republican” but did not describe liberals accordingly. Goldberg also complained that CBS identifies the radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon as a “noted law professor” while Phyllis Schlafly is a “conservative spokeswoman.” Rush Limbaugh, says Goldberg, is the “conservative radio talk show host” but Rosie O’Donnell is not described as the liberal TV talk show host. “Robert Bork is the ‘conservative’ judge. But liberal Laurence Tribe, who must have been on *CBS Evening News* ten million times in the 1980s,” is identified simply as a “Harvard law professor.”⁴⁴

Well, it would be interesting if true. And many of even the sharpest SCLM critics of Goldberg’s book assumed it to be true, perhaps out of the mistaken belief that he must have done at least this much research. Both Howard Kurtz and Jeff Greenfield failed to challenge it on CNN. Jonathan Chait accepted it in his extremely critical cover story on the book in the *New Republic* but then went on to explain why, aside from liberal bias, it might be the case.⁴⁵ And the then-dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, Tom Goldstein, writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, mocked Goldberg’s ad hominem claims but nevertheless credited Goldberg for “get[ting] down to specifics . . . [that] have the ring of truth” on this point.⁴⁶

In fact, all were overly generous. Goldberg presents no testable evidence and his arguments bear little relationship to the truth. At a 2002 book-store appearance broadcast on C-Span, a political science professor asked Goldberg something almost no television interviewer had bothered to inquire: Did he have any systematic data to back up this point? The author scoffed at the very idea of evidence. “I didn’t want this to be written from a social scientist point of view,” Goldberg explained. “I have total confidence that the point here is accurate.”

Another audience member then challenged him on this point and here, Goldberg got a bit testy:

Let me say this. And I want to say this as clearly as I can. You are dead wrong. Dead wrong. Not even close about Teddy Kennedy. You have not, almost every time they

mention his name, heard “liberal.” I will say this—you have heard the word “liberal” almost never mentioned when they say his name, on the evening newscasts. They just don’t. That part—I mean you gave me an easy one, and I appreciate that. It doesn’t happen.⁴⁷

Goldberg seems to think that such statements become true by emphatic repetition. In fact, they are testable and it is Bernard Goldberg who is “dead wrong.” On the small, almost insignificant point of whom Peter Jennings identified with what label on a single broadcast, Goldberg’s point is a partial, and deliberately misleading, half-truth. As the liberal Daily Howler Web site pointed out, “the incident occurred on January 7, 1999, and Jennings did not identify ‘every conservative’ as the senators signed the oath book.” He identified only three of them as such, failing to offer the label of conservative to such stalwarts as Senators Gramm, Hatch, Helms, Lott, Mack, Thurmond, Lugar, Stevens, Thompson, and Warner.⁴⁸ Most of the labels had nothing to do with politics and were peppered with personal asides about a given senator’s age, interests, or personality. On the larger point regarding a liberal bias in the labeling of conservatives, but not liberals, Goldberg could hardly be more wrong, even using the very examples he proposes. For instance, Ted Kennedy does not appear on the news with much frequency, but during the first six months of 2001, when he did, it was almost always accompanied by the word “liberal.”⁴⁹ As for the “million” respectful references to Laurence Tribe that appeared without the appendage “liberal,” the indefatigable Howler checked those as well. According to Lexis, Howler found, Tribe has appeared on the *CBS Evening News* just nine times since 1993, almost always identified with a liberal label. On one occasion, May 14, 1994, CBS News even used Tribe and Robert Bork together, described as “legal scholars from both ends of the political spectrum.”⁵⁰

The above anecdotes are reinforced by some careful research on the topic by Geoffrey Nunberg of the Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford University and its department of linguistics. The results of these are reprinted in Appendix Two, available at www.whatliberalmedia.com, and I urge you to examine them if you believe Goldberg has even a shred of credibility remaining.

Given the success of Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Times*, *New York Post*, *American Spectator*, *Weekly Standard*, *New York Sun*, *National Review*, *Commentary*, and so on, no sensible person can dispute the existence of a “conservative media.” The reader might be surprised to learn that neither do I quarrel with the notion of a “liberal media.” It is tiny and profoundly underfunded compared to its conservative counterpart, but it does exist. As a columnist for the *Nation* and an independent Weblogger for MSNBC.com, I work in the middle of it, and so do many of

my friends. And guess what? It's filled with right-wingers. Unlike most of the publications named above, liberals, for some reason, feel compelled to include the views of the other guy on a regular basis in just the fashion that conservatives abhor.

Take a tour from a native: *New York* magazine, in the heart of liberal country, chose as its sole national correspondent the right-wing talk-show host Tucker Carlson. During the 1990s, the *New Yorker*—the bible of sophisticated urban liberalism—chose as its Washington correspondents the Clinton/Gore hater Michael Kelly and the soft, DLC neo-conservative Joe Klein. At least half of the “liberal *New Republic*” is actually a rabidly neoconservative magazine (see chapter 3) and has been edited in recent years by the very same Michael Kelly, as well as the conservative liberal hater Andrew Sullivan. Its rival on the “left,” the *Nation*, happily published the free-floating liberal hater Christopher Hitchens until he chose to resign, and also invites Alexander Cockburn to attack liberals with morbid predictability. The *Atlantic Monthly*—a mainstay of Boston liberalism—even chose the apoplectic Kelly as its editor, who then proceeded to add a bunch of *Weekly Standard* writers plus Christopher Hitchens to *Atlantic's* anti-liberal stable. What is the hysterically funny but decidedly reactionary P. J. O'Rourke doing in both the *Atlantic* and the liberal *Rolling Stone*? Why does liberal *Vanity Fair* choose to publish a hagiographic Annie Liebowitz portfolio of Bush administration officials designed, apparently, to invoke notions of Greek and Roman gods? Why does the liberal *New York Observer* alternate *National Review's* Richard Brookheiser with the Joe McCarthy-admiring columnist, Nicholas von Hoffman—both of whom appear alongside editorials that occasionally mimic the same positions taken downtown by the editors of the *Wall Street Journal*. On the Web, the tabloid-style liberal Web site Salon gives free reign to the McCarthyite impulses of both Andrew Sullivan and David Horowitz. The neoliberal Slate also regularly publishes both Sullivan and Christopher Caldwell of the *Weekly Standard* and has even opened its pixels to such conservative evildoers as Charles Murray and Elliott Abrams. (The reader should know I am not objecting to the inclusion of conservatives in the genuinely liberal component of the media. In fact, I welcome them. I'd just like to see some reciprocity on the other side.)

Move over to the mainstream publications and broadcasts often labeled “liberal” and you see how ridiculous the notion of liberal dominance becomes. The liberal *New York Times* op-ed page features the work of the unreconstructed Nixonite William Safire and for years accompanied him with the firebreathing-if-difficult-to-understand neocon A. M. Rosenthal. Current denizen Bill Keller also writes regularly from a soft, DLC neoconservative perspective. Why was then-editorial page editor, now executive editor, Howell Raines one of Bill Clinton's most vocal adversaries during his entire presidency?⁵¹ Why is this alleged bastion of liberalism, on the very morning I wrote these words, offering words of praise and encouragement to George W. Bush and John Ashcroft for invoking the hated Taft-Hartley legislation on behalf of shipping companies, following a lock-out of their West Coast workers?⁵² (Has the

Wall Street Journal editorial page ever, in its entire history, taken the side of American workers in a labor dispute?) It would later endorse for re-election the state's Republican/Conservative governor, George Pataki, over his capable, if unexciting, liberal Democratic African-American opponent, Carl McCall. The *Washington Post* editorial page, which is considered less liberal than the *Times* but liberal nevertheless, is just swarming with conservatives, from Mr. Kelly to George Will to Robert Novak to Charles Krauthammer, among many more. On the morning before I finally let go of the draft manuscript of this book, the paper's lead editorial is endorsing the president's plan for a "pre-emptive" war against Iraq.⁵³ The op-ed page was hardly less abashed in its hawkishness. A careful study by Michael Massing published in the *Nation* found, "Collectively, its editorials, columns and Op-Eds have served mainly to reinforce, amplify and promote the Administration's case for regime change. And, as the house organ for America's political class, the paper has helped push the debate in the Administration's favor. . . ." ⁵⁴ If you wish to include CNN on your list of liberal media—I don't, but many conservatives do—then you had better find a way to explain the near ubiquitous presence of the attack dog Robert Novak, along with those of neocon virtuecrat William Bennett, *National Review's* Kate O'Beirne, *National Review's* Jonah Goldberg, the *Weekly Standard's* David Brooks, and Tucker Carlson. This is to say nothing of the fact that among CNN's most frequent guests are Ann Coulter and the anti-American telepreacher Pat Robertson. Care to include ABC News? Again, I don't but, if you wish, how do you deal with the fact that the only ideological commentator on its Sunday interview show is the hardline conservative George Will? Or how about the fact that its only explicitly ideological reporter is the deeply journalistically challenged conservative crusader John Stossel? How to explain the entire career of Cokie Roberts, who never met a liberal to whom she could not condescend? What about *Time* and *Newsweek*? In the former, we have Mr. Krauthammer holding forth and in the latter Mr. Will.

I could go on almost indefinitely here, but the point is clear. Conservatives are extremely well represented in every facet of the media. The correlative point here is that even the genuine liberal media is not so liberal. And it is no match—either in size, ferocity, or commitment—for the massive conservative media structure that, more than ever, determines the shape and scope of our political agenda.

A Tom Tomorrow cartoon makes this point more cogently than I can in just four panels simply by (implicitly) asking readers to undergo a thought experiment. What if there really were a "liberal media"? Imagine, "an expansive network of left-wing think tanks which are of course bankrolled by secretive left-wing financiers seeking to advance their radical agenda." Now imagine "blatantly left-wing cable news networks and op-ed pages that then promote (left-wing) ideas relentlessly." Had enough? What about "angry liberals" debating these left-wing proposals with weak, mealy-mouthed conservatives on the Sunday talk shows? Want more? How about an entire universe of left-wing talk radio hosts spending endless hours devoting themselves to

hammering these left-wing notions into the heads of tens of millions of listeners across the land? Why, poor President Bush and Vice President Cheney wouldn't have a chance.⁵⁵

But to divide the media into their conservative, liberal, or centrist aspects misses a larger point and can do more to obscure than illuminate. The media make up a vast and unruly herd of independent beasts. Given their number and variety, it can be difficult for anyone to speak accurately about all of them simultaneously. Can one usefully compare Thomas Friedman to Larry Flynt? What about Garry Wills and Matt Drudge? Charlie Rose and Jerry Springer? Bill Moyers and Bill O'Reilly? Does *Foreign Affairs* share a single subscriber with the *National Enquirer*? Indeed, even the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* are not really in the same business. They have differing audiences, differing mandates, and differing professional standards, thank goodness. Marshall McLuhan was wrong, or at least woefully inexact: The medium is only the message if you're not paying close attention.*

Perhaps the most frequently made argument in defense of the SCLM thesis is the populist one. In a letter to the *New Republic*, for instance, Bernard Goldberg wrote, "Let's assume I'm dead wrong in my book, that there is no liberal bias in the big-time media. Then I can be easily dismissed. But what about the millions and millions of Americans—including many liberals—who think I'm right . . . Are they all stupid? Or delusional? Are they under some kind of mass hypnosis, doing the dirty work of right-wing nuts who are pulling the strings? These strike me as important questions."⁵⁶

According to a September 2002 Gallup poll, 47 percent of Americans questioned believe the media are "too liberal."⁵⁷ This is an even smaller percentage of Americans than voted for George W. Bush. But even so, it hardly constitutes any form of normative proof or evidence. (Thirteen percent believe the media are biased toward conservatives.) Moreover the "millions and millions of people believe" is not a terribly convincing argument no matter what. Millions also believe in ghosts, extra-terrestrial visitations, and Osama bin Laden's promise of seventy-two virgins. That "millions and millions" of people think Goldberg is right about the media is likely an indication that much of what the public sees and reads confirms their belief that liberal bias does exist. Or it could mean that most media reporters believe that a great percentage of Americans share this view and so don't wish to confuse them. Conservatives, lest we forget, are much more energetic and better-funded complainers about media bias

*For the purposes of our discussion, we may assume that the relevant media are the elite national media, located largely in the networks, the nation's top five national newspapers, the newsweeklies, the opinion magazines, the executives who run these companies along with the sources, both on- and off-air who supply them with information and opinions. With a few important exceptions, these media's inhabitants can largely be found living and working in New York or Washington, with an entertainment subsidiary in Los Angeles.

than are liberals. They are extremely vocal and well-organized in their pressure tactics, and they've done an impressive job over the years in convincing many people that any view that does not comport with a conservative ideological viewpoint is by definition "liberal." In a careful 1999 study published in the academic journal *Communications Research*, four scholars examined the use of the "liberal media" argument and discovered a four-fold increase in the number of Americans telling pollsters that they discerned a liberal bias in their news. But the evidence, collected and coded over a twelve-year period, offered no corroboration whatever for this view. The obvious conclusion: News consumers were responding to "increasing news coverage of liberal bias media claims, which have been increasingly emanating from Republican Party candidates and officials."⁵⁸

The right is working the refs. And it's working. Much of the public believes a useful, but unsupportable, myth about the SCLM and the media itself have been cowed by conservatives into repeating their nonsensical nostrums virtually nonstop. As the economist/pundit Paul Krugman observes of Republican efforts to bully the media into accepting the party's Orwellian arguments about Social Security privatization: "The next time the administration insists that chocolate is vanilla, much of the media—fearing accusations of liberal bias, trying to create the appearance of "balance"—won't report that the stuff is actually brown; at best they'll report that some Democrats claim that it's brown."⁵⁹

No single work can compensate for the enormous advantage conservatives enjoy in their fight with liberals to control the fate of American politics. But if people are willing to examine the question of media bias in an open-minded fashion, perhaps we can even up the sides a bit.